

## **An Ecocritical Reading of the Poetry of Ted Hughes**

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(A draft of a Chapter 24 of Paul Poplawski (ed.), *Studying English Literature in Context*,  
Cambridge University Press, 2022)

### *Abstract*

This essay offers an ecocritical reading of Hughes's poetic career. First, ecocriticism is defined and the successive 'waves' of its development outlined. In contrast to Larkin's 'Movement' poetry, the case is made for Hughes's work as post-pastoral poetry that seeks to counter nostalgic idealisation of the countryside, its inhabitants and its elemental forces. Hughes's first two volumes, *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*, satirise pastoral defences against the forces of nature, but also celebrate the 'elemental power circuit of the universe' at work in the inner life of humans, animals and landscapes. *Wodwo* then seriously extends these themes. Between critique and celebration of forces in the human and more-than-human worlds, the course of Hughes's poetic career was remarkably consistent, despite the variety of forms that each volume took, from the mythic narratives of *Crow* and *Cave Birds*, to the shamanic verse narrative of *Gaudete*, the georgic poetry of *Moortown Diary*, the cultural organicism of *Remains of Elmet* and the redemptive achievement of *River*. The maturity of these three latter volumes deepens both language and themes. Even in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes and his late wife, Sylvia Plath, can be seen to be defined by their different responses to the natural world.

The distinctive feature of this essay is the way in which ecocritical concepts are revealing of aspects of Hughes's poetry: pastoral, post-pastoral, otherness, inhabitation, biosemiology, ecofeminism, material ecocriticism, agency, natureculture and re-enchantment. These concepts are defined in the context of specific texts. Consideration is also given to poetry written 'within hearing of children', as Hughes put it, together with reference to Hughes poetic translation of *Tales from Ovid*. The significance of Hughes's influence upon Alice Oswald and the Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, is emphasised as twenty-first-century poets and readers engage with the consequences of the Anthropocene.

Ted Hughes recognised that the environmental crisis is a cultural crisis. The depth of this crisis becomes clear when, as Poet Laureate in 1992, he began an article in a national Sunday newspaper with these words: ‘If Earth is a casualty of modern civilisation, that is not her only problem ... Unluckily for the Earth, mankind has difficulty finding a language in which to understand her case. A language that will not only interpret the Earth’s needs exactly, but will also, by sheer power of conviction, realign mankind to those needs, like an irresistible magnetic field.’<sup>1</sup> Several features of this discourse are characteristic of Hughes’s way of thinking and writing. First is the anthropomorphism of Earth which, like us, has a problem. The puzzled figure of God in Hughes’s creation stories for children makes creatures that he cannot quite get right.<sup>2</sup> Second is the gendering of Earth as female. Hughes had just published *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) in which he argued that male fear of the feminine in nature was a strong theme of Shakespeare’s works. Third is the belief that realignment is not only possible, but restorative of a relationship that should be as natural as the alignment in a magnetic field. Finally, there is the resolution that a language can be found that carries the force of a ‘sheer power of conviction’ to begin this realignment. For Hughes, this was the language of poetry and story (which include the forms of song and drama). In these few sentences in 1992 Hughes could have been describing his life’s work. An ecocritical reading of it should be able to demonstrate poetry’s power and magnetism in attempting to contribute to the healing of Earth’s problem. Of course, Hughes knows that Earth’s problem is really our problem.

In *English Literature in Context*, John Brannigan cites Greg Garrard’s book *Ecocriticism* (2004) in his discussion of Alice Oswald’s poem, *Dart* (2002), and it is notable

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<sup>1</sup> Ted Hughes, ‘If’, *Observer*, 29 November 1992, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> See Ted Hughes, *How The Whale Became* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

that Oswald was initially hugely influenced by the poetry of Ted Hughes.<sup>3</sup> Ecocriticism began in the late twentieth century as a deconstruction of representations of nature, in the USA as celebratory readings of contemporary nature writing, and, independently in the UK, as a re-reading of Romanticism in the light of contemporary environmental concerns. Two collections of essays were quickly compiled on both sides of the Atlantic – in the USA, Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) and, in the UK, Laurence Coupe's *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (2000). Following on from these starting points, ecocritics have charted several waves of development, including a second wave of self-critique,<sup>4</sup> to a third wave of the exploration of sub-fields such as environmental justice, ecofeminism, indigenous studies, biosemiology, material ecocriticism and post-pastoral theory.<sup>5</sup> At the same time a fourth wave of the globalisation of ecocriticism has resulted from national and regional connections of ecocriticism with local traditions.<sup>6</sup> The work of Ted Hughes remains a distinctively British mode of examining our connection with nature, although it is a mode that benefits from being read through the prisms of several new notions of ecocriticism which highlight key aspects of his work.

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<sup>3</sup> See Paul Poplawski (ed.), *English Literature in Context*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 605–6; and *London Review of Books*, Bookshop interview, March 7, 2017:  
<https://www.92y.org/archives/75-75-alice-oswald-ted-hughes-92y-poetry-center-director-bernard-schwartz.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Dana Philips, *The Truth of Ecology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> See Greg Garrard (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> John Parham and Louise Westling (eds.), *A Global History of Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

John Brannigan suggests that Philip Larkin's poem 'MCMXIV' 'appears to be nostalgic for the lost continuity of a pastoral England'.<sup>7</sup> Ted Hughes's first collection of poetry was immediately seen as a stark contrast to Larkin's nostalgic, slightly diffident, poetry that was associated with the Movement poets of the 1950s. Reviewing *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), Edwin Muir, for example, said that Hughes was 'clearly a remarkable poet and seems to be quite outside the currents of his time'.<sup>8</sup> When Muir wrote, 'His images have an admirable violence', Muir was identifying a feature of Hughes's early poetry that was distinctly anti-pastoral, celebrating elemental forces in landscapes and animals whilst also satirising humans who were disconnected from the powerful emotions and dreams of their own inner lives. Hughes sought to counter pastoral idealisation of the countryside, its inhabitants and its elemental forces. Hughes's first two volumes satirise pastoral defences against the forces of nature, but also celebrate what Hughes called 'the elemental power circuit of the universe' at work in the inner life of humans, animals and landscapes.<sup>9</sup> In the poem 'Egg-Head' from the first collection, the intellectual's head is an eggshell that filters out 'the flash / Of the sun, the bolt of the earth'. But he is also merely 'Peeping through his fingers at the world's ends, / Or at an ant's head', or at 'a leaf's otherness'.<sup>10</sup> Ecocriticism seeks to celebrate literature that engages with 'otherness' in nature and, in Hughes's second collection, *Lupercal* (1960), the poem 'Crow Hill' attempts to create a sense of the otherness of the forces at work in the West Yorkshire landscape of Hughes's childhood, including its human and non-human inhabitants. In the first draft of this poem, farmers appeared in all

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<sup>7</sup> In Poplawski (ed.), *English Literature in Context*, p. 599.

<sup>8</sup> Edwin Muir, 'Kinds of Poetry', *New Statesman*, 28 September 1957, p. 392.

<sup>9</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 200.

<sup>10</sup> Ted Hughes, *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), p. 33.

three stanzas, but in the published poem their presence is reduced: ‘Between the weather and the rock / Farmers make a little heat’. The poem goes on to balance forces of erosion with the vitality of life brilliantly adapted to the tough conditions. These forces of vitality and decay are referred to as a single ‘What’:

What humbles these hills has raised  
 The arrogance of blood and bone,  
 And thrown the hawk upon the wind  
 And lit the fox in the dripping ground.<sup>11</sup>

The otherness of ‘What’ is the same ‘elemental power circuit’ responsible for the strong verbs ‘thrown’ and ‘lit’ which emphasise adaptation to Yorkshire weather.

Ecocritics would call such adaptation ‘inhabitation’ or ‘dwelling’ which, in this poem, includes farmers, hawk and fox, all of whom are at home in the tough landscape that is the actual Crow Hill above the Calder Valley where Hughes grew up. Hughes is poetically undertaking what Jonathan Bate defines as ‘dwelling with the earth’: ‘True inhabiting necessitates a willingness to look at and listen to the world. It is a letting go of the self which brings the discovery of a deeper self.’<sup>12</sup> Bate could be describing here Hughes’s purpose in writing the poem ‘Wodwo’ which gave his third collection its title (1967). In this poem Hughes recognises the difficulty of ‘letting go of the self’ in ‘listening to the world’. In the voice of the half-human, half-animal mythical wood spirit from the Middle English poem *Sir Gawain and The Green Knight*, Hughes asks, ‘What am I?’: ‘Do these weeds / know me and

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<sup>11</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 155.

name me to each other / have they seen me before, do I fit in their world?’<sup>13</sup> Through the figure of the wodwo, Hughes treats, with questioning irony, the human assumption that, although the weeds obviously have their own world, humans are not only part of it, but at the centre of it. The poem’s final line is: ‘very queer but I’ll go on looking’. This is the final poem in a collection that repeatedly rejects the recognisably human notion of, in the wodwo’s words, ‘I suppose I am the exact centre’, especially in the tempting hubris of inventing a purpose for the universe.

The poem ‘Pibroch’ is a lament for the notion of a ‘heaven’, as is clear in the opening lines: ‘The sea cries with its meaningless voice / Treating alike its dead and its living, / Probably bored with the appearance of heaven.’<sup>14</sup> ‘Appearance’ cleverly combines both the sense of the sea looking up and the human invention (comparatively recent in evolutionary terms) of ‘heaven’ in the religious sense. The sea, here, is ‘without purpose, without self-deception’, so ‘Minute after minute, aeon after aeon, / Nothing lets up or develops. / This is neither a bad variant nor a tryout’. Whilst evolutionary biologists might argue with ‘nothing develops’, it is questionable whether anything develops in terms of value, as opposed to simply changing. The poem asks the reader to consider questions about the human desire to see evolutionary ‘progress’ in terms of creation’s ‘purpose’ and whether this is a ‘self-deception’ comparable, perhaps, to the egg-head’s.

Many such human cultural defences against ‘the bolt of the earth, the whelm of the sun’ are tested in the collection named after its central figure, *Crow* (1970). From his own studies of indigenous cultures as a student of social anthropology in his final year at Cambridge University, Hughes was familiar with Native American folk tales about the trickster, who sometimes took the form of a crow. By breaking all social conventions and

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<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 183.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

getting himself into trouble, the trickster's amusing and amoral behaviour in these tales demonstrates why the conventions are needed. Similarly, Hughes's Crow emerges from blackness, in arrogance and innocence, following his appetites and instincts, in poems which combine myth, legend and the Biblical creation story. Crow sets about testing to destruction, with a playfulness that turns to amazement, the constructions of Western civilisation that excuse, or explain away, a direct experience of nature: pastoral idealisation ('Crow and the Birds'), Romantic self-projection ('Owl Song'), the Oedipus complex ('Revenge Fable'), scientific determinism ('Crow's Account of the Battle'), the reification of evil ('The Black Beast'), the killing of 'otherness' ('Crow's Account of St George'), a Christian God ('Crow communes') and LOVE ('Crow's First Lesson'). The persistence of these self-deceptions and their self-destructiveness is characteristically illustrated towards the end of the sequence in the short poem 'Glimpse' when Crow, despite all he has seen, attempts a pastoral lyric that begins, "'O leaves –" / The touch of a leaf's edge at his throat / Guillotined further comment'.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Crow finds in this poem that he can continue in this Romantic vein, as Hughes playfully says, 'Through the god's head instantly substituted'. Even in the face of material reality, Crow finds that the god-like human desire for transcendence can persist, despite its ultimate self-destructiveness.

Occasionally throughout the sequence there are poems in which Crow seems to be tentatively developing an ethical sense of himself in the universe. First, he must show some signs of empathy or at least desire for connection with the otherness of nature. He tries 'just being in the same world as the sea', but it is in terms of his own feelings for the sea – ignoring it, talking to it, hating it, feeling sympathy for it – all to no avail.<sup>16</sup> Finally he finds that he cannot even turn his back and march away from the sea, 'As a crucified man cannot

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 256.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 252.

move'. The pain caused by this blow to his ego in the realisation that he will always be marching towards a sea, 'crucifies' him into immobility. In 'Crow and the Beach' he listens to 'the sea's ogreish outcry and convulsion' and, with humility this time, he is able to empathise enough to feel its pain instead of his own: 'His utmost gaping of brain in his tiny skull / Was just enough to wonder, about the sea, / What could be hurting so much?'<sup>17</sup> We read this now with the knowledge that Hughes was aware of global warming and the rising of sea-levels.<sup>18</sup> But more significant for readers in 1970 was the very idea of listening and looking for the signs of hurt coming from the sea and its inhabitants – what is now called 'biosemiology'.

In notes Hughes made about his earliest experience of the moors above his house, he himself wondered about 'the rocks, the birds, the silence, the flowers, full of something wonderful, if only one could learn to interpret their sounds or their signs'.<sup>19</sup> In a sense the practice of biosemiology was the earliest motivation for his poetry. It is celebrated in the final poem of *Crow*, a hymn to 'Littleblood'. Here Hughes is listening to the life-force that runs through the land ('eating the medical earth') and its creatures ('dancing with a gnat's feet'). It is a life-force that has 'Grown so wise grown so terrible / Sucking death's mouldy tits. // Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood'.<sup>20</sup> The importance of biosemiology was emphasised in one of Hughes's last works, his translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in *Tales*

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Yvonne Reddick, *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Ted Hughes Archive, Stuart A. Rose Library, Emory University, Mss 644, Box 115, ff. 8.

<sup>20</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 258.

*From Ovid* (1997) when he suggested that, in the Age of Gold, 'Listening deeply, man kept faith with the source'.<sup>21</sup>

'Deep listening' is impossible for Crow. At various points in the sequence he encounters his female creator, the goddess of nature, but cannot recognise her. The closest he comes is in 'Crow's Undersong', but all he finds are riddles of her retreat under the trappings of modern civilisation, 'with eyes wincing frightened / When she looks into wheels'.<sup>22</sup> The poem begins, 'She cannot come all the way', but ends, 'If there had been no hope she would not have come // And there would have been no crying in the city // (There would have been no city)'. There is still hope here for a reconciliation that might come from 'listening deeply' in the city that is both the source of human alienation from nature and representative of the capacity for human creativity.

Ecofeminist readers would note the danger of essentialism in Hughes's apparent association of the feminine with nature. But the mythic narrative of the poem sequence that followed *Crow* indicates that Hughes is attempting to reduce the male ego and the arrogance of patriarchy to bring out an innate but resisted, male closeness to nature. In *Cave Birds* (1978) an arrogant cockerel is put on trial for the neglect of his inner nature that connects him to outer nature. In a folkloric narrative that Hughes subtitled 'an alchemical cave drama', the male figure is found guilty and made to confront his own mortality. In refusing a series of false heavens, he shows himself ready to be symbolically married to a female figure who represents both his own inner spirit and the goddess of nature.

In the moving poem 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days', the pair of lovers physically remake each other's bodies, part by part:

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<sup>21</sup> Ted Hughes, *Tales From Ovid* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997), p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 237.

She gives him his eyes, she found them  
 Among some rubble, among some beetles

He gives her her skin  
 He just seemed to pull it down out of the air and lay it over her  
 She weeps with fearfulness and astonishment <sup>23</sup>

The mutual giving is characterised by tenderness and wonder. The final lines of this poem led me to first propose the notion of the ‘post-pastoral’ as being clearly in the pastoral tradition, but avoiding the dangers of idealisation.<sup>24</sup> Hughes evokes a moment of ecstatic connectedness that manages to encompass both that between the lovers in their animality and a human sense of connection to the earth:

So, gasping with joy, with cries of wonderment  
 Like two gods of mud  
 Sprawling in the dirt, but with infinite care

They bring each other to perfection.<sup>25</sup>

That last word could so easily suggest a pastoral idealisation, but this is eclipsed by their ‘sprawling in the dirt’ of the earth like two gods of its materiality. Far from being

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 437.

<sup>24</sup> Terry Gifford, ‘Gods of Mud: Hughes and the Post-Pastoral’, in Keith Sagar (ed.), *The Challenge of Ted Hughes* (London: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 129–41.

<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 438.

transcendent they are of the earth, at one with its messy, physical, sometimes unattractive nature that can nevertheless at such moments offer ‘joy’ and ‘wonderment’. Such moments might be transient since the force of the human desire for control of nature can reassert itself. So the cockerel is reborn as a falcon in a poem entitled ‘The Risen’ which ends in a question that has the inevitability of a statement: ‘But when will he land / On a man’s wrist’. It will have been noticed that, in ‘Wodwo’ and ‘Littleblood’ in particular, Hughes leaves out punctuation for poetic effect. The missing question mark here is another case of challenging the reader to ask why it is missing. *Cave Birds* concludes with a ‘Finale’ which provides the answer: ‘At the end of the ritual / up comes a goblin’. No pastoral complacency is possible because in a post-pastoral text, which goes beyond (rather than ‘after’) pastoral, it is acknowledged that the human desire for control, mastery, purposes, or protections, can reassert themselves.

In his critique of patriarchal arrogance and masculine control, Hughes is implicitly exploring an ecofeminism that ran deep in his thinking about the history of English literature and culture. He was to elaborate this thinking in his monumental study *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). But by 1970 Hughes had a fully formed cultural theory of Western patriarchy’s responsibility for human alienation from nature, as he revealed in a review of Max Nicholson’s book *The Environmental Revolution* (1970). (This review, incidentally, was in the third issue of a new magazine called *Your Environment* which Hughes had persuaded his friends David Ross and Daniel Weissbort to launch with him in 1969.) Hughes believed that a religious patriarchal society had encouraged the biblical rejection of a feminised Nature: ‘The subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature.’<sup>26</sup> In his later study Hughes argued that Shakespeare was exploring, in his plays and his long poems, the tension between Puritan

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<sup>26</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 129.

suppression and a deeper Marian religion that sought energy from what Hughes called ‘the Goddess of Complete Being’. The sense of a need to bring modern masculinity into closer contact with the feminine in human and outer nature should inform a reading of the otherwise perplexing verse narrative of *Gaudete* (1977).

The narrative of this book, which had its origins in ideas for a film script, combines a shamanic healing journey with apparently everyday village life. Although the narrative is a farcical satire, the tone is unwaveringly serious throughout. Hughes knew from his studies of indigenous cultures at Cambridge that a shaman takes a journey in trance into the world of spirits in order to return with healing songs and stories for his community. *Gaudete* opens as the Reverend Nicholas Lumb is carried away into the spirit world to perform a healing task there. (The spirit world seems to have thought that a Church of England vicar is some kind of shaman.) In his place is a changeling Lumb has made from an oak log, who, taking a rather ‘wooden’ approach to the ministry of the Gospel of love, turns the Women’s Institute (a rural women’s organisation) into a coven to be impregnated in the hope, Lumb convinces them, of producing a Messiah. The men of the parish discover what is going on, hunt Lumb down and kill him at the very moment that the spirits have decided to cancel him. The original vicar turns up in the West of Ireland, whistles up an otter and goes off, leaving behind a notebook of poems that are ‘hymns and psalms to a nameless female deity’.<sup>27</sup>

These poems constitute an Epilogue that has a quite different tone – a seriousness appropriate to personal religious encounters with the Goddess – that contrasts with the main narrative and makes an implicit critique of it. If the narrative asserts male confidence and exploitation of women, the Epilogue poems strain with male inadequacy and humility in the face of a mysterious and marvellous feminised creation. Thus these Epilogue poems

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<sup>27</sup> Ted Hughes, *Gaudete* (London: Faber and Faber 1977), p. 9.

inevitably also express something of the feminine in their writer that counters the victimisation of women by the wooden Lumb:

Each of us is nothing  
 But the fleeting warm pressure  
  
 Of your footfall  
  
 As you pace  
 Your cage of freedom.<sup>28</sup>

The Epilogue poems are in the Indian tradition of ‘vacanas’ – ‘poems based on the mystical process of becoming one with a god or with a divine Creative Source’<sup>29</sup> – and sixty-three more of them were published in the limited edition volume entitled *Orts* (1977), which in northern dialect means ‘left-overs’. This volume contains some of Hughes’s most complex attempts to connect to the force of creation in direct addresses to the Goddess. Poem ‘41’, for example, celebrates ‘this planetary rawness’: its

aimless elation  
  
 And stone-dullness  
  
 That empties me every instant

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 195.

<sup>29</sup> Ann Skea, ‘Ted Hughes’ Vacanas: The Difficulties of a Bridegroom’, in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (eds.), *Ted Hughes: Cambridge to Collected* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 81.

Pulses your fullness.<sup>30</sup>

The paradoxes of this ordinary yet breathtaking connection are as close as Hughes can get to feeling on the pulse the ego-emptying mystery of being alive within the ‘fullness’ of the universe.

From his honeymoon with the American poet Sylvia Plath in Benidorm in 1956, to the very end of his life, Hughes wrote ‘within hearing of children’, as he put it.<sup>31</sup> As this phrase implies, he was reluctant to regard his children’s writing, in poetry, stories and plays, as separate from his writing for adult readers, including his central project of exploring environmental reconnection for our species. In poetry, perhaps the best example of this are the animals poems in *The Cat and Cuckoo* (1987), especially its opening poem ‘Cat’ in which the healing action of stroking a cat makes a connection with ‘powers / Of the beasts who ignore / These ways of ours’ (np). In his immensely popular story, *The Iron Man* (1968), the impulse of men to destroy the otherness of the eponymous metal man is countered by the boy, Hogarth, who finds a positive role for him suited to his individual qualities. He eats scrap metal and can withstand heat, so he is enlisted to fight, in a trial by fire, against a Space Being that is threatening the earth. Since the Space Being can only fly and sing, it is inevitably defeated and is afterwards given the job of making ‘the music of the spheres’ in space. It is a story with the sort of redemptive closure that Hughes was unable to find in adult works such as *Crow* and *Cave Birds*.

A quarter of a century later, Hughes wrote *The Iron Woman* (1993) which is explicitly ecofeminist and has a polemical environmental agenda that is really only fully articulated in the book’s final pages. Lucy is called by the Iron Woman to help the fish and eels in the rivers

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<sup>30</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 406.

<sup>31</sup> Ted Hughes, *Season Songs*, BBC Radio 3, 6 September 1977.

that are dying from human pollution of their waters. The Iron Woman turns all the men in the country into fish, who have to be carried as quickly as possible by the women to water, where the men are made to share in the pollution-engendered pain of all riverine creatures. Lucy's father works at the Waste Factory that is contributing to the pollution and the focus of the story becomes the challenge of finding a solution to dealing with waste. From a series of shape-shifting narrative moves, an organic antidote to pollution is found in webs from the Cloud-Spider of Mess that grow over any rubbish and is non-toxic when mixed with water. 'But where', Lucy asks, 'did the Cloud-Spider of Mess come from?' 'Deep, big, fright', says the Iron Woman, and 'deep, big, change'.<sup>32</sup> The message is absolutely clear to readers in the twenty-first century who are now confronting the 'deep, big, frights' that are the consequences of the Anthropocene and contemplating with difficulty 'deep, big, change'.

The poetry of Hughes's mature years produced three volumes of poetry that looked in more detail at the complexities of 'deep, big, change' in environmental attitudes in practical, cultural and metaphysical modes. *Moortown Diary* (1979) contained poems documenting in georgic detail the poet's taking on personal responsibility for land and animals when, in 1972, he bought Moortown Farm, close to the Devon home in North Tawton that he had bought with Sylvia Plath ten years earlier. Seven years after Plath's suicide in 1963, Hughes married Carol Orchard and her father worked on the farm, as will be seen in the final poems of the collection. The *Moortown Diary* poems are literally unaltered diary entries that Hughes called 'improvised verses' written on the day of their inspiration.<sup>33</sup> In the poem 'February 17<sup>th</sup>' the poet faces the trial of dealing with a sheep whose partially-born lamb is already dead. He catches the sheep, but cannot get his hand past the protruding head, so, he writes, 'I went /

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<sup>32</sup> Ted Hughes, *The Iron Woman* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), p. 85.

<sup>33</sup> Ted Hughes, *Moortown Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. x.

Two miles for the injection and a razor'.<sup>34</sup> The description of what the poet then had to do and its visceral consequences resulted in audience members fainting when Hughes read this poem aloud. But this is not an anti-pastoral poem countering popular images of innocent lambs. It is post-pastoral, partly because of the farmer-poet's physical fight to save the mother, taking responsibility for his relationship with nature, and partly because of the poem's final image: 'And the body lay born, beside the hacked-off head.' This is a knowing image suggesting the idea that death is born of the very earth itself. Material ecocriticism focuses upon the agency of material nature and in this poem there are several agencies at work, at several levels. At the physical level the sheep and the farmer work against – and finally with – each other, whilst at the elemental level of the birth push and the release of the dead lamb, the mother's life is saved by human intervention. All this is symbolised by that final image of death in life – the head on the earth.

The final six poems of *Moortown Diary* celebrate the agency of Hughes's father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who devoted his final years to this farm, working against the agency of rain and 'hedge-boughs' and fencing wire. Hughes remembers him at the end of the poem, 'A Monument', battling to erect a fence in an overgrown ditch, 'Under December downpour, mid-afternoon / Dark as twilight, using your life up'.<sup>35</sup> The final stanza of 'The day he died' celebrates a human life so attuned to the land that it has now been deprived of a part of its agency:

From now on the land  
Will have to manage without him.  
But it hesitates, in this slow realisation of light,

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<sup>34</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 519.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 534.

Childlike, too naked, in a frail sun,

With roots cut

And a great blank in its memory.

The series of reversals in this anthropomorphism is both an affirmation of a relationship between man and land, and a moving act of mourning by the poet, whose own ‘slow realisation’ this really is. In fact, this mourning feels as if it is, in a sense, for both of them, since it is for their ‘rooted’ mutual dependency.

Hughes had wanted for some time to write poems about the family members and West Yorkshire environment he had left behind in his youth. When, as a result of directing the photographer Fay Godwin to the Calder Valley in 1970, he began writing poems six years later to accompany her photographs, the poems were more about human adaptation to that bleak landscape than about family members. *Remains of Elmet* (1979), which collected photographs and poems from this project, was jointly assembled by photographer and poet together.<sup>36</sup> But the family poems had to wait for the second edition, entitled simply *Elmet* (1994), to be included. Ecocritics use the term ‘natureculture’<sup>37</sup> to emphasise the closeness of human life to nature and in the poems of *Remains of Elmet* the rise and fall of cultural presences in this landscape – industry, churches, farms – in the face of topography, rock and rain, is treated as a natural flowering and decay. Nowhere is this more explicit than in ‘Lumb Chimneys’ about abandoned industrial chimneys which look like organic growths as they are actually overtaken by nature: ‘The huge labour of leaf is simply thrown away. / Great

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<sup>36</sup> Terry Gifford, ‘Interview with Fay Godwin’, *Thumbscrew* 18 (Spring 2001), pp. 114–17.

<sup>37</sup> Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 16.

See also Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2003).

yesterdays are left lying.<sup>38</sup> Now human culture itself and its great achievements here are a part of ‘the elemental power circuit of the universe’ that Hughes celebrated in his earlier statement about his poetic work.

Many critics regard the collection *River* (1983) as Hughes’s most personally redemptive achievement and the poem ‘That Morning’ has come to represent this achievement. It was read at his memorial service in Westminster Abbey and its last lines are on Hughes’s memorial stone in the Abbey’s Poets’ Corner. Hughes had always been a fisherman since his birthplace home was very close to the Calder Canal. In *River* he expresses a personal sense of natureculture as a fisherman; but more than that his poetry offers a ‘re-enchantment’<sup>39</sup> of all aspects of the river environment. This is not to ignore its pollution by a bird-watching, ‘nature protector’, intensive farmer in the poem, ‘1984 on “The Tarka Trail”’, who nevertheless makes extensive use of ‘Pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, the grand slam’.<sup>40</sup> Hughes takes a poetic gamble in listing more prosaically precise details of these pollutants before addressing the reader directly:

Now you are as loaded with data  
That cultivates his hopes, in this brief gamble  
As this river is –  
  
As he is too.

Hopes for wealth that are ‘cultivated’ by this farmer are actually produced by toxins that compromise his own health through insidiously compromised water quality. This was a local

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<sup>38</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 456.

<sup>39</sup> See Patrick Curry, *Enchantment: Wonder in Modern Life* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2019).

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 843.

(as well as a national) issue for Hughes against which he actively campaigned with friends, unknown to the original readers of *River*.<sup>41</sup>

Re-enchantment of the riverine environment in *River* is more than a poetic celebration; it achieves an almost religious aura. Indeed, in the poem ‘Salmon Eggs’ Christian religious language heightens the significance of the fish’s desperate journey to lay its eggs and die:

And this is the liturgy  
Of Earth’s advent – harrowing, crowned – a travail  
Of raptures and rendings.<sup>42</sup>

In ‘That Morning’, Hughes is in Alaska with his son, fishing in a river where there were ‘wild salmon swaying massed / As from the hand of God’.<sup>43</sup> Two bears arrive to swim beside them and stand, ‘as on a throne / Eating pierced salmon off their talons’.<sup>44</sup> The bears have journeyed to eat like the kings of this wilderness, just as father and son have journeyed to experience this enchanted wilderness together. So the repetition in the final line of the poem refers to each species, living together in this magical moment they have somehow ‘found’ like the end of a quest:

So we found the end of our journey.

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<sup>41</sup> Terry Gifford, *Ted Hughes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 681.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 663.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 664.

So we stood, alive in the river of light  
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.

Again, the repetition of 'light' seems to carry a suggestion of 'enlightenment' as both species find their rightful place, 'alive' in nature that flows around and through them.

Hughes went on to publish, in the last year of his life, his poems addressed to Sylvia Plath in *Birthday Letters* (1998). But even in *Birthday Letters* Hughes and Plath can be seen to be defined by their different responses to the natural world, most clearly in the poem 'Epiphany' in which Hughes refuses to buy a fox cub for sale on the street in London because he knows it would test his marriage. It had been his totem animal since childhood, but he knew that Plath would strongly object to him bringing the fox home. The last line is, 'But I failed. Our marriage had failed.'<sup>45</sup> And Hughes's legacy of influence can be seen in the work of the current Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, and Alice Oswald, who succeeded Armitage as Oxford Professor of Poetry. Both poets have edited selections of Hughes's work to encourage future readers to study the work of one of the most important poets of the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 1117.

twentieth century and an increasingly relevant poet for the twenty-first century as we now address the Anthropocene's damage to nature.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Simon Armitage, *Ted Hughes: Poems Selected by Simon Armitage* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000) and Alice Oswald, *A Ted Hughes Bestiary* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014).

### *Critical Reflections and Further Study*

Why did teachers of English Literature in the UK and the USA in the early 1990s independently feel the need to invent 'ecocriticism'? In the UK Jonathan Bate introduced his book *Romantic Ecology* (London: Routledge, 1991) as 'a preliminary sketch towards a literary ecocriticism', arguing that 'ecology has to be an attitude of mind before it can be an effective set of environmental policies' (pp. 11, 83). The growing awareness of an environmental crisis and of an urgent need for environmental policies informed by ecology sent teachers and scholars back to Wordsworth or, in the US, to the nature writers of the present, in order to understand the 'attitude of mind' behind presentations of nature in the literature we had been studying in terms of power relations in class, race and gender. Now there was an additional dimension to those questions of ideology and its discourses – writers' attitudes towards an ecology that included the human species. Questions of what is now called 'environmental justice' concerning class, race and gender have not been displaced, but enlarged. In this essay I wanted to question Hughes's conception of ecology in each of the major books in turn in order to attempt an evolving overview of his sense of 'ecology as an attitude of mind'. It turns out that it begins in power relations between outer and inner nature and moves towards gender in order to be able to find some provisional resolution in the metaphor, and the metaphysics, of the fisherman (Hughes himself) in the river.

At the same time I wanted to introduce some key terms of ecocriticism that seemed to highlight some of Hughes's concepts. Other ecocritics might have used other terms. Other ecocritics might have asked different questions. Is the 'violence' of the early animal poems actually self-indulgently shocking? Is the early satire too melodramatic, too biting, too patronising? Is my account of 'Crow Hill' and 'Egg-Head' too neatly programmatic? Are the

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narrative schemes behind *Crow* and *Cave Birds* actually evident to the reader of the texts? Some readers might ask whether the Goddess of Complete Being in her various forms is feminising nature in an essentialist way that excludes the possibility of reformed masculinity? Indeed, does Hughes ultimately remain a masculinist writer? Why, for example, spend so much time on the ‘wooden’ Lumb’s activities with the village women in the main narrative of *Gaudete*? Is it really plausible to claim that these activities are implicitly critiqued by the brief religious poems of the Epilogue? Aside from his personal activism (see Reddick, cited in note 18 of my essay), can Hughes be called an ‘ecopoet’, or even an environmental poet, if he is so indirect in his poetry? Does his mythic discourse end up failing to address the really urgent questions his 21st-century readers face?

There are at least two larger questions about Hughes’s writing that are not addressed by this essay, but which surely need consideration. Clearly Hughes wants to encourage in the reader a sense of wonder and awe at the powers of nature by connecting our inner nature of dreams, intuition and understanding at a symbolic level with the forces of outer nature in weather, landscapes and animals. But can this be done in a language that avoids idealising those powers? This is a challenge that faces all poets, including those of his readers who write their own poetry about the natural world. The second question follows on from the first one. Can humans really be equal ‘creatures of light’ amongst the bears and the salmon as ‘creatures of light’? Hughes is seeking images for humans reconnected with nature in what ecocritics call ‘natureculture’. But doesn’t our culture, especially in the form of our language, separate us from outer nature in the very act of finding images for it? Can the fisherman live in nature as naturally as the bear or the fish? Isn’t the very image of the hunter, the fisherman, flawed by his human activity? Doesn’t his or her presence disturb the ecology of which the fisherman is trying to be part, even as a fellow hunter with bear and fish? Indeed, is it possible for a poet to find an uncompromised image for humans living sustainably in our natural home, given the evidence of the Anthropocene so far? Perhaps these are the larger questions which studying the poetry of Ted Hughes demands that we address. Would Hughes himself have approved of this? On the evidence of his poetry I believe that

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he would. Perhaps there is a slight admission of failure under the strong element of hope in what Hughes wrote in *Winter Pollen* (1994) about future generations of his readers, especially readers of his children's books: 'Every new child is nature's chance to correct culture's error' (p. 149).

### *Further Reading*

Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans and Rachael Stein (eds.), *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

Bate, Jonathan, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015).

Buell, Lawrence, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

Clark, Timothy, *The Cambridge Introduction to Literature and the Environment* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

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**Further Reading (in addition to books cited in the essay's endnotes)**

Adamson, Joni, Mei Mei Evans and Rachael Stein (eds), *The Environmental Justice Reader: Politics, Poetics, Pedagogy* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2002).

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