‘Straight Oxygen’: Ted Hughes’ Debt to D. H. Lawrence.

On reading Lawrence’s collected essays in *Phoenix* in 1984 Hughes found them ‘straight oxygen’.[1] That phrase reminded me of a sentence in a letter Lawrence wrote to Catherine Carswell in the deathly spring of 1918:

> We found some very lovely big cowslips, whose scent is really a communication direct from the source of creation — like the breath of God breathed into Adam.[2]

Like Lawrence, Hughes found that he had a gift for receiving such communications from nature, and that they were the most precious things in life. But for a poet, receiving them is only half the battle, the easy half. The real challenge is how to transmit this life-giving oxygen to readers (at the same time enabling them to get that oxygen direct from the source).

Hughes speaks of trying to find words ‘that cannot be outflanked by experience’. But 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’[3]. Hughes learned from Lawrence a faithfulness and humility before nature, a reluctance to process, label or compartmentalize it. How, for example, can Lawrence render in words not simply the colour of a flower, but the swing of his own heart the first time he sees a wild gentian, ‘so blue, so much more than heaven blue’?[4] Hughes is almost silenced by the colour of the harebell, whose veins ‘any known name of blue would bruise / Out of existence’ [‘Still Life’].

Lawrence, Hughes claimed, was the only English writer completely free of ‘the great plastic megaphone mask of English …which acts automatically as a censor & suppressant of any real material’.[5] What he meant by that is explained by a passage in *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse,* where he claims that it was

> bad luck for Shakespeare’s language that the crippled court-artifice of Restoration speech should have been passed on to the military garrison of the Empire, where the desirable ideal of speech for all Englishmen became the shrunken, atrophied, suppressive-of-everything-under, bluffing, debonair, frivolous system of vocal team-calls which we inherit as Queen’s English.[6]

Lawrence alone seems to have escaped all that. His language is, at its best, able to transmit the pure oxygen of his experience even in prose. In his verse even more so. In his anthology *The Rattle Bag* Hughes included more poems by Lawrence than by any other poet except Blake and Hardy.

That oxygen was badly needed by the young in the post-war years, as the stifling pre-war hypocrisies gradually reasserted themselves. A great draught of it was provided by one man. Hughes went up to Cambridge in 1951. The previous year John Lane had single-handedly revived Lawrence's lapsed reputation by publishing almost his complete works in Penguin to mark the twentieth anniversary of his death. In almost every undergraduate's room there would be a few of these Lawrence texts. Hughes told Ekbert Faas in 1970 that, except for a few of the poems, he had read Lawrence entire in his teens: 'His writings coloured a whole period of my life'. Of Lawrence and Blake he said: 'If I could dig to the bottom of my strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces'.[7] He wrote to Nick Gammage:

> Inevitably a writer like Lawrence, who brought to consciousness and formulated so much that was coming to life in the country as a whole, is blended into the cultural air we breathe. It is not easy to know what is our own, and what came through him.[8]

What Lawrence offered to those undergraduates in the early fifties was a blast of fresh air, particularly in relation to sex. Hughes no doubt responded to that as eagerly as the rest of us. But he probably responded even more eagerly to what Lawrence had to say about what modern man had done to nature, bewailing the death of Pan[9] and the consequent 'dominion of man over the cosmos, through the collective effort of Mind'[10]:

> The old religion of the profound attempt of man to harmonize himself with nature, and hold his own and come into flower in the great seething of life, changed with the Greeks and Romans into a desire to resist nature, to produce a mental cunning and a mechanical force that would outwit Nature and chain her down completely, completely, till at last there should be nothing free in nature at all, all should be controlled, domesticated, put to man's meaner uses.[11]

Lawrence and Hughes came from very similar backgrounds: working-class families in heavily industrialized communities, but within walking distance of unspoiled countryside to which they would escape as often as possible. Each was very knowledgeable about the local flora and fauna, and would frequently alert

friends to the flower or bird's nest they would otherwise have missed. Each attended a non-conformist church, a nearby grammar school, and university. Each would organize readings from the classics in the homes of his friends. Each recognized very early the interdependence of all living things, and the frailty of man in the cosmos. Each became, from direct experience, the enemy of everything which had conspired to enslave people and degrade nature.

Many of Lawrence's fundamental tenets became also Hughes' — his opposition to rationalism, humanism, and certain aspects of science; his insistence on the sacredness of Nature; his belief that at some time in ancient history there had been a fall, into self-consciousness and hubristic materialism, into knowledge, that is, of the self-apart-from-God; his belief in the need for an ego-death and a resurrection in individuals; and his belief in the ability of two people to reconstitute each other in marriage. Lawrence, Hughes claimed, 'has psychological depth on a major scale',[12] since his fictions explored the psychological consequences of the unnatural life-modes imposed by the pressures and conditioning of modern life: 'We roam in the belly of our era'.[13]

Hughes came to find the easy colloquial free-verse of Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts and Flowers* very appropriate for many of his own animal poems. 'Bullfrog', for example, has the same affectionate direct address to the animal, the same quirky, slightly comical, metaphors and exaggerations, ('your little old woman hands'), the freshness and liveliness and wit, the flexibility to deepen at any moment into complete seriousness, with mythic overtones ('disgorging your gouts of darkness like a wounded god'). Anyone equally familiar with Hughes, poetry and Lawrence's might occasionally find it difficult to remember whether a particular line is by one or the other. Who, for example, wrote of a bull's 'massive providence of hot blood'? Hughes? No, Lawrence.

Though he did sometimes anthropomorphize animals, Lawrence was aware of the need to resist that temptation and try to stand aside from his own humanity as much as possible in his poems about them, even to the extent of imagining what it must be like to live under water:

> Your life a sluice of sensation along your sides,
> A flush at the flails of your fins, down the whorl of your tail,
> And water wetly on fire in the grates of your gills. ['Fish']

For all the power of their instincts, Lawrence's animals are never machines. They are strange beings whose view of the world is at least as valid as our own.

Lawrence wrote about creatures as 'little living myths', tokens of our own inner lives and psychic energies. They embodied truths of which we could not speak:

> 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, honorable 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.[14]

Hughes was to write:

> And society is in perpetual turmoil with the efforts of this huge suffering lump of vital shut-away truths to escape and speak, and with our efforts to release it and hear it. …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. Far beyond human words.[15]

'Dark' is a very common word in both Lawrence and Hughes. In *The Rainbow* Ursula comes to realize that her familiar world of consciousness and knowledge is no more than an artificially illuminated circle in the middle of a limitless forest:

> The darkness wheeled round about, with grey shadow-shapes of wild beasts, and also with dark shadow-shapes of the angels, whom the light fenced out, as it fenced out the more familiar beasts of darkness. And some, having for a moment seen the darkness, saw it bristling with the tufts of the hyena and wolf; and some, having given up their vanity of the light, having died in their own conceit, saw the gleam in the eyes of the wolf and the hyena, that it was the flash of the sword of angels, flashing at the door to come in, that the angels in the darkness were lordly and terrible and not to be denied, like the flash of fangs.[16]

Man, if he were not afraid, could look into the darkness either outward or inward. The artist is the courageous pioneer, on behalf of the race, into that terra incognita, 'the everlasting hinterland of consciousness'.

> Man is always, all the time and forever, on the brink of the unknown. The minute you realize this, you prick your ears in alarm. And the minute any man steps alone, with his whole naked self, emotional and mental, into the everlasting hinterland of consciousness, you hate him and you wonder over

him. Why can't he stay cosily playing word games around the camp fire.[17]

Something drove Hughes from childhood away from the security of the camp fire to explore the surrounding darkness.

In 1894 T.H. Huxley had published *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays*, where he claimed that the purpose of education was 'the application of [man's] intelligence to the adaptation of the conditions of life to his higher needs'.[18] In Lawrence's adulthood that was still the received wisdom, and had become the basis of our entire urban industrial society. Pantheism meant either something archaic or something to do with the Wordsworthian pieties. It had nothing to do with the realities of modern life. It was certainly not a serious option as a religion for the twentieth century. Lawrence took it upon himself to make it so. It was a Herculean task at a time when nature seemed to be disappearing under the 'century-deep deposits of layer upon layer of refuse: even of tin cans',[19] when the machine seemed to have triumphed utterly, when H.G. Wells and the majority for whom he spoke complacently assumed that history was the story of man's progress towards the triumph of mind over both nature and human nature. In the year before Lawrence wrote *St. Mawr* Wells had published *Men Like Gods* in which he argued that man should 'bring to trial' every other creature, from the rhinoceros to the tubercle bacillus, and either bring it into line with his requirements or get rid of it.

In the 1950s Kingsley Amis was expressing a preference for 'woods devoid of beasts' ['Against Romanticism'] and echoing, in poems like 'Here is Where', Socrates' view that 'the people in the city have something to teach me, but the fields and trees won't teach me anything'.[20] It seems this was still a common view as recently as 1969, when Patricia Merivale ended her book *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* with the statement that 'later writers [than Lawrence] have taken no interest in the Pan-Christ dialectic, or the closely related theme of the death of Pan, or the Romantic transcendental Pan' and that 'Pan is unlikely to become a literary fashion or a public myth again'.[21] Lawrence is assumed to be the last Romantic in this respect, the last writer to try to take Pan seriously. Yet within a year Ted Hughes, reviewing a book on ecology, was invoking Pan in exactly Lawrence's sense:

> When the modern mediumistic artist looks into his crystal, he sees always the same thing. He sees the last nightmare of mental disintegration and spiritual emptiness … But he may see something else. He may see a vision of Eden, 'excellent as at the first day', the draughty radiant Paradise of the animals, which is the actual earth, in the actual Universe: he may see Pan … the vital, somewhat terrible spirit of natural life, which is new in every second. [22]

Lawrence took to be a defining characteristic of the greatest writers

> this setting behind the small action of [their] protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by human consciousness within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness.[23]

Hughes was to create a series of such protagonists: his egg-head, man seeking experience, and six young men; Dick Straightup, Crag Jack and Dully Gumption; Wodwo and Little Frieda; Crow, Prometheus, Jack Orchard, Nicholas Lumb, Adam, the nameless protagonist of *Cave Birds*, and finally himself, wading in underbeing in *River* and helpless under the governance of fixed stars in *Birthday Letters.*

[This is an extract from Keith Sagar's *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation',* Fastpring Publishing, 2010.]

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[1] *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 487. Subsequently referred to as *Letters.*
[2] *The Letters of D. H. Lawrence*, vol. III, eds James T. Boulton & Andrew Robertson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1984), 240-1.
[3] Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, ed. William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 20, 24. Subsequently *WP.*
[4] D. H. Lawrence, *Mr Noon*, ed. Lindeth Vasey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 109.
[5] *Letters*, 487.
[6] Ted Hughes, ed. *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* (London; Faber and Faber, 1971), 198.
[7] Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 202. Subsequently *Faas.*
[8] Nick Gammage, 'The Nature of the Goddess: Ted Hughes and Robert Graves', in *New Perspectives on Robert Graves,* ed. Quinn, (Susquehanna University Press, 1999), 149.
[9] See the chapter 'Lawrence and the Resurrection of Pan' in my *Literature and the Crime Against Nature.*
[10] D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 196.
[11] D. H. Lawrence, *Sketches of Etruscan Places and Other Italian Essays,* ed. Simonetta de Filippis (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1992), 130.
[12] *Letters*, 453.
[13] D. H. Lawrence, *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine and Other Essays*, ed. Michael Herbert (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1988), 255.
[14] D. H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 205. Subsequently *Study.*
[15] *WP* 124-5.
[16] D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow,* ed. Mark Kinkead-Weekes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 406.
[17] D. H. Lawrence, *Introductions and Reviews*, eds. N. H. Reeve and John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
[18] T. H. Huxley, *Evolution and Ethics and Other Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1894), 44.
[19] D. H. Lawrence, *St. Mawr and Other Stories*, ed. Brian Finney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 151.
[20] Plato, *Phaedrus & Letters VII and VIII*, trans. Walter Hamilton (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1973), 26.
[21] Patricia Merivale, *Pan the Goat-God: His Myth in Modern Times* (Harvard University Press, 1969), 218, 228.

[22] *WP* 129-30.
[23] *Study,* 29.