

PHILIP HOBSBAUM

Ted Hughes at Cambridge

I first met Ted Hughes because I couldn't stand the beer in Cambridge. Neither could my friend, Peter Redgrove. So we used to go down to a tiny pub called The Mill overlooking the river Cam, and drink pints of Merrydown Cider. This was heady stuff; most people drank it in halves. The bar area was constricted, and the only other regular who imbibed this beverage by the pint was Ted Hughes. That was how we got talking to him. It was spring, 1954.

He was very tall, about six foot two, gaunt in body and face, but big boned. Few undergraduates were classy dressers, but Ted was appalling. He had smelly old corduroys and big flakes of dandruff in his greasy hair. Also, he talked out of the side of his mouth, as though in a state of unbearable tension.

Whatever we talked about at first, it certainly wasn't poetry. However, one evening he said — out of the corner of his mouth, as usual — 'I hear you and Redgrove are starting a poetry magazine. Here are some poems I'd like you to look at.' And, with that, he shuffled off to the gents.

The wad of manuscript he had thrust at us was greasy and typed in grey characters, as though the ribbon in the typewriter had been used a great many times over a period of years, and never been changed. Redgrove looked at this dubiously, and uttered these memorable words: 'Ted's a nice chap, but I don't think we ought to publish his poems.'

It wasn't strictly true that Redgrove and I were starting a poetry magazine. That had already started, and was called, unpropitiously, *delta*. I think it had replaced a magazine called *Oasis*. Redgrove and a person called Rodney Banister — who took a First in English — had been in charge. During their editorship, *delta* had done little except follow the existing fashions in Cambridge. Thom Gunn was the dominant poet in those days. Redgrove had talked me into taking the magazine over, and I was resolved to make a difference to the literary scene. In especial, I wanted to publish good but unknown poets.

Redgrove had gone off with the Hughes manuscripts, and was to sit on them for some time. I edited *delta* No 3, with a lovely green cover, introducing to Cambridge a talented Oxford poet, Edward Lucie-Smith. I edited no 4, with a magenta cover and a number of pieces by my Downing College contemporaries, David Ward and Christopher Levenson. On the run-up to number 5, which was to sport a blue cover, Redgrove surfaced again with just one Hughes poem he thought might be considered for inclusion.

This was typed on the same greasy paper and with the same grey type-face that I remembered from a term or two previously. In fact, Hughes had been brought back to mind by an odd circumstance that occurred only the previous

week. I had been asked to lead a debate in the Cambridge Union on the preposterous subject, 'This House Will Never See a Poem Lovely as a Tree', with the distinguished Irish poet, W. R. Rodgers, as my seconder. At dinner with the President, an event which customarily preceded these debates, a waiter had brought me a salver on which were some poems addressed to me but with no covering letter or other explanation. Each was signed 'Daniel Hearing', and a couple of Mr Hearing's other poems had appeared in the magazine *Granta*, edited by my then enemy Karl Miller. Yet 'Daniel Hearing's' manuscript, as evidenced at the Union dinner, had been typed by Ted Hughes.

The explanation was, of course, that receiving no further word from me and seeing my name on some notice advertising the debate, Hughes had taken this opportunity to recall his work to my notice, albeit under a pseudonym.

The MS that had arrived at the Union Dinner struck me as gas and gaiters — Hopkins inflated by reminiscences of Yeats and Dylan Thomas. Being a pupil of F. R. Leavis, I was rather down on that sort of thing at the time. The piece of paper resuscitated by Peter Redgrove seemed to me to have more promise; at least, the bottom half did. It was stuck to the top half by a piece of sellotape; or, if you prefer, the sellotape bisected the greasy paper and its barely legible type.

However, further inspection revealed that neither physically nor creatively were the two halves united. On being questioned, Redgrove admitted that the sellotape had been provided by himself, and that he had stuck two different bits of paper together under the apprehension that they represented the disunited parts of a single poem.

What the top half of the sheet, that is to say the first poem, was about, my memory will not recall. Wind, mist, sun, storm? — all I can remember is the grey uncertain typeface on a yellowing surface. The bottom half of the sheet, that is to say the second poem, was a different matter altogether. It certainly looked very similar. Unlike the top half, though, it made sense. With the passage of years, it has acquired an intertextuality which now causes it to make an amount of sense that is truly disturbing. Since it has never been reprinted, for purposes of fair comment and for the information of the reader, I reproduce it here.

The Woman With Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous

You would say the way she was painted was for the war-path,
And sure all sorts of corners stack her dead.
The way she comes at a man gives him no chances
To smile be suave and complicate a truce
And retire undefeated if disgraced.
When her blood beats its drum nobody dances.

Men become wolves, but a wolf has become a woman.
The light in her eyes slants hard and blue as hail.
And when the sun gets at her it is as if
A windy blue plume of fire from the earth raged upright,
Smelling of sulphur, the contamination of the damned,
The refined fragile cosmetic of the dead.

She clings at your guarding arm as a grass-wisp weakly,
And then her eyes are timid as a hare's,
And her mouth merry as a robin on your finger.
O she is slick and silver as a whiting
To coax your delight as far as the dark, and there, friend, there
Darkness is the scabbard of her knife.

I think we have a hint of authority here. The poet has had the sense to draw upon the resources of the language that lie in the areas of pararhyme and of sprung rhythm. 'War-path' leads into the full rhyme of 'chances'/'dances'. 'And sure all sorts of corners stack her dead' looks in itself like a regular pentameter, yet it is sandwiched between two lines so sprung as almost — but not quite — to take off into *vers libre*. This makes for a kind of mimetic patterning.

The poem in manuscript did not present so tidy an aspect as it did in published form, and this was not only a matter of Hughes's typing. I had got the magazine as far as galley-proof stage and was in fact correcting these in my digs at Maids Causeway — which I shared with the future thriller-writer Derek Robinson — when, unannounced and with no prior appointment, in lurched the spectral figure of Ted Hughes. 'Like to make a few changes if you're printing my poem', he grunted out of the side of his mouth. There was a kind of impressiveness about Ted even then, so I let him have his way, and he made a number of changes, every one, so far as I could see, for the better. As far as I can recall the last line originally read, somewhat mysteriously, 'darkness is the *scabbards* of her *knives*'. The simile for the mouth, 'merry as a robin on your finger', was a recension of I cannot remember what; certainly, the image as it stands is new.

So what you have read is an emended version of the poem I had accepted for publication, done at the last possible moment on proof — much to the annoyance of my long-suffering printers, Messrs Crampton and Son of Sawston, who were mostly used to printing notices for garden fêtes and invitations to weddings, and for whom a literary magazine was something of an adventure.

That is not, however, the nub of the matter. This was a poem written before Ted had met either Sylvia Plath or Assia Wevill, two of the three major women in his life, one of whom he married, the other of whom he had as a partner for some years. They were both very personable, both highly aggressive, and

they both committed suicide. In certain quarters Ted has been richly blamed for all this, but neither of these ladies were shrinking violets, and it is to be believed that their actions were deliberated. If Ted is to blame for anything, it is to have been taken captive by two remarkably beautiful and intellectually powerful women. Those of us who have never been injudicious in love may have the temerity to sit in judgement upon him. As it stands, this poem is a remarkable example of *prolepsis*, in which the poet unintentionally forecasts his future predicament.

After each issue of *delta* came on to the streets, where indeed it was mostly sold, the volunteer salespeople were invited to a party. The formula, then as now, was 'Mr So-and-So and Partner'. Somewhat to my surprise, Mr Hughes's partner was Mr Daniel Huws. This was a Welsh-speaking poet who later on found employment at the National Library of Wales.

Ted ran with a rough crowd. They inhabited an abandoned rectory which had been attached to St Botolph's Church. It was presided over by an eccentric old lady called Mrs Hitchcock who, quite coincidentally, was to be one of several mothers-in-law collected *seriatim* by the future biographer of Sylvia Plath, Anne Stevenson. At this time, and I am speaking of the mid-1950s, there were poets such as Redgrove and myself who wore suits and ties, and poets such as Hughes and his associates who, to put it mildly, did not. Among these charmers were Joe Lyde, Mike Boddey, Danny Huws, and Luke Myers. This last, by far the quietest of them, found the company at times so insupportable that he bought a tent and camped out on the lawn, as Robert Lowell — who was our poetic hero in those days — had camped out on the lawn of his mentor, Allen Tate, twenty years previously.

Some of these poets edited a magazine of limited circulation, and even more limited press-run, called *The St. Botolph's Review*. The *St Botolph's* may have regarded itself as some kind of answer to *delta*, though *delta* was certainly not part of the Establishment. In spite of the fact that Danny Huws had written a vituperative review of my magazine, I welcomed him to the party given in honour of the *delta* he had maligned. That was for Ted's sake, rather than his own. What I was not prepared for was the ruck of gate-crashers that followed in his wake, some of them already demonstrably drunk. The most noisy of these was a character I shall call Kevin Sludge, who was reeling around splashing drink everywhere, narrowly missing my then-girlfriend's rather elegant white ball-gown.

I ejected him right away, probably to impress my girl with my physical prowess, and continued my conversation, probably in an attempt to impress her with my prowess on the intellectual plane. What I didn't realise was that the caitiff Sludge had somehow wormed his way back into the party and was coming at me from behind with, raised in his hand, a full bottle of Sherry. Had this

connected with my skull, as apparently he meant it to, my prowess, both physical and intellectual, would have been severely dented. As it was, Ted Hughes sprang forward and held Sludge's fighting arm in what the comic papers of the day would have called an iron grip, shouting out these memorable words: 'Don't kill Hobsbaum, he's a good man!'

I later heard that Sludge spent his vacations fighting with coal miners in South Wales, so it seems that I had experienced a narrow escape. And as Doctor Watson in a similar predicament said of Sherlock Holmes, 'it was worth a wound to know the depth of loyalty which lay behind that cold mask'. However, I am reasonably certain that Ted Hughes changed his opinion of me over the years.

We most of us went to live in London after we graduated. Ted came along to several meetings of the London Group — an *ad hoc* association of poets that I started in 1955. These were held in my bed sitter off the Edgware Road. Ted once scandalised my Rhodesian landlady by using her frying pan to fry a black pudding which was his supper for the night. He scandalised her still more by singing ballads with a rather shy school-teacher called Rosemary Joseph. He had a fine *heldentenor* in those days, and I still remember his ringing top G in 'Lord Randal, my son'. That was at about two in the morning. The schoolteacher in question I suspect figures as the heroine of one of his best early poems, where her profession but not her character is changed. It is called 'Secretary'.

He was, and was to remain, a superb verse speaker. One night he read Hopkins's 'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day' in so vibrantly personal a manner that another young lady present took it to be a sonnet of his own recent composition. On another occasion he read a very large chunk of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* into Peter Redgrove's tape recorder. It would be pleasant to think that this has been preserved for posterity.

He had left Cambridge without a reference from his tutor owing to an unfortunate habit of appropriating road signs such as 'No Parking' and using them to decorate his room while he still lived in college. Perhaps it was this circumstance that propelled him into the St Botolph's Rectory. When I knew him in London, he was staying with his sister. Occasionally he would come to my office and we would go and drink lunch together. I worked in television in those days, and Ted in his hairy overcoat presented a contrast to the tinsel starlets and be-blazered leading men who populated the foyer. His habit of sitting sideways while waiting for me, and squinneying askance at our clients, perturbed our statuesque receptionist, Miss Westbrook. She asked me once 'Do you think Mr Hughes is quite right in his head?' Oh he was, very much so, but unduly sensitive and very much at a loss as to where life was leading him.

I wrote him a reference for Joyce Briggs, then Story Editor at J. Arthur Rank, and Ted got a job reading novels to see whether they would serve to be made into films. However he lasted only seven weeks, saying that he felt that

the pressure of reading so much junk was affecting his faculties. He had held a job as a night watchman, but gave it up, saying he was not going to put his skull between his employer's property and the bludgeon of some passing robber. He returned to Cambridge, and got a job teaching in Coleridge Road School, writing to me about the impossibility of employing one pair of eyes to watch over thirty-two pairs of grubby, roving, sneaking little hands.

Then, somebody told me, he had got engaged to Sylvia Plath. I had heard of, but not, at that point, met her. She was the charismatic American poet who had taken Cambridge by storm. She had taken over the fashion page of the university newspaper, herself acting as her own model. She was going to be very great indeed.

I could not at the time work out how Ted had met her. She certainly was no habituée of the pubs in which most of our social life took place. Nor could I see how Ted, with his flakes of dandruff and smelly trousers, would fit in with her cool elegance. He surfaced once or twice in London, at one point giving me four meticulously typed MSS of Plath's which I realise now must have been some kind of audition for the London Group. I introduced him to the work of Edward Thomas — not so well known then as now — and still remember his chewing over with intense relish the line, from 'The Glory', 'I cannot bite the day to the core.' That, to be anachronistic, was a Ted Hughes line if ever there was one!

He borrowed my much-thumbed copy of Isaac Rosenberg, and I didn't get it back until after his first visit to the USA. During his absence, I read out at various literary soirées the poems he sent Redgrove and myself. The Rosenberg had been shopsold when borrowed, but, when it was posted back to me, it seemed as good as new. There was an accompanying note, penned in green ink. It began, 'You will recognise this copy as being none of yours. Now it is. The other was involved in a cycle accident, got soaked in wine, and was destroyed.' When we met, he told me that the best of the younger poets in the States was Richard Wilbur, and recommended for especial attention Wilbur's poem 'Potato'.

'These fragments I have shored', as Eliot said. Ted was the lyric poet *par excellence*, and we all knew how good he was. What I couldn't see was the possibility of development. When Ted praised someone, he would say, 'He's a man', and I always felt there was more to be said about anyone than that. We had briefly met Robert Graves when he gave the Clark Lectures at Cambridge, and Ted had been enthralled by *The White Goddess*. But Redgrove had gone on to study Jung, and I was looking forward to starting my Ph.D. in literary theory, a field little frequented in the 1950s.

So our ways diverged. I last saw Ted in Leeds, in the 1960s, when he was staying with Redgrove, who had become the Gregory Fellow in Poetry. I put my foot in it asking after Sylvia, from whom I did not know Ted had separated. He gave me a lift to Leeds Central Station in Bill Merwin's dilapidated car, thus

causing me to miss my train.

I don't think we ever really got on. But I admired him greatly, and still love his early naturalistic country poems. 'Thought Fox' I think is a masterpiece, and 'November'; also, 'Relic', 'Wind', 'Six Young Men' and 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar'. However, I annoyed him by broadcasting a parody of one of his most famous works which I called 'Bard Roosting'. I reviewed his book *Wodwo* adversely, and I don't think he ever forgave that. With *Crow*, which I still think is formless and melodramatic, he seemed to me to have lost his way. I don't think he ever regained it.

Lyric verse is a young man's game, unless you happen to be an everlasting peak in poetry; one of the eternal classics. Fine writer though he is, Ted couldn't be termed that. An intelligent Dylan Thomas is more like it.

I shall always remember him, not as a grizzled Laureate and O.M., but as a farouche young poet. He may have had flakes of dandruff rather than vine leaves in his hair, but he had the authentic voice — 'the carol, the creation'. Had he died at thirty, with what anguish we should think of him now: our Shelley, our Wilfred Owen. But had Plath lived to be sixty-eight — think of 'Mirror', think of 'Candles' — she might have been there, in living history, as Ted will never be; with Hardy, and with Yeats.

From: *Short Eared Owl Settling on Eggs, Sitka Spruce Plantation*

In miles of sapling spruce
she settles,
small in those miles as a comma
in a book,
the bird of hooks and big plush softness,
her eyes of fire
across two decades
outstaring the viewer's look

"Cambridge, a superb photographer ... is in the tradition of Scottish naturalists like Hugh Miller, John Muir and David Stephen. [This book is] a pleasure to look at and touch as well as read."

James Robertson, *Scotland on Sunday*

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BUT HEATHER!'**

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