

Ted Hughes, Fishing and Poetry

Ted's keenness for fishing began very early, and only a few yards from here. Turn right at the main road, then first left, and you will come to the bridge over the Rochdale canal at the bottom of Midgley Road. Here it is at about the time we're talking about, the early thirties. On the far right is Mount Zion chapel, now demolished. The row of houses beyond it is Aspinall Street, where Ted was born in 1930. In 'The Canal's Drowning Black' he wrote:

The canal
Bred wild leopards — among bleached depth fungus.
Loach. Torpid, ginger-bearded, secretive
Prehistory of the canal's masonry,
With little cupid mouths.
Five inches huge!

Ted would catch them, and put them in a two-pound jam-jar on the kitchen window-sill. Next morning they would all be dead. Once, under the canal bridge, there was even a leaping trout:

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']

In his reading of this poem on radio Hughes said that the trout had 'a magical meaning for me'. It was an 'authentic aboriginal ... the holiest creature out there in its free unspoiled sacred world'. It guaranteed the existence of that world, glimpsed in such happy places as Redacre Wood and Crimsworth Dene, and was the precursor of all the salmon which later came to embody for him the whole life-to-death-to-new-life adventure.

The significance of wild nature was not only directly experienced by the young Hughes, but also mediated to him by his boyhood reading. Around the campfires on the moor, Ted and his older brother Gerald would discuss the wonders they read about in the books of Roderick Haig-Brown, a British expatriate who settled on Campbell River on Vancouver Island and enthralled young people the world over with his stories of fishing, hunting and life in the woods. They made a pact to emigrate together to British Columbia, but Gerald emigrated to Australia and Ted went to Cambridge, then no farther than Devon. ... For Ted, British Columbia was the road not taken.

When Ted was seven the family moved to Mexborough in South Yorkshire. At about thirteen, his new friend John Wholey introduced him to the Crookhill Estate above Conisborough, where his father was Head Gardener and Gamekeeper and a fount of knowledge of flora and fauna. The two boys would cycle all over south Yorkshire fishing and shooting. On the estate there was an ancient pond with huge pike. In a poem he wrote at the time, 'On catching a 40 lb pike', Ted described it as 'a sinister fish in a sinister lair'. With perhaps a little exaggeration he wrote: 'I felt I'd hooked 3 parts of hell'. In a 1959 poem, 'Pike', Hughes recalls finding

Two, six pounds each, over two feet long,
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb —
One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet.

Pike 'spare nobody'. The energies they embody, like those of the shark that 'hungers down the blood smell even to a leak of its own / Side and devouring of itself' ['Thrushes'], are the typical terrifying energies of predatory nature.

At about the same time that he was writing 'Pike' and 'Thrushes', Hughes wrote to his sister Olwyn:

An entire vision of life seems to have grown up for me around the notion of God as the devourer — as the mouth & gut, which is brainless & the whole of evil, & from which we can only get certain concessions.

[*Letters* 148]

He goes on to argue that whatever is without love, including all the 'lower orders of life' is 'entirely evil'. Thus fishing an incredibly deep pond at midnight is his invitation to the creatures of the deep to enter his world. He is terrified

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

Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed.

His fear is not simply that he might catch an immense pike, but of his own dream of what might be down there, a dream 'darkness beneath night's darkness had freed' from his own unconscious. It was both a pike and a thought-pike, or a nightmare pike.

Yet in spite of the terror, or perhaps in part because of it, there was a deep fascination, even exhilaration, in fishing. Many years later Hughes recalled:

When I was feeling good I'd have dreams full of giant pike that were perhaps also leopards ... They'd become symbols of really deep, vital life. My obsession with pike maybe was my obsession with those energies. So it wasn't all fishing. It was something else.¹

What was this 'something else'? Fishing became for him, very early, much more than an escape from whatever he needed to escape from — school work, the literary life. In his own words, it came to preoccupy him, 'as a lifeline might' [*Three Books* 184]. The experience of fishing was inseparable from the healing experience of visiting the wild places where it took him, of which he wrote in 1964:

These are the remains of what the world was once like all over. They carry us back to the surroundings our ancestors lived in for 150 million years — which is long enough to grow to feel quite at home even in a place as wild as the uncivilized earth. Civilization is comparatively new, it is still a bit of a strain on our nerves — it is not quite a home to mankind yet, we still need occasional holidays back in the old surroundings. It is only there that the ancient instincts and feelings in which most of our body lives can feel at home and on their own ground. ... Those prehistoric feelings, satisfactions we are hardly aware of except as a sensation of pleasure — these are like a blood transfusion to us, and in wild surroundings they rise to the surface and refresh us, renew us.

[*Poetry in the Making*, p. 76]

Marriage to Sylvia Plath in 1956 committed Hughes completely to the literary life, and his sense that he might have taken a wrong direction was one of the sources of stress between them. He later wrote:

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’)

¹ Interview with Thomas R. Pero, *Wild Steelhead and Salmon*, Winter 1999, p.50.

One of the main attractions of North Tawton when Hughes bought Court Green in 1961 was the closeness of several Devon rivers brimming, still, with salmon and sea-trout.

Gradually, with great difficulty and many retreats, Hughes completely changed his attitude to nature. He realized that the monsters were largely of his own making, projected onto nature from his own unconscious, which was typical of the split psyche of modern man.

It had occurred to Hughes that writing poems was also a form of fishing

The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general formlessness. [*Poetry in the Making*, p.17]

In fact fishing and writing poems were two ways of doing the same thing, escaping from the usual toils of the ego, reaching out to the *other*, whether in the form of ‘a new specimen of the life outside your own’ or a new insight dragged up from your own mysterious depths.

The younger Hughes had been so defensive of the independent ego that he had lived in terror, feeling himself to be no more than a ‘bloodily-grabbed dazed last-moment-counting morsel in the earth’s mouth’ [‘Hawk Roosting’]. Yet by the late seventies he was, by fishing, consciously seeking an ego-death:

And bang! the river grabs at me

A mouth-flash, an electrocuting malice
Like a trap, trying to rip life off me —
And the river stiffens alive,
The black hole thumps, the whole river hauls
And I have one.

A piling voltage hums, jamming me stiff —
Something terrified and terrifying
Gleam-surges to and fro through me
From the river to the sky, from the sky to the river
Uprooting dark bedrock, shatters it in air,
Cartwheels across me, slices thudding through me
As if I were the current — [‘Earth-numb’]

In a late interview Hughes spoke of ‘the fascination of flowing water and living things coming up out of it — to grab at you and be grabbed’ [Pero, 53]. His

fishing line became a hot-line to the source. Hooking a big fish felt like plugging in to the power circuit of the world. The fish being hooked by the man is simultaneously the man being hooked by the river.

Life without fishing would, Hughes claimed, have been ‘an artificially diminished life’:

If I were deprived of that kind of live, intimate, interactive existence — allowing myself to be possessed by and possessing this sort of world through fishing, through that whole corridor back into the world that made us as we are — it would be as though I had some great, vital part of me amputated. [Pero 56].

Each trip brought him nearer to becoming the self he had always wanted to be, the self he considers his real self, under the ego and all its accretions. Thus fishing became a religious experience Hughes could no more have given up than he could have given up writing poems, a way of making contact, at best, with what he called the goddess. Rivers were, for him, the very bloodstream of the goddess (‘the river throbbing, the river the aorta’), salmon her most noble emissaries. Yet Hughes' vision reveals, without ever saying so, that the salmon is our prototype, its life-cycle a paradigm of nature's purposes and of the religious life.

How this transformation took place, over some twenty years, is too long and complex a story to tell here. It is, in fact, the theme of my new book: *Ted Hughes and Nature: ‘Terror and Exultation’*, which will shortly be put on my website for free downloading.

As fish stocks diminished, and in some cases disappeared, in the West Country rivers, owing to pollution and overfishing, Hughes went further afield, to Scotland and Ireland. In 1979 he fished with his son Nicholas in Iceland, and in 1980 in Alaska. It was in these years that most of the poems in *River* were written. In 1983, the year that book was published, Nicholas' Oxford research on fish stocks took him to Lake Victoria, Africa's largest inland fishery, where Ted joined him.

In 1986 Hughes finally reached British Columbia. Ehor Boyanowsky had shown him a book, John Fennelly's *Steelhead Paradise*, which ‘had set his heart pounding’.² Fishing for steelhead on the Dean River he found his spiritual home. Steelhead are incredibly strong sea-trout, the largest a metre long and weighing ten kilograms or more. In two weeks of fishing on the Dean the following year, Hughes and his three companions hooked eighty fish and landed

² Ehor Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, silver Ghosts*, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, 2009, p.15.

fifty-four. Of these they ate one. The rest were returned to the river unharmed, 'deserving [as Boyanowsky put it] a protracted reflection on their beauty as they slowly come back to life and, with an insolent flick of their tails, free themselves from our grasp and vanish into the aquamarine currents' [85].

Hughes wrote:

They are immensely powerful and glamorous fish, with a mystique of their own: the great prize of the Pacific North-West. My three companions, fanatic 'steelheaders', two Canadians and one American, would never dream of killing one of these creatures. 'If we killed them', they say, 'we'd be like you people in England: we wouldn't have any'.
[*Three Books* 186]

The attraction for Hughes was not, of course, just the steelhead, but also the setting of a vast, imposing, unspoiled wilderness: the raging river, the giant grizzlies, the great cedars, the granite cliffs, the snow-capped peaks. Boyanowsky describes the experience in these words:

There is always a discomfiting suspension of the familiar, of the normal reassurances of civilization, in true wilderness, in the domain of the savage gods. For all to go well on a remote river — in fact, merely to survive — you rely entirely on whatever skills and resources you can marshal. Layers of dull, insulating habit peel off, and the senses, the very nerve endings, go into overdrive. It is a reawakening that the bush dweller experiences every day but the urbanite pays for dearly (the intensity can startle and the fear and dread overwhelm). You are less than insignificant, it suggests, no more than a mud wasp. The feeling of relief is humbling and reassuring. Time to fish.
[Boyanowsky 23]

Here Hughes wrote 'The Bear'. The fishermen are caught in a cloudburst:

But we sat there
And enjoyed it. And the Steelhead down there
They were enjoying it too, this was what they were made of,
And made by, and made for, this was their moment.
The thousand-mile humping of mountains
That looked immovable, was in a frenzy,
Metabolism of stars, melt of snows —
Was shivering to its ecstasy in the Steelhead.
This actually was the love-act that had brought them
Out of everywhere, squirming and leaping,
And that had brought us too — besotted voyeurs —
Trying to hook ourselves into it.

And all the giddy orgasm of the river
Quaking under our feet —

But it was not essential to hook fish. A gentler communion could be experienced merely by wading into a river. In 'Go Fishing' he wrote:

Join water, wade in underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away downstream ...
Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles. ['Go Fishing']

Hughes said in an interview:

When I am fishing alone, as I come out of it, if I have to speak to somebody, I find I can't speak properly. I can't form words. The words sort of come out backwards, tumbled. It takes time to readjust, as if I'd been into some part of myself that predates language. [Pero 56]

In 'Go Fishing' the human participant is humbled, feels ghostly, loses all sense of his own centrality and omnipotence as a lord of language. The waters wash away his sense of identity. He merges, in Hughes' words, with 'the stuff of the Earth ... the whole of life. ...It's an extension of your whole organism into the whole environment that created you' [Pero 55-6]. It is a recovery of your 'biological inheritance'. The personal pronoun is completely eliminated.

Sadie Plant writes:

Flows of intensity, their fluids, their fibres, their continuums and conjunctions of affects, the wind, fine segmentation, micropceptions have replaced the world of the subject. ... We too are flows of matter and energy (sunlight, oxygen, water, protein) ... a multiplicity of molecular combinations bringing into play not only the man in the woman and the woman in the man, but the relation of each to the animal, the plant, etc.³]

Such a flow could wash away the 'blotched newsprint' of words, heal all creation's wounds, take the misshapen ego back into the womb from which it would issue nameless and faceless and ready for a renewed attempt at living in time and with other people. But total immersion in the flow involves losing words, and no poetic communication is possible without words. Words must be found to recapture something of the experience after the return; but they will not be the monkey chatter of our daily discourse or the 'emergency words' of our accidental lives. They must be, as Hughes said of

³ Quoted by Peter Redgrove in *The Epic Poise*, ed. Nick Gammage, Faber, 1999, pp. 50-1.

the border ballads, ‘words that cannot be outflanked by experience’ [*Winter Pollen*, 68]. Words can be ‘so full of themselves and all the dictionaries they have digested’ that they displace experience. It is a delicate balance finding the right words to express ‘something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the spirit of the snowflake in the water of the river’ [Ibid 20, 24]. In ‘The Gulkana’ he wrote: ‘Word by word / The voice of the river moved in me’.

It was not even necessary to enter water. Just to be by a river and to watch the sea-trout so ‘crammed with religious purpose’ was itself a healing experience:

Robed in the stilled flow of their Creator
They inhale unending. I share it a little. [‘August Evening’]

Of all the collections Hughes made in collaboration with an artist or photographer, *River* is the least successful, in that the photographs engage less with the poems, and go some way to transforming *River* into a coffee-table book. Indeed, it is hard to imagine *any* photographs which would not have been at odds with the poems, since, though there is vivid *visual* description of rivers in them, it seems marginal in comparison with the kinetic, tactile and aural description and imagery. (Where description becomes imagery is often hard to determine.) Hughes’ response to the river is not photographic or painterly, since such pictures cannot hope to convey what concerns him most — the flow, the constant change, the power, the voice and music of the river, and the interrelatedness with the weather and the whole ecosystem of which it is the life-blood and generator.

The language of all these river poems is a rich weave of inter-relationships, a music ‘sewing body / And soul together, and sewing soul / And sky together and sky and earth / Together and sewing the river to the sea’ [‘In the Dark Violin of the Valley’]. A poem may be ostensibly about a single creature, but that is defined by its relationships with other creatures, with weather and season and landscape. Since ‘all things draw to the river’ it is therefore the language of atonement [‘Everything is on its Way to the River’]. Each poem is a microcosm.

The river ‘is a god, and inviolable. / Immortal. And will wash itself of all deaths’ [‘River’]. At Easter the river ‘is in a resurrection fever’ as the cock minnows in their bridegroom panoply jostle in an inch of water, labour ‘in the wheel of light’ [‘Under the Hill of Centurions’].

The controlling image of *River* is the wheel. But the wheel is no longer, as it had been in his poems of the sixties, *karma*, reincarnation, the wheel of unredeemed life in the body, from which the only worthy challenge is to escape for ever. The wheel is now the cycle of the seasons, and of nature’s annual lapse and renewal. It is also the wheel of water, lifted from the sea as cloud, dropped

on the land as rain, whence it flows as rivers back to the sea. It is also the life-cycle of the salmon as it follows the river to the sea to feed and grow, then returns to its birthplace to spawn and die.

The poems in *River* are arranged almost exactly to follow the cycle of the year, from salmon-stripping in late December to the spawning of the following January. In his Pero interview Hughes recalled a dream of walking by a big, swift river:

And coming up this river were these big salmon. As they came past me they were leaping. And as they leapt they shook themselves in the air. As they shook themselves in the air, their milt and spawn were splashed over me. I was completely covered with milt and spawn from these leaping salmon. [50]

This shamanic dream must have seemed to Hughes a blessing from the source, a 'clairvoyant piece of information' [*Winter Pollen*, 56], a healing gift which is also a gift of healing. And shamanic dreams have practical consequences in the ordinary world. In 'The Morning Before Christmas' Hughes and seven other men at the salmon ladder perform the 'precarious obstetrics' of stripping first hen salmon of their eggs, then cock salmon of their sperm, into plastic bowls, then solemnly, lovingly, perform the lavings and drainings and rewashings, in an effort to improve slightly the terrible odds against survival.

In 'The Gulkana' (a very wild Alaskan river) the salmon are engaged in a dance of death which is simultaneously a sacrament of being reborn from their own eggs and sperm:

The current hosing over their brows and shoulders,
Bellies riven open and shaken empty
Into the gutter of pebbles
In an orgy of eggs and sperm,
The dance orgy of being reborn.

They are blissful in their selfless unconditional love of the Goddess, the river, water, life.

Selflessness is the clue, — emptiness, merging, oneness, atonement — not the diamond-hard resistant selfhood of Hughes' first hawks, or the solipsism of his eggheads. He has now shed that false self, that intruder, that self who is at home with a cup of coffee in an aircraft, and released a long-imprisoned deeper self:

one inside me,

A bodiless twin, some doppelganger
Disinherited other, unloving,
Ever-living, a larva from prehistory,
Whose journey this was, who now exulted
Recognizing his home.

[‘Gulkana’]

The life of the salmon is the life of the living waters, sea and river, which is the life of earth and sky, which is our only life. The salmon is part of a flow which 'will not let up for a minute'. The river is itself an archetypal image for life in time, process, which Eliot had described as the one-way helpless journey towards death. But a river is by no means a one-way wastage:

Something else is going on in the river

More vital than death — death here seems a superficiality
Of small scaly limbs, parasitical. More grave than life
Whose reflex jaws and famished crystals
Seem incidental
To this telling — these toilings of plasm —
The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
Dumb with immensity.

The river goes on
Sliding through its place, undergoing itself
In its wheel.

[‘Salmon Eggs’]

And here the poem approaches the mystery. The wheel, karma, the ‘cycles of recurrence’, had formerly been for Hughes, as for most religions, images of horror or absurdity, needing to be transcended. The pressure was to get off the intolerable wheel. Now it seems that the horror was a product of defective vision, the split psyche, the spiritual blindness caused by dualism, the hubristic desire to improve on the given life, to redeem nature. Nature is now, for Hughes, not in need of redemption, but is itself the only redeeming power. Hughes’ eucharist gives thanks for ‘earth’s tidings’ and the ‘blessed issue’ of salmon eggs. He translates the river’s annunciation as ‘Only birth matters’.

In the first edition of *River* the collection is framed by the two poems about the blessed issue, beginning with ‘The Morning Before Christmas’ and ending with ‘Salmon Eggs’. This emphasis on birth and only birth does not discount death, for death is the price to be paid for birth. Birth in the opening poem is set in a context where the odds are ‘five thousand to one against survival’, and the lucky few are ‘dead within days of marriage’:

Nothing

So raggy dead offal as a dead
Salmon in its wedding finery.

Life, in *River*, is 'the bliss of making and unmaking', unmaking in order to continue the cycle of making. In 'Salmon Eggs' the mating salmon are 'emptying themselves for each other'. This selfless giving is a form of dedication or worship:

And the fish worship the source, bowed and fervent,
But their hearts are water. [‘Torridge’]

O salmon, arc up, shatter the goggling lens —
Fall back into the cradle of beginning
And ending, the round of unending water. [‘Snapshot’]

The ending is the October salmon’s slow death. The spent salmon, worn-out with his two thousand mile journey, earth's 'insatiable quest', ends as a 'shroud in a gutter' — 'this chamber of horrors is also home':

All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness,
The epic poise
That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so patient
In the machinery of heaven. [‘October Salmon’]

Even his dead body is needed, as food for scavengers, and to provide essential nutrients for the rainforest, on which depend the rains which will make it possible for the next generation of salmon to reach their upstream spawning grounds. All creatures but man are part of this machinery, which he seems intent on dismantling.

As I said, Hughes and his son Nicholas spent some weeks salmon-fishing in Alaska. The place and its creatures demanded a sacramental response. Hughes wrote to me:

Alaska was everything I’d hoped. Everything happened I wanted to happen, & a whole lot more. We caught salmon until we were actually sick of catching them. We got ourselves off great lakes (living time, 5 minutes of immersion - so cold) by the skin of our teeth two or 3 times. We fished alongside bears. Lay awake listening to wolves. And generally

sleepwalked through that dreamland. Unearthly valleys of flowers
between snow mountains. Miles of purple lupins.⁴ [EP 240]

The poem in which Hughes most fully receives and expresses this experience is 'That Morning', the poem with which he chose to end the 1993 version of *River*. Here two awe-struck human beings are allowed to re-enter Paradise, not as trespassers or intruders or voyeurs, but as long exiles being welcomed home. The sheer profusion of salmon was a sign and a blessing, the body a 'spirit beacon lit by the power of the salmon'. This vision of the 'body of light' expresses the divine harmony of matter and spirit, as if this were no longer a fallen world (a world in which the sky might be darkened by a 'drumming drift' of bombers):

Then for a sign that we were where we were
Two gold bears came down and swam like men
Beside us. And dived like children.
And stood in deep water as on a throne
Eating pierced salmon off their talons.

So we found the end of our journey.
So we stood, alive in the river of light
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.

Nature here is not clothed in celestial light, has no need of any borrowed glory. It is wholly constituted of earthly light, which is none the less spirit.

River seems to me not only Hughes' finest collection, but one of the great books of world literature. What the poems in *River* do is enliven our awareness of and respect for the source, and strengthen our resolve to ensure, at the very least, that it continues to flow.

⁴ *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*, British Library, 2012, p.93.