‘The Poetry Does Not Matter’

The first lines of the first poem in Hughes's first book *The Hawk in the Rain* plunge us into a world which is soon to become familiar:

> I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
> Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
> From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
> With the habit of the dogged grave. ‘The Hawk in the Rain’

‘The Hawk in the Rain’ pitches us into the thick of the battle between vitality and death, which Hughes claimed was his only subject. It is, in this poem as in many, a one-sided battle. Three of the four elements seem to be in alliance with death. Earth, even the earth of ploughland, is not fertile but a mass grave. Water drowns. Rain falls not to engender new life but to convert earth to down-dragging mud and to hack to the bone any head that presumes to raise itself. Air manifests itself only as wind that kills any stubborn attempts at life. The very language is a series of blows pounding life down. What hope amid all this for the fire of vitality or spirit? It is located only in the eye of the hawk,[1] which seems effortlessly, by an act of will, to master it all, to be the exact center, the eye of the storm, the ‘master-fulcrum of violence.’ The hawk is as close to the inviolability of an angel as a living creature can be, but he too is doomed at last to ‘mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land’. Yet the effect of the poem on the reader is far from depressing. If the man trying to cross a ploughed field in a cloudburst cannot be the ‘master-Fulcrum of violence’, the same man later sitting at his desk making a poem of the experience can: ‘I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented - the poem is finished’.[2] Art is bringing resolution to what without it would remain uproar.

This is true of even the best poems in *The Hawk in the Rain* such as ‘Wind’. Here Hughes brilliantly mimes the distorting and levelling power of a gale, seeking to find a language, like that of the ballads, which ‘cannot

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[1] On the significance of the eye in Hughes, see Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), l6-17.

[2] Ekbert Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 163; hereafter cited as Faas.

be outflanked by experience'. His wind is real enough, and carries much the same larger meaning as the wind Castaneda's Don Juan calls the *nagual*, a wind that threatens to obliterate the *tonal* – 'everything we know and do as men" (or in Hughes's words 'book, thought, or each other'):

> 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.[3]

But rhe language of 'Wind' is not quite that of the ballads. The very skill Hughes exhibits in the manipulation of language reinforces the *tonal* and keeps the wind out. The man who 'cannot entertain book, thought, / Or each other', can still write a magnificent poem, with such finely crafted lines as:

> The wind flung a magpie away and a black-
> Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly.

The later Hughes will no longer erect such verbal barricades:

> Tumbling worlds
> Open my way
>
> And you cling.
>
> And we go
>
> Into the wind. The flame-wind - a red wind
> And a black wind. The red wind comes
> To empty you. And the black wind, the longest wind
> The headwind
>
> To scour you. 'The guide'

Given the landscape of mud and blood, the vast no-man's-land, that is the world of Hughes's early poems, it is not easy for him to say how men

[3] Carlos Castaneda, *Tales of Power* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1974), 176.

should try to live in such a world. It is easier to say how they should not. What Hughes pours his most vehement scorn on is the egg-head's pride and ‘braggart-browed complacency in most calm / Collusion with his own / Dewdrop frailty’; his spurning of the earth as ‘muck under / His foot-clutch’; his willingness to oppose his own eye to ‘the whelm of the sun’ (‘Egg-Head’). Pride and complacency are man's commonest defences against receiving the full impact of the otherness and endlessness of the natural world, for example ‘the whaled monstered sea-bottom.’ What Hughes is saying in this poem is, I take it, that the egg-head is resisting birth, which requires the breaking of the ego-shell, because the wisdom that would then flood in would be accounted madness in our world of single vision. In *Moby Dick*, when the negro boy Pip fell overboard, thought he had been abandoned, and was then rescued, he went about an idiot:

> The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God.

‘Egg-head’, however, is at the opposite pole from any divine indifference. The superiority of the speaker manifests itself with just as much fervency and trumpeting as the egg-head is accused of. The style is confident and masculine and aggressive to the point of ‘braggart-browed complacency’.

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ln *Lupercal* there is again some discrepancy between style and content. The style has all the necessary weight and strength to mime the pressure of the huge forces of the natural world upon the living organism. But the energies are invoked (often in the form of predatory beasts) with a sometimes over-weening masculine confidence that they can be controlled by the imposed form of the poem itself - the artistry of the poem working in much the same way as ritual worked in the ancient world (as in the Roman Lupercalia). Were the poems really, as he thought at the time, containing the energies, or were they shutting out by their tightly closed forms the ‘wandering

elementals' that, had they come in, would have overwhelmed all pretence at art? The style of *Lupercal* is confident of its ability both to evoke and control the energies, to plug in to the 'elemental power-circuit of the universe'. Hughes's imagination, purged of the poetic cult of beauty and the Wordsworthian sentimentalities, becomes a great intestine rejecting nothing:

> This mute eater, biting through the mind's
> Nursery floor, with eel and hyena and vulture,
> With creepy-crawly and the root,
> With the sea-worm, entering its birthright. 'Mayday on Holderness'

Thus the poet can clamp himself well onto the world like a wolf-mask, and speak with the voice of the glutted crow, the stoat, the expressionless leopard, the sleeping anaconda, the frenzied shrew, the roosting hawk - which is 'Nature herself speaking'. Yet again there is some discrepancy. We are told that the stoat 'bit through grammar and corset', that its 'red unmanageable life . . . licked the stylist out of [the] skulls' of 'Walpole and his set ('Strawberry Hill'). But the poem that tells us so is a triumph of intelligence and style, in a volume of great stylistic achievement, orthodox grammar, and corseted stanzaic and even rhyming verse.

This discrepancy is also apparent in 'To Paint a Water Lily' with its elegant rhyming couplets. The poem is a verse exemplum of Carlyle's observations on Nature in 'Characteristics':

> Boundless as is the domain of man, it is but a small fractional proportion of it that he rules with Consciousness and Forethought: what he can contrive, nay, what he can altogether know and comprehend, is essentially the mechanical, small; the great is ever, in one sense or other, the vital; it is essentially the mysterious, and only the surface of it can be understood.
> But Nature, it might seem, strives, like a kind mother, to hide from us even this, that she is a mystery. . Under all Nature's works, chiefly under her noblest work, Life, lies a basis of Darkness, which she benignantly conceals; in Life, too, the roots and inward circulations which stretch down fearfully to the regions of Death and Night, shall not hint of their existence, and only the fair stem with its leaves and flowers, shone on by the sun, shall disclose itself and joyfully grow.

Hughes's example is the water lily, whose leaves are simultaneously the floor of the sunny, conscious world, accessible (visually) to any Sunday painter, and the roof of another, less colourful and 'aesthetic' world, the unconscious, inaccessible to all the senses, accessible only to the imagination. Hughes refuses merely to praise the rainbow colours of nature (for which the painterly

style of the poem is well suited), but strives to escape the tyranny of the eye and listen rather to the inaudible 'battle-shouts / And death-cries everywhere hereabouts'. He refuses to paint only the dragonfly alighting on the waterlily if his imagination can see into the life of the pond and the horror nudging her root. However, in this poem at least, it can only gesture in that direction.

> Prehistoric bedragonned times
> Crawl that darkness with Latin names

is a nursery picture, fancy rather than imagination, and 'jaws for heads' is mere Hammer horror. The underwater world, the unconscious mind, is a closed book to the poet. There is no hint of the wisdom of pip, of the shamanic journey into the 'regions of Death and Night' that Hughes's poems are later ro become.[4]

'Pike' is a much better poem, moving from the descriptive and narrative modes of total authorial command in the first nine stanzas into a more open dramatic mode, where what is being dramatized is precisely the fear arising from the speaker's ignorance of what is rising towards him out of the 'Darkness beneath night's darkness'. As Gaston Bachelard writes (not in relation to this poem):

> Night alone would give a less physical fear. Water alone would give clearer obsessions. Water at night gives a penetrating fear. . . If the fear that comes at night beside a pond is a special fear, it is because it is a fear that enjoys a certain range. It is very different from the fear experienced in a grotto or a forest. It is not so near, so concentrated, or so localized; it is more flowing. Shadows that fall on water are more mobile than shadows on earth.[5]

It is also the fear that what is rising toward him might be too monstrous, too alien, too ego-destroying for the poetry he is yet able to write to deal with. Fishing in deep water at night is the perfect image for the kind of poetry Hughes really wants to write, poetry that projects the most naked and unconditional part of the self into the nightmare darkness, not with the intention of bringing back trophies into the daylight world, but of confronting, being, if necessary, supplanted by, whatever happens to be out there. The poems about fishing and water tend to be those in which this is to be most fully achieved, culminating in 'Go Fishing':

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[4] Compare the later poem 'Chiasmadon' (collected in *Moortown* as 'Photostomias'). This primitive deep-sea fish is also known as the dragon-fish, and could well be described as having jaws for head. 'Photostomias' is a fine example of Hughes' mature imagination at full stretch. See Leonard M. Scigaj, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Form and Imagination* (University of Iowa Press, 1986), 276-77

[5] Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dream*, trans. Edith R. Farrell (Dallas: Instructional Publications, 1983), 101-2.

Join water, wade in underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away downstream
Gulp river and gravity

Lose words
Cease
…

Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles.

Here, as Nicholas Bishop points out, 'the personal pronoun is absolutely eliminated from the poem as the protagonist becomes translucent to the processes of both the entire surrounding river-scape and those of the explored inner world'.[6]

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The early sixties was a period of intense experimentation in search of a poetry able to grope its way through that darkness without the map-grid of imposed form or the flash-light of rationality which would have scared away all its creatures. The most significant breakthrough at this time was 'Wodwo', first published in 196I. The success of the poem depends partly on the choice of persona, a 'little larval being' that might have just emerged from an egg or chrysalis, with human intelligence and curiosity, the human temptation to simply appropriate whatever it encounters, yet still naked and open, exposed and tentative,[7] but mainly on finding the right voice for such a creature.

Grammar and corset, rhymes, stanzas, 'poetic' effects of all kinds, rhetoric, have gone. And with them has gone the imposition of personality that those techniques had largely served. What we are left with is a very free verse, close to colloquial prose, flexible, responsive at every moment to the demands of the sense and to nothing else. It is a totally unforced utterance, a world away from the bludgeoning verse of 'The Hawk in the Rain'. The wodwo is no 'diamond point of will': his 'I suppose I am the exact centre /

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[6] Nick Bishop, *Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology,* Harvester Wheatsheaf, 199l, 248. See also Bishop's fuller analysis of this poem in Sagar, ed., *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*. I am heavily indebted to Bishop's work throughout this essay

[7] As Hughes wrote of children: 'Preoccupations are already pressing, but they have not yet closed down, like a space helmet, over the entire head and face, with the proved, established adjustments of security'. *Children as Writers 2*, Heinemann, 1975, v.

but there's all this what is it ... very queer but I'll go on looking' denies the desirability of being a 'master-Fulcrum of violence' and at the same time the desirability of using the formal elements of poetry, its melody and rhythm, as a means of resolving the uproar, thereby sealing off the poem from the real world. No possible pattern is final or definitive or at the 'exact cenre'. How can it be when 'there's all this'?

The language is reduced to a functional minimum from which, like the wodwo itself, it is now free to move out into new forms of expression: 'The nearest we can come to rational thinking is to stand respectfully, hat in hand, before this Creation, exceedingly alert for a new word'. (Faas, 172)

This freedom seems to be related to a more inclusive vision. 'Still Life', for example, begins as uncompromisingly as 'Pibroch', but we gradually realize that the bleak vision is not this time that of the poet himself, but that of 'outcrop rock' taking itself to be the exact centre, the one permanent exclusive reality. The poet stands to one side, saying 'but there's all this'. The less insistent style allows for a play of humour undercutting the claims of outcrop stone to be all there is, 'being ignorant of this other, this harebell'

> That trembles, as under threats of death,
> In the summer turfs heat-rise,
> And in which - filling veins
> And known name of blue would bruise
> Out of existence-sleeps, recovering,
> The maker of the sea.

And in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' we have balance instead of intolerable pressure, fullness instead of lack, unspilled milk instead of spilled blood, and a human being, albeit a child, in a reciprocal and rewarding relationship with a human world and a natural world at one with each other. The poetry here does not impose the momentary resolution, but mirrors it while remaining itself transparent, like water in a brimming pail.

The tragic events of February 1963 put an abrupt end to this atonement. Hughes was thrown back at a stroke into a much more deeply felt despair than ever before. It was as though he had seen the face of the goddess, who had blighted him and struck him dumb. Before his three-year silence descended he wrote, however, 'The Howling of Wolves' and 'Song of a Rat'. The style here has gone very cold, metallic, each line the sharp tooth of a steel trap. The diction is a succession of blank monosyllables forced between teeth:

The eyes that never learn how it has come about
That they must live like this,

That they must live

or ‘The rat is in the trap, it is in the trap’. To dress such testimony up as ‘poetry’ (with the association of that word with ‘pleasure’ relentlessly insisted on by the B.B.C.), would clearly be absurd, almost obscene. Great poetry is truth-telling, and the truth must be in the telling as much as in the authenticity of the vision. Pain, which otherwise is condemned to express itself in silence or inarticulate cries, has, in poetry, its only speech.

That speech will not be the speech of ordinary rational discourse. It searches for the buried world under the world, and for a speech beneath words. The poet opens himself to be ‘pierced afresh by the tree's cry’:

And the incomprehensible cry
From the boughs, in the wind
Sets us listening for below words,
Meanings that will not part from the rock. ‘A Wind Flashes the Grass’

Meanings emerge from silence, from the blank unprinted page, sparely, one syllable for a line, in a voice that is nor the commanding voice of the poet, but the faceless voice that issues the imperatives of living and dying to tree, gnat, skylark, and man alike:

A towered bird, shot through the crested head
With the command, Not die

But climb

Climb

Sing

Obedient as to death a dead thing. ‘Skylarks’

The style or non-style of *Crow* is another new departure. At the end of his 1970 interview, Ekbert Faas asked Hughes why he had ‘abandoned such formal devices as rhyme, metre and stanza’. Hughes conceded that ‘formal patterning of the actual movement of verse somehow includes a mathematical and musically deeper world than free verse can easily hope to enter... But it only works . . . if the writer has a perfectly pure grasp of his real feeling …

and the very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one's own tune against that choir. It is easier to speak a language that raises no ghosts'. (Faas, 208) What he did not say, and may not yet have become conscious of in theory, though it is clear enough in his practice, as Nicholas Bishop has shown, is that the mathematical and musical accomplishments of formal verse might actually prevent the poet's language becoming 'totally alive and pure', and deny him access to the deepest levels of his own psyche. Hughes went on:

> The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of a style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the king's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. I throw out the eagles and choose the Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except iust what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing.

But Hughes does not explain what, in the folktale, is the advantage of choosing 'the dirty, scabby little foal', the advantage of crows over eagles, or of super-ugly language over the beautiful musical language of our poetic tradition. In a letter to me Hughes expanded a little: 'I tried to shed everything that the average Pavlovian critic knows how to respond to. It was quite an effort to get there - as much of an effort to stay there - every day I had to find it again. My idea was to reduce my style to the simplest clear Cell - then regrow a wholeness and richness organically from that point. I didn't get that far'. But again Hughes does not explain the need for this stylistic ascetism. For that explanation we must turn to his writings on the Eastern European poets, who seemed to Hughes to have discovered a universal poetic language, independent of surface sound and texture and therefore translatable, an ABC of what counts. In his 1969 essay on Popa he had written:

> No poetry could carry less luggage than his, or be freer of predisposition and preconception. No poetry is more difficult to outflank, yet it is in no sense defensive. His poems are tying to find out what does exist, and what the conditions really are. The movement of his verse is part of his method of investigating something fearfully apprehended, fearfully discovered, but he will not be frightened into awe. He never loses his deeply ingrained humour and irony: that is his way of hanging on to his human wholeness. And he never loses his intense absorption in what he is talking about, either. His words test their way forward, sensitive to their own errors, dramatically and

> intimately alive, like the antennae of some rock-shore creature feeling out the presence of the sea and the huge powers in it. This analogy is not so random. There is a primitive pre-creation atmosphere about his work, as if he were present where all the dynamisms and formulae were ready and charged, but nothing created - or only a few fragments. . . [There is an] air of trial and error exploration, of an improvised language, the attempt to get near something for which he is almost having to invent the words in a total disregard for poetry or the normal conventions of discourse. (*Winter Pollen,* 223)

What first attracted Hughes to Pilinszky's poems was, he says, 'their air of simple, helpless accuracy'. Pilinszky described his own poetic language as 'a sort of linguistic poverty'. He takes 'the most naked and helpless of all Confrontations' and asks 'what speech is adequate for this moment?' His vision is desolate; his language as close as he can get to silence: 'We come to this Truth only on the simplest terms: through what has been suffered, what is being suffered, and the objects that participate in the suffering'.

The more affirmative, the more radiant with meaning, a work is going to be,the more essential that its starting point is Nothing, the silence of Cordelia, so that it cannot be said that the affirmative meanings have been smuggled in with the loaded language, that anything has been left unquestioned, that the negatives have not been fully acknowledged. Pilinszky has taken the route Hughes started out on in *Crow*; his poems

> reveal a place where every cultural support has been torn away, where the ultimate brutality of total war has become natural law, and where man has been reduced to the mere mechanism of his mutilated body. All words seem obsolete or inadequate. Yet out of this apparently final reality rise the poems whose language seems to redeem it, a language in which the symbols of the horror become the sacred symbols of a kind of worship.
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> These symbols are not redeemed in an unworldly sense. They are redeemed, precariously, in some all-too-human sense, somewhere in the pulsing mammalian nervous system, by a feat of human consecration: a provisional, last-ditch 'miracle' achieved by means which seem to be never other than 'poetic'.
>
> (*Winter Pollen,* 233-4)

Hughes did not get that far in *Crow*, but he did in the sequel *Cave Birds*, in the *Gaudete* epilogue, and in the best poems in every subsequent book.