Chapter 7 The Beasts of the Field: *Moortown Diaries*

In 1970 Hughes had married Carol Orchard, and in 1972 they bought Moortown farm on the edge of Dartmoor, to run with her father, a lifelong farmer, Jack Orchard. They raised sheep and South Devon cattle until the sudden death of Jack Orchard in 1976. That Hughes should have married a farmer's daughter and shortly afterwards become a farmer may have been a lucky accident or an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to correct the psychic imbalance which had driven him (in the terms he himself uses of Shakespeare) to suppress the right side of the brain. This dominance of the left side produces the feeling of living in a state of Prometheus-like alienation from real things. Nowhere is it more necessary to accept and adapt to the chaos of real things, births and misbirths and deaths, than on a farm. In retrospect Hughes saw that 'the death in the natural labouring external world of Moortown, which is mainly dung & death acting as a crucible for repeated efforts at birth, is a counterpoint to the "birth", in a supernatural, spirit, inner world, of Prometheus'[1]. The farming poems, separately published as *Moortown Diary*, were written between September 1973 and June 1976. They are the real sequel to *Prometheus on his Crag*.

In his marginalia on Wordsworth's poems Blake wrote: 'Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate imagination in Me.' He spurned the corporeal, vegetable world as having no more to do with him than 'the Dirt upon my feet'[2]. Coleridge agreed with him:

> The further I ascend from men and cattle, and the common
>
> birds of the woods and fields, the greater becomes in me the
>
> intensity of the feelings of life. Life seems to me there a
>
> universal spirit that neither has nor can have an opposite.

Hughes' experience was exactly the reverse. It was by descending from the far limits of pain and consciousness (where only archetypal images serve) into woods and fields among men and cattle that he recovered his sense of the universal spirit of life:

> We have some beautiful beasts. I'm getting quite involved in them. Impossible not to. They're giving me more than I give them. I was quite

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[1] *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid, Faber, 2007, 431-2.
[2] *Blake: Complete Writings*, ed. Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1974, 617.

> intensely enmeshed in their world when I was an infant — but felt I was losing it. Fishing isn't enough. But now this working on this land & these animals has given it all back double. I feel to be waking up for the first time in my life. … It's reconnected me to the only world I belong to in any way. … And so far as I can judge it has helped my writing — mainly by making it impossible for me to gad about and showing me the real precious value of each hour, which I did not learn twenty years ago as I should have done.
>
> [*Letters* 345, 365]

In 'East Coker' Eliot had written dismissively of the traditional life of the farmer:

> Keeping the rhythm in their dancing
> As in their living in the living seasons
> The time of the seasons and the constellations
> The time of milking and the time of harvest
> The time of the coupling of man and woman
> And that of beasts. Feet rising and falling
> Eating and drinking. Dung and death.[3]

In quoting this passage Hughes dissociates himself from Eliot's contempt for life in time and preference for a timeless elsewhere. Eliot stood second only to Shakespeare in Hughes' pantheon of English poets. He deeply respected the authenticity of Eliot's poetic and personal journey. Speaking of poetry as the voice of Eros, he wrote:

> What other poet's work concerns itself so exclusively with and presents so profoundly and passionately and completely, in all its human implication, the life and death in the flesh and resurrection in the spirit of that god?[4]

But this was not the direction in which Hughes himself was now moving. It was the resurrection of the god in the flesh he now sought, as he abandoned his aloofness from tangible reality, even from the blood and mud and dung.

As he learned the feel of farming, the hard disciplines of stewardship and husbandry, Moortown farm became for Hughes, in Craig Robinson's words, 'a working laboratory of co-operation between man and nature' [5]. Jack Orchard

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[3] In hia recording of the poem Eliot pronounces 'time' as if it were a dirty word.

[4] *Winter Pollen*: *Occasional Prose*, ed. Scammell, Faber and Faber, 1994, 290.

[5] *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* , ed. Sagar, Manchester University Press, 1983, 262.

provided him with a model of what living on the land, in perfect accord with the weather and the seasons, would be like:

> It's a revelation to watch at close quarters somebody like Carol's father (he does all the real work) — from farmers in unbroken line as far back as they can trace. He's a mobile archive of know-how & understanding — and perfect attunement. [*Letters 345*]

This was very unlike Eliot's version of the lives of generations of farmers

> Lifting heavy feet in clumsy shoes.
> Earth feet, loam feet, lifted in country mirth
> Mirth of those long since under earth
> Nourishing the corn.

The death of Jack Orchard did not negate what he had embodied; and to nourish the corn is not, in any case, a worthless fate. As Whitman wrote:

> I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,
> If you want me again look for me under your bootsoles.
> ['Song of Myself']

'The field and its grass', which Hughes had flung away in 'Song of Woe', were now recovered, with the practical responsibility, as a farmer, of tending the earth and its livestock. In 1967 Hughes had spoken of trying to get 'back to the objective world where my talent really belongs' [*Letters* 274]. Nowhere had he strayed further from the objective world than in *Cave Birds,* written during his farming years. It is as though his diary poems of those years were written to compensate for or counteract that abstraction. His imagination flourished on this daily input of its proper food. As Robert Bly said in an interview:

> Imagination requires food, as a horse does and contrary to many Jungian speculations, the food of the imagination is not archetypes but the actual energy given off by old tree roots, mountains, rocks, glaciers, fields of barley, crows.

Lawrence wrote:

> You cannot dig the ground with the spirit. ... The very act of stooping and thrusting the heavy earth calls into play the dark sensual centres in a man, at last, that old Adam which is the eternal opposite of the spiritual or ideal

> being. Brute labour, the brute struggle with the beast and herd, must rouse into activity the primary centres, darken the mind, induce a state of animal mindlessness, and pivot a man in his own heavy-blooded isolation.[6]

Jung himself wrote: 'Every renewal of life needs the muddy as well as the clear. This was evidently perceived by the great relativist Meister Eckhart'[7]. Lawrence, Bly and Hughes are all in the tradition of Meister Eckhart, who claimed that 'humility' derived from 'humus'.

Hughes was no gentleman farmer. He had not the time or energy after a day's farming to write polished poems, only to make a few purely factual diary notes of the more interesting things which had happened:

> In making a note about anything, if I wish to look closely I find I can move closer and stay closer, if I phrase my observations about it in rough lines. So these improvised verses are nothing more than this: my own way of getting reasonably close to what is going on, and staying close, and of excluding everything else that might be pressing to interfere with the watching eye. In a sense, the method excludes the poetic process as well.[8]

It largely excludes also the selective, interpreting, abstracting, ambitious ego, and all our preconceptions about what constitutes the poetic. When Hughes later tried to process the diary into 'real poems', to 'assault it with technical skills'[9], he found that he lost much more than he gained, lost the freshness and integrity of the original raw experience. (Lawrence admired Etruscan art because it was not 'cooked in the artistic consciousness'.) Craig Robinson writes:

> It is as if he were saying that the observed world (or, more accurately, the observed world plus the instant lively pattern of the observing mind) is of sole importance. The poetry, all stylistic devices and prepared expectations of wrought complexity, are allowed to come about only in so far as they serve the world. [*Achievement* 260]

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[6] *Studies in Classic American Literature,* ed. Greenspan, Vasey and Worthen, Cambridge University Press, 2003, 398.

[7] Jung, C. J., *Collected Works,* 20 vols., Princeton University Press, (Bollingen Series), 1953-1969; London, Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1957-1979, vol.11, 244 .

[8] *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003, 1205.

[9] Radio 3 10 May 1980. Also on British Library Spoken Word disc NSACD 55.

The observing mind is not allowed to do more than observe, not allowed to wander into abstraction, to take its eye off the object. So Hughes resisted the high temptation of the mind and the meddling intellect and left well alone.

The vocabulary is Anglo-Saxon, the idiom demotic, the sparse metaphors rural. The result is a set of poems with a tighter grip on reality than any others I know, where even the miracles are made of mud and smells and jellies and heat. Far from wrestling with words and meanings, Hughes is here wrestling to get its mother's huge teat into the mouth of a newborn calf, or to get a dead lamb out of its mother's womb. Such wrestling with muscle and tissue and hot recalcitrant animal bodies issues in epiphanies of life and death.

Perhaps Hughes embarked on these poems as an attempt to reassert his relationship with the earth after the limbo of Prometheus. That relationship turns out to be very different from the sense of exile, and misuse and cross-purposes which had characterized many of his early poems. Neil Roberts comments:

> The human and the animal are sharers in the desiny of the natural body. The human is no longer eclipsed by the animal, and there is no longer such an emphasis on the predatory, as in the earlier poems, but the shared fate of being in nature. The human has a greater awareness, and may occasionally be able to help, but mostly can only look on in baffled sympathy.[10]

In the event, the renewed contact with the natural world, its births and deaths and failures and harvests, simply looking at it and recording it, proved so revitalizing, so revelatory, that it was to help to transform his entire vision. All the poems are sacramental, some of them visionary, but they remain rooted in common everyday realities. They are poems of observation, but such is Hughes' knowledge of and feel for natural processes that the observed details are selected and rendered, effortlessly, in such a way that they reveal not appearances but inner workings and connections. After the isolation and paralysis of *Prometheus*, all is now bustle and change, as the earth swings through its cycles on the poles of birth and death.

The new humility required also that Hughes should no longer 'relegate Nature to a function of human perception'[11]. On the contrary, it is now recognized as the only reality, into which we are granted an occasional privileged glimpse:

> In the dawn-dirty light, in the biggest snow of the year
>
> Two blue-dark deer stood in the road, alerted.

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[10] *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, 124.
[11] Leonard Scigaj, *Ted Hughes,* Twayne, 1991, 180.

They had happened into my dimension

The moment I was arriving just there.

It seemed to him

That the curtain had blown aside for a moment

And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road

The deer had come for me. ['Roe-deer'][12]

Craig Robinson writes:

> It is as though the deer, at once messengers and message, were about to disclose their 'secret' and so summon Hughes to the naked presence of the usually veiled goddess. [*Achievement* 276]

Farming is a far from romantic undertaking; and these poems are far removed from the Pastoral tradition.[13] Raymond Williams quotes Pope:

> We must therefore use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries.[14]

Hughes indulges in none of the distortions which make traditional nature worship so vulnerable to the attacks of any clear-eyed realist such as Samuel Beckett. This farm is no greetings-card farm. The first poem 'Rain' sets the scene. This rain is not poetic archetype engendering new life. On the contrary, it seems intent on obliterating life: 'Every half-ton cow / Sinks to the fetlock at every sliding stride. / They are ruining their field and they know it.' The calves do not move, 'Nothing protects them. … Nowhere they can go / Is less uncomfortable'. It seems a world of hopelessness and misery, like the world depicted in the first lines of the first poem in Hughes' first book:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up

Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,

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[12] All quotations from Hughes' poems for adults are from *Ted Hughes; Collected Poems*, ed. Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003.

[13] See Terry Gifford, 'Gods of Mud: Hughes and the Post-pastoral' in Sagar, ed. *The Challenge of Ted Hughes.*

[14] *The Country and the City,* Oxford University Press, 1975, 30.

From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle

With the habit of the dogged grave. ['The Hawk in the Rain']

How much more miraculous it is that life should not only persist but create new life in such conditions, with the habit of the dogged womb. With no hyperbole Hughes shows us miracles emerging out of mud and blood and the body's jellies. The rain may ruin the fields, but not always. Getting in the last load of hay is a race against the rain, which this time is won, just, so that the rain when it comes is a blessing, not only on the haymakers, but on the whole earth as the abode of man:

Softly and vertically silver, the whole sky softly

Falling into the stubble all round you

The trees shake out their masses, joyful,

Drinking the downpour.

The hills pearled, the whole distance drinking

And the earth-smell warm and thick as smoke

And you go, and over the whole land

Like singing heard across evening water

The tall loads are swaying towards their barns

Down the deep lanes. ['Last load']

One of Ted Hughes' most strongly held tenets was that 'everything must be paid for'. This is conspicuously the case with farming. The rewards are paid for not only by long and hard labour in all weathers, but also by the many losses and disasters. For every birth a death; sometimes simultaneously. Hughes refused to leave the disasters out of his account. These are not, after all, poems for children.

Any honest record of farming, especially of livestock rearing, is bound to be a record largely of disasters, and the proportion of deaths in *Moortown* is even greater than in *Season Songs*. Some, such as 'February 17th', where Hughes describes in detail his decapitation of a half-born dead lamb, are likely to sicken

the sensitive. But if we do not exact a full look at the worst, we falsify the whole and devalue the best. When a three-year-old nephew persistently asks 'Did it cry?', Hughes answers at last, 'Oh yes, it cried.' Death must be confronted, taken seriously A lamb suffering from a disgusting and incurable disease must be shot.

On one occasion, after Hughes had read ‘February 17th’, a member of the audience accused him of ‘a disgusting piece of horror writing’. Hughes replied: ‘Well, we either have a will to examine what happens, or we have a will to evade it’. Though he valued what he called ‘up-beat’ poems, which left the writer and the reader feeling cheerful, he claimed that the ‘true poems’, the ‘great complete statements’ were more likely to be in the direction of the ugly. He instanced the Book of Job, *The Iliad*, and the great tragedies, claiming that poetry was ‘a biological healing process’:

> It seizes on what is depressing and destructive, and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing, or it tries to do. That is what it is always setting out to do. And to reach that final mood of release and elation is the whole driving force of writing at all.[15]

The acceptance of death is not easy. When, after months of useless treatment for orf, Hughes has had to shoot a lamb, the lamb-life in his care stands before him, then enters his head. The dead badger in ‘Coming down through Somerset’ decays day by day, yet he delays getting rid of it:

> I want him
>
> To stop time. His strength staying, bulky,
>
> Blocking time. His rankness, his bristling wildness,
>
> His thrillingly painted face.
>
> A badger on my moment of life.
>
> Not year ago, like the others, but now.
>
> I stand
>
> Watching his stillness, like an iron nail
>
> Driven, flush to the head,

[15] *Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas read and discuss selections of their own poems*, Norwich Tapes, The Critical Forum, London 1978.

Into a yew post. Something

Has to stay.

Living creatures cannot stay, and it is, Hughes knows, childish to want them to. But we can make things which will stay longer than we do, and be useful to future generations. A staple driven precisely into an oak post, a barbed wire fence, is a monument, not only to Jack Orchard:

And that is where I remember you,

Skullraked with thorns, sodden, tireless,

Hauling bedded feet free, floundering away

To check alignments, returning, hammering the staple

Into the soaked stake-oak, a careful tattoo

Precise to the tenth of an inch,

Under December downpour, mid-afternoon

Dark as twilight, using your life up. [‘A Monument’]

Of this poem Craig Robinson writes:

> Hughes is aware that the qualities he is celebrating are some way from any contemporary heroic norm. Indeed to call this fence a monument is to draw attention to the disparity between civic and rural virtues, For it is the exact opposite of a conventional monument: informal, useful, anonymous, self-erected, hidden. Few of us would think of the fence as a monument at all without the prompting of Hughes’ poem, just as few would know the import of the pile of stones at the head of the ghyll in Wordsworth’s ‘Michael’. [*Achievement* 282]

The monument is not only the fence erected by Jack Orchard, but also the poem, or whole sequence (originally entitled *Moortown Elegies*), in which Hughes preserves his memory:

The trustful cattle, with frost on their backs,

Waiting for hay, waiting for warmth,

Stand in a new emptiness.

From now on the land

Will have to manage without him. ['The day he died']

There is no denying that farming is as much to do with deaths and misbirths (astride of a grave) as with happier miracles:

> The deepest fascination of stock rearing is this participation in the precarious birth of these tough and yet over-delicate beasts, and nursing them against what often seem to be the odds. [*Collected Poems,* 1209]

In 'Ravens' Hughes will not deny even to the three-year-old child that the lamb which died being born cried. But what the ravens have done to its body - 'its insides, the various jellies and crimsons and transparencies / And threads and tissues pulled out' - does not cancel the miracle that this mess and spillage so nearly added up to a new life, and that the same strange substances did so only a few yards away, where a ewe investigates her new lamb 'while the tattered banners of her triumph swing and drip from her rear-end'.

What had so disgusted Beckett, 'the pastures red with uneaten sheep's placentas', what he had reduced to 'the whole bloody business', 'a turd', 'a cat's flux', what Eliot had reduced to 'dung and death', Hughes redeems. He insists on not isolating the single death from its larger context:

> Though this one was lucky insofar
>
> As it made the attempt into a warm wind
>
> And its first day of death was blue and warm
>
> The magpies gone quiet with domestic happiness
>
> And skylarks not worrying about anything
>
> And the blackthorn budding confidently
>
> And the skyline of hills, after millions of hard years,
>
> Sitting soft. ['Ravens']

In the unfallen vision of *Moortown Diary*, *Season Songs* and *What is the Truth?* even death has its atonement, (the lamb's hacked-off head has 'all earth for a body'), and even the worm, even the dirt is god.

Taking his lead from Hughes' description of the farming poems as 'unawakened': 'a life embedded in mud, body of death etc, & seeds', it seems to me that Leonard Scigaj is lured into misreading them. He refers to them as locked in the 'ordinary', a 'passive submission to the actual', 'restricted to the temporal flow' and to 'the animal level of unawareness', concluding that 'the limits of absorption in the actual are severe' [Scigaj, 1991]. In his earlier book, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes*[16], it is clear that Scigaj arrived at this reading by allowing Hughes' synopsis to seduce him into a discussion of Alchemy, Cabbala, and Blake's myth of the fallen Albion in *The Four Zoas* and *Jerusalem.* From these sources he contructs a template which he uses to interpret the poems. This leads him to describe the farming poems as portraying 'a nature restricted to elemental processes and animal behaviour, a nature that has not been lifted to the realm of spirit through imaginative powers' [263]. Hughes no longer had such a low opinion of 'elemental processes and animal behaviour'. He regarded man's assumption that nature needed to be redeemed by human imagination into the realm of spirit as hubristic in the extreme. He saw nature, without the interference of man, as composed of ten percent matter and ninety percent spirit, spirit being those forces which invest matter with form, life and purpose. Hughes' effort is to move towards 'a proper knowledge of the sacred wholeness of Nature, and a proper alignment of our behaviour within her laws' [*Winter Pollen* 131].

The artist's job is to strip away anthropocentric assumptions and try to see nature in its own terms. If he can achieve that

> He may see a vision of the real 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. [130]

This is the vision of the priest at the end of *Gaudete,* of Creation as 'an infinite creature of miracles, made of miracles and teeming miracles'. Hughes repeats Lawrence's question: 'From what, and to what, could this infinite whirl be saved?'[17]

But we do not need Hughes, or Lawrence, or Blake or the Cabbalists, to tell us how to read these poems. It seems to me that if we follow Lawrence's advice to

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[16] *The Poetry of Ted Hughes*, Iowa UP, 1986.

[17] *The Virgin and the Gipsy and Other Stories,* eds Herbert, Jones and Vasey, Cambridge University Press, 2005, 140.

trust the tale rather than the teller, or, in this case, the poem rather than the poet, we must read the poems very differently from Scigaj, however closely he tries to follow Hughes' own synopsis.

Hughes by no means ignores the limits and frustrations of farming, but, as Gifford and Roberts say:

> Hughes's poetry has not been striving towards mystical transcendence or for some supposedly invulnerable stance. In it he is seeking a position of practical engagement with the world that is utterly honest, stripped of self-deceptions, humble and respectful but at home in the only world, that is our life and our death.[18]

'The actual earth', 'the animal level', the level of nature's imperatives, of mud and tissue, is precisely the level at which miracles happen daily. The farmer may or may not be aware of them, but the poet-farmer is. He has the best of both worlds. All the varied colours of the incarnate world, including those of mud and blood, which, for Shelley, stained 'the white radiance of eternity', were life to Hughes. Blake's symbol, Lawrence's symbol, for that inclusiveness and balance is the rainbow. Rainbow was the name of a calf:

> The black and white cow, on the highest crest of the round ridge,
>
> Stood under the end of a rainbow.
>
> Head down licking something, full in the painful wind
>
> That the pouring haze of the rainbow ignored.
>
> She was licking her gawky black calf
>
> Collapsed wet-fresh from the womb, blinking his eyes
>
> In the low morning dazzling washed sun.
>
> Black, wet as a collie from a river, as she licked him,
>
> Finding his smells, learning his particularity.
>
> A flag of bloody tissue hung from her back-end
>
> Spreading and shining, pink-fleshed and raw, it flapped and coiled

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[18] Gifford, Terry, and Roberts, Neil, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study,* Faber and Faber, 1981, 252.

In the unsparing wind. … We got to cover.

Left to God the calf and his mother. ['Birth of Rainbow']

The trailing squall-smokes are like a cosmic magnification of the trailing afterbirth. This calf was lucky. God had set his bow in the clouds as a sign that something as delicate as a rainbow can glow in the stormiest sky.

Whitman wrote:

I find letters from God dropt in the street, and every one is sign'd by God's name,

And I leave them where they are, for I know that wheresoe'er I go,

Others will punctually come for ever and ever.

['Song of Myself', section 48]

Hughes saw it as his poetic role to open those letters and read them to us.

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