

Twentieth-Century Dreck

Ted Hughes and the Modern World

I

The presence in Ted Hughes's poetry of the bric-à-brac of the contemporary world—albeit often in a posture of rejection—is worth stressing. For many readers (at least until the appearance of *Birthday Letters*) his work has been marked by a lack of what we loosely call “realism”. Contemporary life appears to be for the most part only indirectly refracted through these poems. There are plenty of animals but comparatively few people—and those who do appear are, in his theriomorphic imagination, naturalised rather than individualised. The retired colonel in *Lupercal* is a “man-eating British lion” akin to the last English wolf and the last sturgeon of the Thames. The subject of “Sketching a Thatcher” is not so much a man as a “tatty old eagle”. Dick Straightup has a “belly strong as a tree-bole”. Certainly we are a long way from social realism. Hughes is predominantly seen as a visionary poet, and visionary poets are not supposed to be much concerned with the factuality of life. In this picture his mythic stance appears as the opposite extreme to the supposedly drab empiricism of Philip Larkin. But crudely dichotomising in this way means that we get a distorted picture—we miss thereby the visionary qualities in Larkin's poetry and the realistic qualities in that of Hughes. Hughes has in general not been well-served by his critics who, seeing him primarily as a mythographer, take him too much on the terms in which he chooses to present himself, and which are often less than helpful. His grandiose vision of the shaman-poet “tapping into the elemental power-circuit of the universe” is not *prima facie* a very convincing one in a technological society that, in any event, has no tradition of shamanism to begin with.

However, for Hughes's most prominent critics such as Keith Sagar and Leonard Scigaj, this is precisely the mark of his origi-

nality and, indeed, of his superiority to other contemporary poets. The claims they make on his behalf are essentially these—that he is pre-eminently a mythic poet; that the mythic poet is intrinsically superior to one who is concerned with the mere “factuality” of our lives; that the myth he offers is a true one as opposed to the false ones spewed up by a predominantly scientific-rationalist contemporary consciousness: and that the message he brings us is, in Sagar’s words, “the essential vision of the nascent world-age”. All four of these claims are, in fact, questionable—and, indeed, I shall go on to question them in the course of interrogating Hughes’s own work. But it is first worth considering how such an approach tends to conflate Hughes the poet with Hughes the prophet.

There is, indeed, a whole cluster of problems here. If what Hughes is saying can be spelt out in terms of a specific “message” as both Sagar and Scigaj claim, this has no necessary bearing on his worth as a poet. Being a good prophet is compatible with being a bad artist. Also, in seeing Hughes as a “mythic” poet, it would be helpful if we had some understanding of where the limit of myth lies (it is noticeable that even Lévi-Strauss was unable to provide a definition). If, as for Sagar, there can be myths of Reformed Christianity or technological progress, one wonders if any narrative structure at all may qualify. If so, telling apart the mythic from the “empirical” poet may be a rather harder task than we had envisaged.

The claim that myth is a superior sort of narrative in that it can strike depths that a supposedly “realist” narrative cannot reach is a mere tautology if we have first rigged the notion of myth to give it this added profundity beforehand. Surely the truth is that there can be shallow myths just as there can be false ones. It can also be the case that, rather than illuminating, the mythical approach is obfuscatory. Indeed, in some of Hughes’s work, most notably in *Birthday Letters*, the almost automatic recourse to the mythical becomes a sort of *mauvaise foi*, a self-exculpating fatalism whereas the question is, rather, whether he had the right or the need to employ such an approach to begin with. The relationship with Plath is so relentlessly mythologised there that it seems they were in a doomed drama from the outset—or rather several doomed dramas, as Hughes selects from a good many in the course of the sequence. There is a sort of spuriousness in this. Take, for example, “9 Willow Street”, which describes his nursing a bat on

Boston Common and then remembering that, being an American bat, it could have rabies:

How could fate
Stage a scenario so symbolic
Without having secreted the tragedy ending
And the ironic death? It confirmed
The myth we had sleepwalked into: death.
This was the bat-light we were living in: death.

In fact, there seems no reason to suppose that the bat had rabies. Hughes survived unproblematically the bat's bite. It appears that the bat also survived. Given that the incident comes from a relatively early stage in his relationship with Plath the incident could hardly have pullulated with morbid significance at the time, and it takes a good deal of strain to make it significant in retrospect. There is, inevitably, something of a credibility gap for the reader.

The sense so often given in these poems of Hughes and Plath living out a preordained myth which was inevitably to end in her death is an uncomfortable one. In fact, these were two people living out a particular life-style which, like anyone else's, could have ended in a number of different ways. To mythologise it, to make it seem something that could only have one outcome—"Was Death, too, part of our luggage?"—makes Hughes and Plath appear puppets of fate rather than two individuals capable of choosing their lives. Here mythologising is used by Hughes to hide beneath a fatalism rather than admit any responsibility on his part (and, of course, Plath's) for the events that happened. It is used to mask reality rather than reveal it.

Here the effect is dishonest; elsewhere it is merely portentous. Take the description of the Indian midwife in "Isis":

Our black Isis had stepped off the wall
Shaking her sistrum—
Polymorphous Dæmon,
Magnæ Deorum Matris—with the moon
Between her hip-bones and crowned with ears of corn.

One feels she has less stepped off the wall than out of the pages of *The White Goddess*. The midwife is not so much a woman as an anthropological anomaly. She is de-individualised in Hughes's

poem: rather than seeing her as a person he sees her as a portent. As such she is merely a cipher in the doomed drama he is presenting. She is never to be seen as simply herself. Again the mythological approach gives not a deeper interpretation of reality but a shallower one.

The moments we most prize in *Birthday Letters*—and the ones we most believe in—are precisely those where Hughes lets the events speak for themselves. We can well believe in Hughes as “a post-war, utility son-in-law”. We can believe too (though it is possible he exaggerates) in “the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks/ That was to brand my face for the next month”—memento of his first meeting with Plath in “St Botolph’s”. In “A Portrait of Otto”, referring to Plath’s father, the lapidary statement “She could scarcely tell us apart in the end” has its own peculiar poignancy. Indeed, it seems that these poems best succeed the more Hughes leaves his mythological apparatus behind him, and puts his trust in naked factuality—that is, when he becomes an empiricist.

II

In any case, for Keith Sagar *Birthday Letters* is peripheral to Hughes’s main achievement, which is to offer us an antidote to the mechanistic thinking of science and supplying the corrective myth—the “true” myth—that our age most needs. For Sagar the history of Western civilisation is that of “man’s increasingly devastating crimes against Nature”. That is, mankind’s attempts to bring the world under his own control result in a repudiation of nature that can only issue in disaster. We must accordingly replace an anthropocentric consciousness with a biocentric one: it is this that Hughes’s poetry is held to exemplify, and in this that its healing power lies. Thus for Scigaj, *River* is Hughes’s *Odyssey*, teaching us “how to refresh our senses and, more importantly, save our planet”. *River* is, admittedly, one of Hughes’s finest achievements, but most of us would suppose that writing poetry was not necessarily the most obvious way of attempting to save the planet. Ecological soundness is one thing. Art, one would have thought, is another. Besides, it is not obvious that the essential message that Scigaj and Sagar discern in Hughes’s poetry is true; even if it were, it is not one that is peculiar to Hughes; and even if it were both of these it would have little bearing on the value of Hughes’s work as a poet.

The message has decidedly dodgy foundations. For Scigaj, nature “seems to attain an ecological balance effortlessly, without

reflection". This is nonsense, as even Tennyson knew when, some years before *The Origin of Species*, he described nature as "red in tooth and claw" and saw it as having regard neither for the individual nor for the species. Quite apart from the fact of the major mass extinctions of the past as testified by the geological record, had there been at any point an ecological balance, then there would obviously have been no further speciation. With the advent of mankind, especially once he lived in large numbers, there was little choice but domination over the rest of nature: hunting-gathering destroys species, so does farming. Compared to either it is worth emphasising that industrialisation is relatively benign.

We are moving a long way away from poetry, but this is where Hughes's major critics lead us. The myth they attribute to Hughes, far from being true, is demonstrably false from a scientific point of view—though, of course, a false myth can be incidentally useful if it brings about a benign ecological awareness. A scientific stance, though, is precisely what Hughes is held, with some justification, to be opposing. Craig Robinson sees his work as an attack "on the excessively rational mind, on scientific-technological thinking and Cartesian dualism, on earth-rape, and psychological closure". Whether opposing such an easily-available bundle of Aunt Sallies is proof of profundity of poetic thinking may, however, be held in doubt.

After all, there are comparatively few people who can be convicted of excessive rationalism and, far from scientific understanding being widespread, it is rather rare—certainly rarer, say, than belief in astrology and fear of the number thirteen. And Cartesian dualism—one wonders why this particular old scarecrow is trundled out so often—is scarcely a living issue amongst present-day philosophers. As for earth-rape—well, I presume we are all against it. As for psychological closure—one would have thought that this is characteristic of the essentialist vision that these critics themselves embrace and which they are so eager to foist upon Hughes—that is, that there is only one essential version of history and only one possible account of nature.

Rather than resisting the language of science, Hughes takes it on with a rather indiscriminate enthusiasm, both in his prose and in his poetry. In his tribute to T.S. Eliot, *A Dancer Before God*, he invokes, with dubious relevance, genetic codes, magnetic fields, autoimmune systems, and the unified field theory. For most of us,

seeing Eliot's work in terms of "an exploratory X-ray of processes within the dark embryo" is scarcely very illuminating. Take a poem like "Little Whale Song", attributing to the whale not only "The loftiest, spermist// Passions, the most exquisite pleasures" but also

Their X-ray all-dimension
Grasp of the world's structures, their brains budded
Clone replicas of the electron world
Lit and re-imagining the world,
Perfectly tuned receivers and perceivers.

Hughes is aiming at a "terrific" effect, no doubt, in accordance with his subject, but the result is only impressive if you don't probe into what the words actually mean—which is very little. What possible bearing do "clone replicas" (a tautology) or "the electron world" (whatever that is—there is a similarly bizarre use of "electron" in some late poems of Lawrence) have on the nature of the whale?

Bafflingly, in *Tales from Ovid*, we are told that "Pan is the real thing—the true voice/ Of the subatomic". In his version of Euripides' *Alceste* we meet such oddities as Zeus being "the maker of the atom" and the Titans as "electro-technicians". (It is, oddly, a practice followed by Simon Armitage in his own imitation of Euripides, *Mister Heracles*. There we have Heracles "knocked out by a strange action... some tampering with neutrons or atoms" as well as "Hide me in the Periodic Table... make me minuscule and I'll pass away/ through wormholes, through the eye of a needle/ into matter." The taste for using scientific lexis regardless of its meaning appears to be a growing one with poets.)

Hughes's distrust of science and rationality was real enough, but rather than being a sign of his originality, as Sagar and Scigaj see it, it may instead be seen as Hughes uncritically taking over—pre-eminently from Yeats, Lawrence and Graves—the intense resentment against modernity and the urge towards the primitive that is so much part of the heritage of modernism. In this he may seem less avant-garde than simply belated. The nostalgia for origins runs deep in Hughes and, as in his forebears, it takes some pretty peculiar forms.

The trouble with stressing, as his critics do, his disbelief in science and rationality is that it forces attention on what he offers in

their place: and what he offers is a jumble of magic, alchemy, astrology, primitive cosmogonies, the Tarot pack, the I Ching, the Ouija board—just about anything that runs counter to contemporary science. It is clear that Hughes was credulous about second sight and the evil eye, and ruled his own life as much as possible on the basis of magic. We have the incident recorded in “The Gipsy” where a gipsy women is allegedly heard by Hughes to say to Plath: “Vous crèverez bientôt”. His response, rather than attempt to shrug it off, is on his terms more positive: “For days I rhymed/ Talismans of power, in cynghanedd,/ To neutralize her venom.” All this, rather than leading us to a place beyond science and rationality, tries to return us to an impossible place that would be prior to either. It is less a path to follow than a state of denial. There is a similar lack of positive content when Hughes as the shaman-poet tapping into “the elemental power-circuit of the universe” declares that it needs “rituals, the machinery of religion” to keep it under control. But what religion? Not Christianity, of course. What these expressions bring to mind are, rather, the human sacrifices of the Mayans to keep the universe on its course. With Hughes we haven’t moved beyond a Lawrentian religion of the blood. In all these areas I do not see Hughes’s overt message as pathbreaking in the way claimed by his apologists. His forebears had beliefs no less preposterous. One thinks, for example, of Lawrence’s *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, once defended by F.R. Leavis who made heroic attempts to persuade us (and no doubt himself) of its essential sanity. The work is pregnant with the remarkable genius of Lawrence, though for most of us in its least persuasive form. It would scarcely be remembered but for the fiction and the poetry which, though marked by his unbelievable beliefs, are redeemed by an acuteness of vision and depth of feeling which make those beliefs dispensable.

The case of Yeats is similar. No doubt, the system of *A Vision* was valuable heuristically to Yeats as a poet, but we admire the poetry despite the arcanum that helped to make it possible. The truth of the poems is scarcely identical with that of Yeats’s occultist credo (to which even he could give only fitful credence) and we value them regardless of their source—though that is not to say that they aren’t sometimes marred by it. So it is with Hughes. The point is less to listen to what Hughes himself says—which it seems to me is often nonsense—but to what the poems (at their best) say.

III

Particularly in his earlier nature-poetry, where Hughes emphasises the sheer otherness of the natural world, Hughes stands close to Lawrence, as he so often does too in the freedom of movement of his verse and its energy (which can sometimes become stridency). Indeed, in looking back on Lawrence's own poetry we can see some at least of Hughes in advance.

The urge, the massive, burning act
Of the bull's breast.
The open furnace-doors of his nostrils.

In a passage like this (from "St Luke"), we already seem some way into a Hughesian vision of nature. Famously, in his earlier poetry it is Hughes's emphasis on violence and cruelty that is most striking—an emphasis which can be overplayed. Of thistles, for example, we are told that "every one manages a plume of blood." (which seems unlikely). The otherwise innocuous skylark has not previously been seen by poets as "crueller than owl or eagle"—is there, one wonders, some kind of competition? And can, say, thrushes really be seen as "terrifying"?

If, however, we look again at the poem "Thrushes" we find enough for us to be, if not terrified, at least a little scared. When we look at the beady eye of the bird whatever kind of consciousness we discern there is utterly different from our own; we find ourselves to be sharing the planet with creatures that remain alien to us. Hughes emphasises the thrushes' inhuman efficiency, their lack of doubt, of the thoughts and second thoughts that make human beings hesitate in action; they have "No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares." Yet in the odd conjunction of "Mozart's brain" and the efficiency of "the shark's mouth" there is a suggestion that in artistic creation—at least at its greatest—we have some human equivalent to the unthinking and immediate efficiency to be found in the natural world. Both are counterpoised to the man, the lesser artist, "Carving at a tiny ivory ornament/ For years." There is an implicit poesis here: the (very much) idealised Mozart attaining perfection by, as it were, catching it in the air, and in so doing becoming almost part of nature again. (Others may find this more persuasive than I do.) Nonetheless, in a number of poems we do have an authentic perception of nature as machine-like in its precision and lacking self-

consciousness. At this point there is little or nothing of the Wordsworthian moment: nature is scarcely capable of reflecting ourselves back to us ourselves, being uncanny in its otherness.

Hughes is not, however, content with registering nature's otherness: he takes on himself what seems the impossible task of making nature, necessarily dumb, say what it would say if it could speak. Thus we have, in a poem as early as "Hawk Roosting" from *Lupercal* (and in a bare, stripped-down style that presages the "super-ugly" style of *Crow*) the declaration:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

It is this attempt to see with the eye of nature—and Hughes is more confident in his ability to do so than is Lawrence who admitted, for example, that "Fishes are beyond me"—best exemplifies Sagar's requirement that we move from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. We cannot do this, however, if we are utterly apart from nature. For the counter-truth to the otherness of nature is the Darwinian recognition that we too are part of it, and that nature is a matter of eat or be eaten. This is amply recognised in Hughes's work—never was nature redder in tooth and claw than here.

Where, however, is the harmony, the healing power that Sagar and Scigaj require of Hughes's poetry? Where is the reconciliation between man and (the rest of) nature? As Hughes's career progresses a view of nature appears that is benign by comparison with his earlier work. Indeed, it is sometimes uncomfortably anthropomorphic: for example, in "Buzz in the Window" we have a spider "patiently, joyfully" cutting the mesh of his web and hauling a fly home in "exhausted ecstasy". This is surely anthropomorphic with a vengeance: certainly it is not nature speaking from within any more but man speaking from without.

It is in *River* that Hughes receives the highest accolades from his critics—for Scigaj it is "one of the central literary masterpieces of the world". Certainly, there is some impressive writing here, even if (contrary to his critics) one may think that the part it is likely to play in saving the planet is likely to prove a small one. It is a complex sequence, not without its more hermetic moments

(“the buzzard’s hand” joins with “the haddock’s thumb” to make another of those totally opaque Hughesian formulations). My concern here is only with the final poem, “That Morning”, in which, as the men are fishing

Two gold bears came down and swam like men

Beside us. And dived like children
And stood in deep water as if 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.

This is a fine ending to an important sequence of poems, the meditative repetition of the last phrase (unusual for Hughes) making for an ending in a sort of awed hush. It is an epiphany, but not of a sort we can all share, except in the context of the poem. It is an Edenic moment, but no more than a moment, and not a prescription for how we can live permanently with nature. (Apart from anything else, bears as we well know are dangerous animals, and not to be approached lightly.) To see it primarily in the context of ecological correctness is, I think, to diminish it, and not to listen to what the poem tells us, which is the record of a particular moment rather than offering a generalised guide to living.

Further, to place Hughes’s nature-poetry in general into the straitjacket of a single all-important myth is to make it more monolithic than it really is: in fact, there is a rich range of responses to nature in his work, not all of them necessarily containable in a consistent narrative. And, of course, not only to nature. Hughes’s work—which has been made available to us often in a partial and haphazard way, due to Hughes’s own self-doubts and second-thoughts—is immensely varied in its responses to life and in its stylistic diversity, as Simon Armitage’s recent selection of his poems reminds us. (Hughes himself was not always his own best critic in selecting from his work.)

Sagar is consistently most sympathetic to that part of Hughes’s oeuvre which can most easily be contained within the mythological nexus, thus he is lukewarm to most of the work after *River*. But

a good deal of his poetry, including that which Sagar most prizes, can be read profitably without plunging into the mythological maelstrom to which Hughes's prose writings so often invite us. His later work is in general less recondite than much of his middle period and seems to be aiming for a greater directness of utterance. It is also, to some degree, confessional in a way that he had not allowed himself before. Obviously, this is the case with *Birthday Letters*, but it is also, in a more indirect fashion, the case with his version of *Alcestis*. At first sight the de-mythologiser Euripides is a surprising choice. One can understand how the more archaic Æschylus (whose *Oresteian Trilogy* he had earlier translated) would have an appeal to Hughes, but scarcely the more sceptical and rationalising Euripides. It is perhaps less the dramatist than the particular drama that is important to him here, for it is undoubtedly the case that it enables him to make utterances that are unmistakably personal. Thus the chorus says of Admetus:

He does not know what loss is.
Nothing has ever hurt him.
But when she has gone he will know it.
When everything is too late
Then he will know it.
When he has to live in what has happened.

Another chorus could almost have come out of *Birthday Letters*:

Your death humbled all of us.
Your death
Was your greatest opportunity
And magnificently you took it.

This is, of course, Hughes speaking through yet another myth, albeit not one of his own invention. But he is speaking plainly enough, and what he says has nothing to do with how the world can be saved, but is a personal one, indeed, a sort of expiation. Here at least he must be read as a poet, not as a prophet.