

Ted Hughes and the Calder Valley

EDWARD JAMES Hughes was born at 1 Aspinall Street, Mytholmroyd on 17 August 1930. He was the youngest of the three children of William Henry Hughes and his wife Edith Farrar. The Farrars traced their ancestry back through the father of Nicholas Ferrer, founder of the religious community of Little Gidding, to William de Ferrières, who came over with William the Conqueror. On the Hughes side there was certainly Irish and possibly Spanish or Moorish blood. But Hughes' immediate forebears were descended from farmers and handloom weavers on the poor slopes of the Pennines, forced by the industrial revolution down into the mills of the Calder Valley.

In Hughes' childhood his maternal grandmother's family was still farming at Hathershelf. Otherwise, most of the family for two or three generations had worked in some capacity in the local woollen and clothing industries. Two of his uncles, Walter and Tom Farrar, were the prosperous owners of a clothing factory. His father William Hughes could have become a professional footballer, but chose to become a joiner. At the age of twenty he was one of thirty thousand young men to join the Lancashire Fusiliers, of whom 13,642 were to be listed killed. William Hughes was awarded the DCM 'for conspicuous courage and great leadership' at Ypres. Uncle Walter had been wounded, and William saved from death by the pay-book in his breast pocket. The imagination of the growing Hughes was shadowed by fearful images of trench warfare, images which were not difficult to match with the harsh images of nature struggling to survive and sometimes failing on the exposed moors.

Behind Aspinall Street was the canal, and beyond that was the main trunk road connecting the Yorkshire woollen towns and the Lancashire cotton towns, with its constant rumble of heavy lorries. Beyond that the Calder and the railway. Then, rising almost sheer from the valley and seeming to fill half the sky, Scout Rock. In 1963 Hughes contributed a wonderful essay called 'The Rock' to the BBC series 'The Writer and his Background'. Here he described the effect of growing up in the Calder Valley (where he spent his first eight years), in a house overshadowed by Mount Zion chapel and Scout Rock:

This was the memento mundi over my birth: my spiritual midwife at the time and my godfather ever since – or one of my godfathers. From my first day, it watched. If it couldn't see me direct, a towering gloom over my pram, it watched me through a species of periscope: that is, by infiltrating the very light of my room with its particular shadow. [Worlds 122]

It seemed to seal off everything to the South. Since to the North the land rose almost as steeply from immediately in front of the house up to the high bleak moors, 'the narrow valley, with its flooring of cricket pitch, meadows, bowling greens, streets, railways and mills, seemed damp, dark and dissatisfied' and felt like a trap.

Nevertheless Hughes had a happy childhood. A few yards away from Aspinall Street was the canal where the local children would fish for loach. Hughes and his friends would explore the nearby Redacre woods, or climb through fields towards the exhilaration of the moor with its heather and bilberries and curlews and wide horizons. Though the Calder may have been 'the hardest worked river in England', most of its tributary valleys were beautiful and unspoiled. Edith Hughes loved walking, and would take her children at every opportunity to picnic, and swim in the pools. There would be shopping trips to Halifax where Ted would choose another lead animal for his collection. Best of all were the paradisaic hunting and camping trips with his brother Gerald, ten years older, his guide to the secret magical places such as Crimsworth Dene.

For Ted and Gerald at least there was always a ladder out of the dark valley-trap. In a letter to Fay Godwin Hughes recalled:

When my brother walked over those hillsides with a gun he was the first person anybody had ever seen just wandering about free up there. He was regarded as an eccentric. Everybody else was clamped to his farm or to the valley bottom and convulsed with the ideals of toil. The great feeling there was that you were utterly free and alone — everybody else was at work and out of the way. It was as if I had the whole place to myself.

[*Letters* 379]

In 'The Rock' Hughes recalled his first climb to those hillsides: 'It was a balloon view. An alarming exhilaration. I felt infinitely exposed to be up there on the stage I had been trying to imagine for so long':

If any word could be found engraved around my skull, just above the ears and eyebrows, it would probably be the word 'horizon'. Every thought I tried to send beyond the confines of that valley had to step over that definite hurdle. In most places the earth develops away naturally in every direction, over roads and crowded gradients and confused vistas, but there it rose up suddenly to a cut empty upturned edge, high in the sky, and stopped. I supposed it somehow started again somewhere beyond, with difficulty. So the visible horizon was the magic circle, excluding and enclosing, into which

our existence had been conjured, and everything in me gravitated towards it. [125]

Hughes' contact with the Calder Valley did not end with the family's move to Mexborough in 1938. In 1952, when Hughes was in his second year at Cambridge, the family returned to this area to live at The Beacon at Heptonstall Slack. He brought his new first wife, Sylvia Plath, there in 1956. Hughes would have lived in this area, but Sylvia, used to the flat blandness of Northampton, Massachusetts, felt threatened by the dramatic landscape and climate of these hills. After a few years in American and London they settled in Devon. Sylvia committed suicide in 1963. In 1969 Hughes bought a half-derelict mill-owner's house, Lumb Bank, at Heptonstall Slack. In 1970 he married Carol Orchard, a Devon farmer's daughter. Hughes, Carol and the children lived at Lumb Bank for a time, but it proved too cold and damp and they decided to return to Devon. After Hughes had spent a considerable amount on the renovation of Lumb Bank, it was leased in 1975 to the Arvon Foundation. Hughes was subsequently enormously supportive of Arvon's creative writing courses.

In 1974 Hughes was one of seven contemporary poets in a Penguin anthology called *Worlds*. Hughes was represented there by 'The Rock' and a dozen poems, three of which are set in the Calder Valley. The earliest of these is 'Six Young Men', written at Hughes' parents' house at Heptonstall Slack in 1956. The poem describes a photograph belonging to Hughes' father of six of his friends on an outing to Lumb Falls taken just before the first world war.¹ Six months later all six were dead:

All are trimmed for a Sunday jaunt. I know
That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,
Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit
You hear the water of seven streams fall
To the roarer at the bottom, and through all
The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.
Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,
And still that valley has not changed its sound
Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

¹ The photograph is reproduced in *Ted and I: A Brother's Memoir*, by Gerald Hughes, p.49.

In November 2007 Elmet Trust placed a plaque at Lumb Falls in remembrance of those six young men.

Another Calder Valley poem in *Worlds* was a poem of 1962, 'Heptonstall':

Black village of gravestones.
The hill's collapsed skull
Whose dreams die back
Where they were born.

Each of the sections of *Worlds* also contained a 'photographic essay' on that poet's environment. The dozen photographs by Fay Godwin captured perfectly Hughes' description of the Calder Valley. Hughes was so impressed by them that he conceived the idea of a joint book of poems and photographs about the valley, the book which eventually became *Remains of Elmet*, first published in 1979, with an expanded edition, called just *Elmet*, in 1994. In an introductory note to the first edition Hughes wrote:

For centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees. Then in the early 1800s it became the cradle for the Industrial Revolution in textiles, and the upper Calder became 'the hardest-worked river in England'. Throughout my lifetime, since 1930, I have watched the mills of the region and their attendant chapels die. Within the last fifteen years the end has come. They are now virtually dead, and the population of the valleys and the hillsides, so rooted for so long, is changing rapidly.

Fay Godwin set out to capture some impressions of this landscape at this moment, and her photographs moved me to write the accompanying poems.

What Hughes does not mention here is that his own family had lived through this process. His uncle Walter he described as 'a living archive of the Calder Valley' [*Letters* 378].

In 1976 Hughes wrote to Fay Godwin:

So my first idea became an episodic autobiography — nothing connected. Just poems anchored in particular events and things. I don't know how much there might be, or what it will be like. But I know I do have an immense amount locked up in all that. At times it is overwhelming when I try to release it. ... If only some of that could be caught in photographs — the way the

primaeval reality of the region is taking over again from the mills, chapels, farms, pubs, bowling greens and cricket pavilions, pompous houses and rhododendrons, walls and reservoirs, stonework of nineteenth century giants, and the black peculiarities of the three points of the triangle — Colne, Todmorden and Halifax. [379]

A great deal of that was indeed caught in Fay Godwin's photographs, of which Gifford and Roberts write:

There is a tension in the air of these black and white photographs that provides a visual complement to the tensions between man and landscape, the industrial and the organic, childhood and present, social and natural processes, that are explored in the poems.²

In 1992 Hughes recalled:

In *Remains of Elmet* I began first of all thinking: this is my chance to write the autobiography of my childhood, in easy descriptive little verses. I started with two no three pieces: *The Canal's Drowning Black*, *The Long Tunnel Ceiling*, and *Mount Zion*. [633]

Animals were of tremendous importance to Hughes from the beginning, living representatives of another world, 'the true world'. 'the world under the world'. Even the canal

Bred wild leopards — among bleached depth fungus.
Loach. Torpid, ginger-bearded, secretive
Prehistory of the canal's masonry,
With little cupid mouths.
Five inches huge! ['The Canal's Drowning Black']

They were easily netted, and, after a night in a two-pound jam-jar

On a windowsill
Blackened with acid rain fall-out
From Manchester's rotten lung

were lobbed back, stiff, 'into their Paradise and mine'. Once, under the main road canal bridge, there was even a leaping trout:

A seed

² Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: a Critical Study*, Faber, 1981, p. 233.

Of the wild god now flowering for me
Such a tigerish, dark, breathing lily
Between the tyres, under the tortured axles.

['The Long Tunnel Ceiling']

'The wild gentle god of everywhere' was obviously responsible for these free lords, and for the weasels smoked out of a bank 'furious with ill-contained lightning', demons 'crackling with redundant energy'.

['The Weasels We Smoked Out Of The Bank']

Ted's grandfather, 'Crag Jack' Hughes, had also escaped from the valley prison. Hughes puts these words into his mouth:

The churches, lord, all the dark churches
Stooped over my cradle once:
I came clear, but my god's down
Under the weight of all that stone. ['Crag Jack's Apostasy']

Mount Zion chapel literally stooped over Hughes' cradle:

Above the kitchen window, that uplifted mass
Was a deadfall —
Darkening the sun of every day
Right to the eleventh hour.

Later he was dragged there every Sunday in an atmosphere of terror:

The convicting holy eyes, the convulsed Moses mouthings.
Men in their prison-yard, at attention,
Exercising their cowed, shaven souls.
Lips stretching saliva, eyes fixed like the eyes
Of cockerels hung by the legs
As the bottomless cry
Beats itself numb again against Wesley's foundation stone.

['Mount Zion']

The purpose of the chapel seemed to be simply to eradicate the joy of life, even if that meant eradicating life itself. Once the place was thrown into a state of battle-fury by a cricket singing from a crack in the wall:

Long after I'd been smothered in bed
I heard them
Riving at the religious stonework
with screwdrivers and chisels.

Now the cracks are widening and the only singing heard in many of the chapels is the singing of crickets.

What the boys preferred to do with their Sundays was to dig, Sunday after Sunday, with iron levers, even while the bells summoned them elsewhere, for the Ancient Briton supposed, according to local folklore, to lie under a half-ton rock in Redacre Woods:

We needed that waft from the cave
The dawn dew-chilling of emergence,
The hunting grounds untouched all around us.
['The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock']

That rock could not be shifted, nor what it hid, the buried life of England, wildness, the repressed needs of the human psyche, eradicated.

Or better still, sometimes, after being marched off to chapel in his 'detestable blue' blazer, (he would spend the time there imagining a wolf galloping through snow), he would be taken by his father to Stubbing Wharf pub, where, if they were lucky, Billy Red would turn up, drink a free pint, then release a couple of rats the landlord had caught for him, and catch and kill them with his teeth. Wolf, fox, rat, became totemic beasts for Hughes .

The poet is engaged in finding metaphors for his own nature, his only touchstone for human nature. His earliest metaphors are drawn from his immediate childhood world, his inheritance. These metaphors in turn give him a way of looking at the further and future world and a way of thinking about himself when he becomes self-conscious. Thus they shape his nature and bring it closer to the permanent realities. In a radio interview in 1961, Hughes said that the move to Mexborough when he was eight 'really sealed off my first seven years so that now my first seven years seems almost half my life. I've remembered almost everything because it was sealed off in that particular way and became a sort of brain — another subsidiary brain for me'. The geography of his childhood world became his map of heaven and hell; the distinctive interplay of the elements in that place gave him his sense of the creating and destroying powers of the world; the local animals became his archetypal symbols. This landscape was imprinted on his soul, and, in a sense, all his poems are about it. When the poems are overtly, literally, about it, the magical change from description to metaphor to myth is enacted before our eyes, as in *Remains of Elmet*.

But the idea of making the book an autobiography of his childhood did not last long:

Then it struck me — this is a book of photographs about a region that belongs to everybody who lives or has lived in it, not only to me. I was suddenly struck, you see, by the embarrassing egotism of my plan to convert the whole region into my childhood stage. So I abandoned my project. After that, I aimed for a blurred focus, generalised mood-evocation in each piece — something that would harmonise with Fay Godwin's photographs, but would avoid that painful collision of sharp visual image and sharp specific verbal image, in which the verbal image, after a moment of psychological distress, always loses. [*Letters* 633]

Hughes saw the Pennine landscape itself is a huge animal which seems to let itself be tamed. The network of walls is 'harness on the long moors'. But now those hills are breaking loose again, slowly shaking the walls, mills, chapels and houses to pieces as in a great sieve.

The 'great adventure' was the attempt to bring the hills and moors with their resources of grass, water and stone, into the human economy. For a time it seemed to have succeeded. The hills were plotted and parcelled with mile after mile of stone walls raised with lifetimes of patient labour, and 'Spines that wore into a bowed / Enslavement' ('Walls'). Hill-stone seemed to be content

To be cut, to be carted
And fixed in its new place.
It let itself be conscripted
Into mills. And it stayed in position
Defending this slavery against all.
Men got to the summit and
('Hill-Stone Was Content')

for some giddy moments
A television
Blinked from the wolf's lookout.
('When Men Got to the Summit')

But now all that remains of the great enterprise is a hulk, 'every rib shattered'. The spent walls are nothing but a 'harvest of long cemeteries'. The stones of the mills are returning to the earth. It is, of course, sad to see a thriving community in decay; and most of Hughes' childhood in that valley was happy. But he feels little

nostalgia. It was a 'happy hell'. The lives of the farm workers 'went into the enclosures / Like manure' ('Walls'). The lives of the factory hands were sacrificed to the looms. But what really broke the spirit of the community was the first world war.

First, Mills
and steep wet cobbles
Then cenotaphs.
First, football pitches, crown greens
Then the bottomless wound of the railway station
That bled this valley to death.

So it seemed to the young Hughes that there was a mourning quality in the spirit of the place. And the role of men in that place was to provide the deaths and disasters and wastage for it to be in mourning for:

Everything in West Yorkshire is slightly unpleasant. Nothing ever quite escapes into happiness. The people are not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only half-born from the earth, and the graves are too near the surface. A disaster seems to hang around in the air there for a long time. I can never escape the impression that the whole region is in mourning for the first world war. ('The Rock')

To confront this spirit in its purity, it was necessary to go up onto the moors. There you could listen to the 'dark sounds' of the spirit of the moors: 'The peculiar sad desolate spirit that cries in telegraph wires on moor roads, in the dry and so similar voices of grouse and sheep and the moist voices of curlews.' You could almost see the spirit because of the strange eerie quality of the light (a quality wonderfully captured in Fay Godwin's photographs) 'at once both gloomily purplish and incredibly clear, unnaturally clear, as if objects there had less protection than elsewhere, were more exposed to the radioactive dangers of space, more startled by their own existence.'

Remains of Elmet is entirely about the crime against nature, which here takes the form of the enslavement of a people conscripted into the mills, the chapels, the trenches, conscripted also into the human attempt to conscript in turn what Hughes calls the mothers, the sustaining elements of earth, air, fire and water, to degraded, spiritless purposes. Like Blake Hughes seeks to renew the fallen light. The poems and photographs which are set in the valley bottom are harsh and gloomy — mills, chimneys and bridges reflected in the dull canal. What light there is seems trapped by the surrounding darkness, as the human spirit was trapped in the mills and chapels:

The fallen sun
Is in the hands of water. (It Is All')

Water, too, is fallen, conscripted into gulleys, drained of all promise of fertility in the worn-out water of women and the 'lost rivers of men.

But in the poems and photographs set on the high moors the elements seem to revel and gleam in their freedom.

The people, however, are so cowed after generations of enslavement that they seem unable to awake from their dream, unable to accept the offering.

The happiest men are those at play, the exposed, pitifully buffeted men trying to play football on the highest ridge for miles.

And the valleys blued unthinkable
Under depth of Atlantic depression —
But the wingers leapt, they bicycled in air
And the goalie flew horizontal (Football at Slack')

It is a comic poem, but the comedy arises partly from the incongruity of the fact that the men are so determined to enjoy their all-too-brief respite, so focused on a football that they seem totally unaware that their only spectator is a wild god leaning through a fiery hole in heaven:

And once again a golden holocaust
Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them.

In summer the men again cherish the freedom of Saturday afternoon, this time on a cricket pitch. For a moment the exhilaration of a huge hit seems to offer the men the chance to stampede 'through the sudden hole in Saturday'. Where to? The North Sea? Batsmen and fielders are running 'for dear life'. But escape is impossible. The men are bound by the rules of the game (in the 'cage of wickets', 'pinned to the crease'), by the boundary, by the 'shaggy valley parapets' just beyond it, 'pending like thunder', by the laws of physics (the ball drops far short even of Midgeley), by the economic trap (Monday already looms) and the confines of their own consciousness —

Brain sewn into the ball's hide
Hammering at four corners of abstraction
And caught and flung back, and caught, and again caught

To be bounced on baked earth, to be clubbed

Towards the wage-mirage sparkle of mills
Towards Lord Savile's heather
Towards the veto of the poisonous Calder.

After the inevitable tea and sandwiches they return 'to the cool sheet and the black slot of home', as if to living graves.

Only the children, it seems, ever rebelled against the 'submarine twilight' of the valley, and tried to let in some permanent light. On his way to school Hughes passed every day a huge derelict mill, where 'vandal plumes of willow-herb' tried to survive under the five hundred green skylights. It seemed to him like a sacked tomb:

Lifelines poured into wagepackets
Had leaked a warm horror, like Pompeii,
Into that worn-out, silent dust.

But there was something he could do. With a heroic, almost demonic vandalism like that of the plumed and horned willow-herb he set himself, over a period, to break all five hundred skylights with five hundred stones, and he achieved his purpose:

One by one
Five hundred sunbeams fell on the horns of the flowers.

The comedy is part of the feeling of release from that intolerable 'weight of Atlantic depression' which had characterized the earlier poems about the Yorkshire Pennines. The style, out from under that pressure, plays like the wind.

What distinguishes the moors from the valley is the fact that, in spite of the mourning, the accumulated deaths, 'the mood of moorland is exultant'. Many of the finest poems in *Remains of Elmet* celebrate the exhilaration which is the recognition that out of these uncompromising materials, this graveyard, this vacancy of scruffy hills and stagnant pools and bone-chilling winds, the place is continually renewing life and making miracles.

And now this whole scene, like a mother.
Lifts a cry
Right to the source of it all.
A solitary cry.
She has made a curlew. ('Long Screams')

Such mothers are not, in our sense, maternal. They have no concern to make life easy for plants or animals, let alone humans. The miracle is that 'out of a mica sterility' comes the harebell's blueness, the heather's nectar. And this is why Hughes cannot regret that the moors are breaking loose again from the harness of men:

Chapels, chimneys, vanish in the brightening

And the hills walk out on the hills
The rain talks to its gods
The light, opening younger, fresher wings
Holds this land up again like an offering

Heavy with the dream of a people.

(‘The Trance of Light’)

It is not only the chimneys and chapels of the Calder Valley which must collapse before there can be any new building. The image of stone returning to the earth is one of many images in Hughes for the restoration to Nature of its own, the healing and rededication of the holy elements before man can approach them again with clean hands, with respect and humility, and for purposes, one hopes, rather more natural, sane and worthily human than the enslavement of body and spirit which has characterized Protestantism and capitalism in England.

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