

1 Hughes and his landscape. (1980)

A list of the best twenty living British poets would include a disproportionate number of Welsh, Scottish and Irish poets. The usual explanation for this would be the different and higher role of the poet in the Celtic cultures, the bardic tradition and so on. I should like here to suggest another possible reason, the deeper influence of landscape upon Celtic poets. The Celtic writer is more likely to live in a landscape, as opposed to a town, and that landscape is likely to be more dramatic, insistent and wild than most English landscapes which are gentler and more amenable to human purposes and perspectives. I do not mean that the landscape is available to the Celtic poet simply as subject matter (though it is no coincidence that, for example, two of R. S. Thomas' best poems should be 'Welsh Landscape' and 'The Welsh Hill Country'), but that it can provide him also with a fund of vital images, and with a paradigm for his understanding of life itself and his own inner being.

I want to go even further than this. Poetry is religious or it is nothing. Its claim to be taken seriously – more seriously than any other form of art or language – is its ability to keep open and operative the connections between the depths of the human psyche and the hidden sources of everything in the non-human world. The poet is a medium for transmitting an occult charge from the non-human world into the psyche and thence into consciousness. The Celtic poet knows this in his blood. Most English poets have drifted into a rational humanism and arrogantly expect us to value their measured musings. Their verse is altogether lacking in what Lorca called *duende*, the spirit of life itself in its constant war with death, the spirit of the earth with its 'dark sounds':

These 'dark sounds' are the mystery, the roots thrusting into the fertile loam known to all of us, ignored by all of us, but from which we get what is real in art. . . . The *duende* is a power and not a behaviour, it is a struggle and not a concept. . . . It is not a matter of ability, but of real live form; of blood; of ancient culture; of creative action . . . The appearance of the *duende* always presupposes a radical change of all forms based on old structures. It gives a sensation of freshness wholly unknown, having the quality of a newly created rose, of miracle, and produces in the end an almost religious enthusiasm . . . The *duende* does not appear if it sees no possibility of death. . . The *duende* likes a straight fight with the creator on the edge of the well . . . The *duende* wounds, and in the healing of this wound which never closes is the prodigious, the original in the work of man. The magical quality of a poem consists in its being always possessed by the *duende*, so that whoever beholds it is baptized with dark water. Because with *duende* it is easier to love and to understand,

and also one is certain to be loved and understood; and this struggle for expression and for the communication of expression reaches at times, in poetry, the character of a fight to the death.

(Lorca, 'Theory and Function of the *Duende*')

One of the primary manifestations of *duende* is in the spirit of place. Much of what we call civilisation has been characterised by efforts to kill or mutilate that. The surest way to kill it within the psyche is to learn to ignore it, or to sentimentalise or prettify it. It is emphatically not the loving mother of post-Wordsworthian English Nature poetry. The Celtic writer takes for granted that the landscape shaped him, and probably assumes that this is not so true of his English counterpart, since the landscape of England is relatively bland. If, like Philip Larkin, you were born in Coventry, that might be true: 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.' But there are parts of England with every bit as much character as anywhere over the borders - for example, that stretch of the Pennine moors and valleys between Lancashire and Yorkshire which has Haworth at its northern edge and the Calder Valley running through the middle of it, from Todmorden to Halifax. It was once part of the ancient kingdom of Elmet, 'the last British Celtic kingdom to fall to the Angles' according to Ted Hughes, who was born there, and who celebrates its Celtic and more recent past in *Remains of Elmet*:

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.

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 theriomorphic archetypes. 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*.

From these poems, and from many earlier texts, we can trace the evolution of the most penetrating, authentic and all-embracing poetic vision of our time.

Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd in 1930 in an end terrace house backing on to the canal. Beyond the canal 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 railway. Then, rising almost sheer from the valley and seeming to fill half the sky, 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.

(The Rock)

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.

The other spiritual midwives were scarcely more benign. In 'My Fairy Godmother' Hughes imagines himself at birth surrounded by the Wicked Powers. One of them says: 'The earth for him will have such magnet strength / It will drag all things from his hold, and his own body at length'. Another said: 'A misty rock is all this boy shall be / He shall meet nothing but ships in distress and the wild, empty sea'. Another: 'He shall be a ghost, and haunt the places of earth, / And all the stars shall mark his death as little as his birth'. His Fairy Godmother redeems his life by providing him with a ladder out of the

trap, a magic ever-changing ladder which stands for life's perpetual capacity for transforming and renewing itself.

Crag Jack, one of Hughes' alter egos (in fact his grandfather), is more specific about the identity of those Wicked Powers:

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 his 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 folk-lore, to lie under a half-ton rock:

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, the repressed needs of the human psyche, eradicated. In the short story ‘Sunday’, the boy has to endure a stifling, scrubbed Sunday morning, the church-going slopes spotless and harmless, forbidden grass in the Memorial Gardens, even the pavements untouchably proper. The men wear ‘tight blue pin-stripe suits’ and the boy his detestable blue blazer. Sitting in chapel, the situation of greatest constraint he knows, he lets his imagination be taken over by the image of a wolf which ‘urged itself with all its strength through a land empty of everything but trees and snow’. This wolf, the ghost of the last wolf killed in Britain, appears again and again in Hughes:

These feet, deprived,
Disdaining all that are caged, or storied, or pictured,
Through and throughout the true world search
For their vanished head, for the world

Vanished with the head, the teeth, the quick eyes -.

(‘February’)

The wolf is that in the boy which refuses to be constrained, tamed, disciplined, like those Vikings {‘the snow’s stupefied anvils’} who spent themselves in ‘beforehand revenge / For the gruelling relapse and prolongeur of their blood / Into the iron arteries of Calvin’ (‘The Warriors of the North’).

The boy lives for the afternoon, when his father has promised to take him to Top Wharf Pub to see for the first time Billy Red kill rats in his teeth like a terrier. The Cretans sacrificed a living bull to Dionysos by tearing it with their teeth. Billy Red degrades this archaic religious act, communion with the god by eating the god, to a Sunday afternoon secular entertainment for a bored denatured public for a free pint. But the boy is not yet denatured. The thought of that savagery, that unthinkable closeness of the human and the animal, reduces everything else in his consciousness to unreality. The story is autobiographical.

There really was a Billy Red.

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
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 demons like the weasels smoked out of a bank 'Furious with ill-contained lightning', demons 'crackling with redundant energy'.

Yet the only relationship which seemed possible between town boys and the surrounding wildlife was to catch and kill. Hughes had an older brother:

His one interest in life was creeping about on the hillsides with a rifle. He took me along as a retriever and I had to scramble into all kinds of place, collecting magpies and owls and rabbits and weasels and rats and curlews that he shot. He could not shoot enough for me. (*'Capturing Animals'*)

Later Hughes tried to keep wild animals as pets:

An animal I never succeeded. in keeping alive is the fox. I was always frustrated: twice by a farmer, who killed cubs I had caught before I could get to them, and once by a poultry keeper who freed my cub while his dog waited. (‘Capturing Animals,)

The lesson was being driven home that animals were, by nature, victims. It was the natural order of things that any creature outside the ordered world of men should be killed. And if a human being chose to step outside that ordered world, he became fair game. The lesson was reinforced by a story his brother told him ‘of the tramp sleeping up there in the bracken, who stirred at an unlucky moment and was shot dead for a fox by an alert farmer and sent rolling down the slope’. After the move to Mexborough when he was eight, Hughes was one day crawling silently up the side of a hollow scooped out by the Dearne to see what might be in the next hollow. As he reached the top and peered over, he found himself face-to-face with a fox, about nine inches away. They looked into each other's eyes, and it seemed that his own being was for a moment which was also an eternity, supplanted by that of the fox. Then the fox was gone. But it remained in his unconscious as a symbol of unquenchable life whether in the natural world or in the human psyche.

In his second year at Cambridge Hughes went through a sort of crisis which caused a complete block in his ability to write essays. One night very late, very tired, he went to bed, leaving the essay he had been struggling with on his desk. Then he dreamed that he was still sitting at the desk when the door opened and a creature came in with the head and body of a fox, but erect, man-sized, and with human hands. He had escaped from a fire; there was a strong smell of burning hair and the skin was charred, cracked and bleeding, especially the hands. He came across the room, put his hand on the essay, and said 'Stop this. You are destroying us.' His hand left a blood-print on the page. Hughes connected the fox's command with his own doubts about the effect of the Cambridge brand of critical analysis on the creative spirit (he had written no more poems since leaving school), and decided to change from English to Archaeology and Anthropology.

The life which we have already killed off and got under, which now marauds destructively in the underworld of the unconscious is the wolf. The life now making its last stand in remote fastness is adder and otter. The life we keep trying to kill, but which somehow survives, is stoat (see ‘Strawberry Hill’) and fox. The 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 Pennine hills are breaking

loose again, slowly shaking the 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.

('Hill-Stone Was Content')

Men got to the summit and

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.

All the young men of the valley were recruited into the Lancashire Fusiliers and shipped to the Dardanelles. Seventeen, including Hughes,

Muffle much cordite.

And the air-stir releases
The love-murmurs of a generation of slaves
Whose bones melted in Asia Minor.

(‘Hardcastle Crag’)

In a radio interview Hughes said that the First World War was more part of his imagination than the second because ‘It was right there from the beginning, so it was going on in us for eight years before the Second World War came along . . . The First World War was our sort of fairy-story world - certainly was mine’.

So it seemed to the young Hughes that there was a mourning quality in the spirit of the place, the *duende*. 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 the *duende* 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.’

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 unpromising materials, this graveyard, this vacancy of scruffy hills and stagnant pools and bone-chilling winds, the place is continually renewing life and making miracles. This was expressed finely in many early poems:

Buttoned from the blowing mist
Walk the ridges of ruined stone.
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.

('Crow Hill')

Yet even this seems rhetorical against the transparent purity of his latest testimony:

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')

And this is why Hughes cannot regret that the moors are breaking loose again from the harness of men:

The Trance of Light

The upturned face of this land
The mad singing in the hills
The prophetic mouth of the rain

That fell asleep

Under migraine of headscarves and clatter
Of clog-irons and looms
And gutter-water and clog-irons
And clog-irons and biblical texts
Stretches awake, out of Revelations
And returns to itself .
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.

After his marvellous evocation of the spirit of the moors, Hughes ended that early essay 'The Rock' with these words: 'From there the return home was a descent into the pit, and after each visit I must have returned less and less of myself to the valley. This was where the division of body and soul, for me, began'. It was a great advantage to Hughes to have been born not in a town, where he might have allowed himself to be shut up in the little box of the exclusively human:

The country, to townies,
Is hardly more than nice,
A window-box, Pretty
When the afternoon's empty;
When a visitor waits,
The window shuts.

(Kingsley Amis, 'Here Is Where')

nor in the country, where he might have become just another 'nature' poet, but on the very frontier where the two were engaged in a 'fight to the death'. He suffered in childhood the crisis of our civilisation in a very pure form. The experience forced him into a fiercely dualistic attitude to life which released the amazing energies of his first three collections, *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*. The subsequent books have been a gradual healing of that split. From that deep early dualism Hughes has moved painfully but surely towards 'a proper knowledge of the sacred wholeness of Nature, and a proper alignment of our behaviour within her laws'.

Most great writers want to save the world. Fiction and drama are partly modes of discourse and tend to get pulled towards other, non-imaginative forms of discourse such as politics, ethics or religion. The poet must recognize that he is not in the business of initiating a revolution or peddling propaganda or of merely ruminating in verse about political, ethical or religious matters. His business is to effect subtle changes, poem by poem, by book, in the consciousness of his most responsive readers, towards a more whole and balanced sense of themselves and of their dependence on and obligation towards all that is not themselves. To do this, he need not be in possession of The Truth. What we require from him is not answers but metaphors - sparks which fly from the imagination of the poet to fire the imagination of the reader.

The great poet will have to do rather more than this. He will have to save himself, cure himself, in the role of Everyman. That is, to take himself to pieces and reconstitute himself in accordance with the inescapable facts. This process has to be lived through, not just imagined. But the imagining, the poetry, is part of the process, not just a record of it. The right metaphors are simply those which work, which actually do carry out the operation, or the required stage of it.

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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