

## Foreword

One of the many benefits of adult teaching is that one can teach more or less whatever is of most interest to oneself at the time, including foreign literature in translation; there are no examination syllabuses, and there is no need to repeat oneself. Consequently I found myself early in my career teaching a vast range of literature, and most of the authors I engaged with, however remote in time, and not necessarily poets, seemed to offer exciting connections with each other, and require to be thought about in the same context, the context of man's relationship with the non-human world.

In the early seventies I started teaching Greek literature in translation, and became through it more aware of the essentially religious nature of the whole poetic undertaking, and specifically the dedication of nearly all the imaginative art which interested me to Dionysos as against Apollo. The purpose of the greatest works of Greek poetry, whether mythic, epic or dramatic, seemed to be to warn man against that particular kind of pride the Greeks called *hubris*. And the primary symptom of *hubris* was man's belief that by virtue of his intelligence and technology he could stand apart from and above the natural world. Such works as the *Odyssey*, the Oedipus plays of Sophocles, and *The Bacchae*, seemed to me to have as their primary *raison d'être* the need to warn civilization of the dangers, simultaneously inner and outer, psycho-spiritual, social, and global, of the crimes committed against Nature in its name. It was the function of the poet, then as always, to challenge and expose the dominant beliefs of his culture.

Aristophanes' *The Frogs* was performed at the Great Dionysia in 405, possibly the same festival at which *The Bacchae* was performed. And *The Frogs*, for all its knock-about comedy, is almost as tragic in its implications for Athens as *The Bacchae*. The idea of the play is that since the three great poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, were all now dead, the only hope for Athens was to send Dionysos down to Hades to bring back the greatest of them. When Dionysos gets there, the ghost of Euripides asks him what he wants a poet for. 'To save the city of course', he replies. The comedy lies entirely in the idea that a dead poet might be brought back, not at all in the idea that a poet might save the city. The absolute seriousness of that proposition marks the difference in the status of the poet in Athenian society from our own. The idea that a poet could save us if listened to would provoke almost universal laughter, not least among academics. Yet even then the saving wisdom of the tragic poet was not heeded. Both statesmen and people preferred, in Aristophanes' words, to 'sit at the feet of Socrates /

Till they can't distinguish the wood from the trees / And tragedy goes to POT'. The poet shares, it seems, the curse of Cassandra. The gift of prophesy must be paid for by the fate of never being heeded. The elected leaders pursued their hubristic, blind, suicidal policies with the support of the majority of the electorate. The following year Athens fell. There followed the long decadence, and the rise of Rome.

The tragic poets had foreseen not only that, but that Athens was creating a template for all Western civilization, which would eventually succeed in spreading universal plague, spilling all germens, destroying the Sphinx, Pan, Dionysos, 'great creating Nature' herself.

I am thus entering a debate which has existed as long as civilization, about whether art is part of civilization's struggle to transcend or maintain itself independently of nature, or whether it operates in alliance with nature infiltrating and subverting civilization in the attempt to prevent it from cutting itself off from nature's sustaining energies and values - whether it is properly, in Nietzsche's terms, Apollonian or Dionysian. It is no longer possible to regard this debate as academic. It is now a matter of life and death.

The scope of my book was becoming more complex and topical as it was affected by my growing interest in ecology. I became more aware, like every sane person, of the gravity of what was being done to the environment, and of our ecological interdependence with the rest of life. I did not develop ecological theories and then go looking for literary works which could be interpreted as supporting those theories. My interest in ecology did not provide me with a means of interpreting, still less judging literature. I had no need of that. It simply alerted me to the fact that in work after work, works from many periods and cultures, chosen for many different reasons, the thinking and feeling of deep ecology (systemic, holistic and biocentric thinking), had been there all along, as if that were also the inevitable language of the imagination. I simply paid more attention to the central theme of much of the greatest literature, man's attempt to redefine himself in relation to Nature, the cosmos, the not-self in which he is such a small but crucial speck.

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Other extra-literary reading of course fed into the process: the complete works of Jung and Joseph Campbell (especially *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) for example, and such stimulating essays as Laing's *The Politics of Experience*, and Lorca's *Theory and Function of the Duende*.

From these I learned that the imagination requires the opposite of hubris, an ego-death.

Trying to keep up with Ted Hughes remained my primary concern, and I saw that what I was in effect doing in much of my other work was exploring the way in which, according to Eliot's proposition that every new writer added to the tradition changes the tradition, Lawrence and Hughes had changed the way we needed to read almost all previous literature dealing with Nature. And since by Nature I now understood all man's understanding of and dealings with his own nature and everything beyond himself in the created universe, including his ideas of spirit, godhead and the sacred, that meant virtually all literature of any importance.

The works which strike home will be different for each of us. But some works have struck large numbers of readers particularly deeply, at different times and in different places and cultures. These are the classics, which every generation reinterprets and revalidates in terms of its own experience and problems. For there is nothing unique about our experience or new about our problems, except their urgency. Two thousand five hundred years ago the visionary writers saw the beginning of a process which would inevitably, ultimately, lead to our present predicament. But the existing classics cannot answer all our needs. As Eliot insisted, there must be a succession of new works both extending and changing the tradition. It is one of the most important functions of the contemporary writer to bring home to us what our deepest needs are. This awareness we can then translate into new demands made upon the literature of the past, and a revaluation of it in terms of its ability to meet them.

The classic status of recent work cannot be finally determined. But the critic must attempt to identify the contemporary classics in order to engage with them at their moment of maximum relevance and urgency. Perhaps one measure of the greatness of a recent or contemporary writer is precisely his or her ability to revitalize for us the great literature of the past, by providing us with the bearings by which we can understand and respond to it anew. The two twentieth-century writers who have most deeply affected my own reading of earlier literature have been Lawrence and Hughes.

By now I was taking every teaching opportunity and every window in my work on Lawrence and Hughes, to work on this book. But it was growing alarmingly. For every chapter I wrote two more were added to the list of those requiring to be written. I knew that I must start to find parameters which limited rather than extended the scope of the book. These came, as usual, by chance. In the mid-eighties I was asked to be the external examiner for a thesis at Exeter University by Nick Bishop, which was later

published as *Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology*. What I gained most from this fine thesis was a sense of how a kind of hubris can express itself stylistically; how a certain rhetorical command of language is itself a way of reasserting the dominance of the ego, whatever the content.

But the most important breakthrough, which came at about the same time, was a result of looking, for some other purpose, at the notes I had taken at various talks and readings by Ted Hughes. I came across my notes on an unpublished talk he had given on the Eastern European poets at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in 1977, which I had not looked at since. He had said that he could never understand how critics could presume to pass judgement on literature, since it was the function of literature to pass judgement on its readers. It was obvious from other sources that Hughes believed literature earned the right to do this by first putting its own author in the dock for crimes against nature and his own nature, or complicity in such crimes. We are all, including writers, criminals; but the writer differs from the rest of us by pleading guilty and allowing himself to be tried and punished as a representative of the race, most of whose crimes and hubris he can find replicated in himself easily enough. Sometimes he manages to get himself, to a degree, corrected. It was from that time that I changed the title of the book to *Literature and the Crime Against Nature*.

By 'nature' I understand not only the physical environment, the earth with its climate and landscapes, its flora and fauna; not only the powers and processes, systems and relationships, which we now call the ecosystem; but also those psychological, moral and spiritual conditions which might be spoken of as consonant with or expressive of nature. The inner crime, the crime against our own nature, must precede any crimes against the environment. There is little surviving myth, folklore or imaginative literature which does not deal in some way with the nature of man in relation to whatever non-human powers he perceives as operating in the world. It is by such enquiry that the imagination seeks to understand the turmoil of history. Thus the oldest myths, stories and poems are always relevant to the most specific and urgent problems of any age. The story of the Trojan War is about any and every war; the Prometheus myth is about nuclear energy; the Tiresias myth is about genetic engineering; the Oedipus myth is about the disposal of toxic wastes ...

But I am not concerned with the crime against nature simply as a theme, central and pervasive though it is. Imaginative literature speaks a different language from that of any other discourse, not only exploiting timbre and rhythm which, in Lawrence's phrase 'sound upon the plasm

direct', but, most significantly, speaking the ancient language of symbol and metaphor, a language of connections, relationships, patterns, systems, wholes, as distinct from the language of analysis and dualism and atomization which is our normal modern speech. Thus even literature which is not directly about the crime against nature can contribute to changes in consciousness which are highly relevant to it. An awareness of these aspects of the experience of reading imaginative literature can transform that experience in the same way that scientific thought is being transformed by ecology and systems theory and religious thought by the new orientation towards the sacredness and blessings of creation.

We know that all mirrors held up to nature, even by scientists, are distorting mirrors. All descriptions of nature are coloured by attitudes, are partly descriptions of the contents of the writer's own psyche projected onto the receptive face of nature. For the scientist this might be a problem; but for the imaginative artist it is the whole point of his art, to strive for a vision which can unify the subjective and the objective, inner and outer:

The character of great works is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled to the full presence of the outer world. And in them we see that the laws of these two worlds are not contradictory at all; they are one all-inclusive system; they are laws that somehow we find it almost impossible to keep, laws that only the greatest artists are able to restate. They are the laws, simply, of human nature. And men have recognized all through history that the restating of these laws, in one medium or another, in great works of art, are the greatest human acts.

[Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, 150-1]

There are broadly three possible attitudes to nature: first, that it is cruel, ugly, obscene, amoral - that life lived in accord with it would be 'nasty, brutish and short'; second, that it has its beauties and charms, but that these are irrelevant or seductive - a temptation away from truth or ultimate values, which are to be sought elsewhere; or third that, without turning a blind eye to anything in nature, it is still possible to find it sacred, and a source of permanent values. All these are, of course, represented in literature. The question is whether the creative imagination, by its very nature, tends towards one rather than another. Has it taken sides in the two-thousand-year battle between rational, civilized man and Nature? How relevant is great imaginative literature to the most urgent problems of the twenty-first century?

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This book could have been published as early as about 1990; but that was about the worst moment, a time when the anti-literary forces within English studies had gained such power and influence that they were able to prevent the publication of almost any book which took literature seriously (and to prevent the promotion or even employment of lecturers who took it seriously). It languished for a decade unread except by friends, by several creative writers, and by some of the few academics (most notably Jonathan Bate) who were sympathetic to my approach. Then I put it on my website, and the fact that the essays were downloaded at the rate of about two hundred a day for a year or so, with plenty of positive feedback, encouraged me to look again at the possibility of book publication. There were by now plenty of signs that the tyranny of post-modern critical theory, 'cultural studies' and political correctness which had made English departments the laughing-stock of universities for the closing decades of the twentieth century was collapsing through sterility and in-breeding. It is time for criticism to take up the only task which can justify its existence, to serve imaginative writing, both its writers and its readers.

Reading works of imaginative literature has given me much of great value. I do not mean pleasure, which is a frequent but not essential by-product. Nor do I mean in the old sense 'enhancing the quality of life' by reading the right books. That is uncomfortably close to enhancing it by drinking the right wines. It has modified for the better my own consciousness; it has given me access to wisdom, vision and experience far beyond my own; it has fertilized my own creativity; it has shown me something of the survival gear the race will need to live in this world in the next millennium. Many others, I know, both from personal testimony and published work, have had similar experiences. Some readers need no intermediaries; others need a little help to gain access to these gifts. It seems to me that my career as teacher and writer on literature can be justified only to the extent that it has provided such help.

This attitude to literature is, of course, politically incorrect. It is accused of lacking any theoretical basis or discipline, of being elitist, and of being traditional (which is now synonymous with 'out-of-date'). These accusations assume that it is based on nothing more substantial than half-baked or unacknowledged theories or assumptions, or worse, that it is merely a statement of faith, unsupported and insupportable. It is, of course, text-based, and one of its 'incorrect' assumptions is that texts, especially

those of the traditional canon, have any status, should command any respect. But what I am talking about is incontrovertible *fact*. If someone, without provocation, is savaged and mutilated by a dog, their subsequent statement that the dog is dangerous is not an assumption or opinion or theory or superstition, it is a fact - they have scars to prove it. If my imagination is fertilized by exposure to a work of literature, my subsequent statement that literature can fertilize the imagination of readers is similarly a fact, and I have poems to prove it. Unfortunately, not all the proofs are so tangible. In many cases there is no alternative to taking the reader through the texts implying continually, 'is this not so?'

Students for decades now have been discouraged on theoretical grounds from making such journeys. When, in Brecht's telling, Galileo asked the papal astronomers to look at the moons of Jupiter through his telescope they said that there was no point in doing so, since they could prove to him by disputation that the moons of Jupiter could not exist. 'Political correctness' can be equally obscurantist.

Post-modern critics have appropriated to themselves the authority formerly enjoyed by the writers of the traditional canon. Essential core reading is now a vast canon of post-critical theory, which leaves no time for the reading of imaginative works. Post-modern critical theorists are the self-appointed judges of literature; yet many lack, or fail to demonstrate, the basic ability even to read such literature.

I am not interested in engaging in any debate with post-modern critical theorists, or in advancing any opposing theories. It is impossible to engage in serious debate with those who argue (using language of course) that language has no purchase on reality. All theories, even those I subscribe to, get in the way of open and appropriate reading. What does interest me is any means by which we can make ourselves better, more perceptive, responsive and cooperative readers, more alert to what is there on the page. For this reason I shall not at this point say anything of the book's conclusions. The proof of the pudding is in the eating. My aim is to offer convincing readings – convincing to any open-minded readers, irrespective of their prior affiliations – of a wide range of major works of Western literature, ancient and modern. My hope is that the readings which follow, will, cumulatively, draw the reader towards certain general conclusions. Some of the conclusions to which I have been gradually driven by my reading and teaching of a great deal of literature from Homer to Hughes I shall set out in an Afterword.

