

MARVELS AND MIST

by Gerry Cambridge

*Ted Hughes**Collected Poems*

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THIS DOORSTOP VOLUME, WHICH RUNS TO OVER 1300 pages, 1125 of them poetry, collects all the work for adults Ted Hughes published, not only in his major collections, but in those issued by private presses, and in little magazines. As Paul Keegan in his scholarly and thorough introduction makes clear, it is not a *Complete Poems*, which will have to wait the attention of scholars.

There are several things to say at the outset. This volume seems to have been designed primarily for reference: it is a decidedly uncomfortable book to read; heavy literature, not least in the physical sense. Balancing its deadweight on one's knee, one thinks discomfitingly of Hughes' own lines in the poem 'Tutorial', in which a narrator refers to some books of literature he and a scholar are scrutinising, as "tomb boards / pressing the drying remains of men". It's an unfortunate thought, considering the vivacity and sheer earth-energy of much of this volume's contents. One also has the impression that, in a peculiar way, this book reads the reader: Hughes seemed such an exhilarating intelligence, and with such an unusual range of reference, that in diffident moments one feels that most of the failings in the interaction between the volume and a reader are likely to be the latter's. The book is like an alp: its verse makes few concessions to 'reader-friendliness'; it has almost none of that 'most amiable form of cowardice' Robert Frost classified as humour.

Hughes' background wasn't strong on humour, of course. He had inherited the aftermath of the First World War, which had scarred whole communities in his native Yorkshire. His father was only one of seventeen survivors of a slaughtered regiment. His mother, Edith Farrar, was related to Nicolas Ferrar, founder in 1625 of the Anglican community at Little Gidding. The poet seems to have had a particularly close relationship with his decade-older brother, Gerald, who would take him out on his hunting and shooting forays. In a photograph of them together, when Hughes was seventeen, the poet — later christened, not altogether complementarily, "Ted Huges" and "Ted the Incredible Hulk" in Larkin's letters — seems almost dainty in comparison to

the older man. Then followed Cambridge, which Hughes called “a prison from life” and, famously, his meeting with Plath, their marriage, and his subsequent marriage-wrecking relationship with Assia Gutmann. As Plath had, Gutmann killed herself, but also her daughter with Hughes, in 1969. The poet married Carol Orchard in 1970. He remained married till his death of cancer on October 28, 1998. His career had a late flourish, firstly with the widely praised *Tales From Ovid*, and secondly with *Birthday Letters*, published in January 1998. The previous February, he had sold his archive for an undisclosed sum to Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, a surprising choice of venue for such a lover of England. When he died, his estate was worth £1.4 million.

There are several Ted Hugheses, of course. There is Hughes the ‘nature’ poet, portrayer of an astonishing bestiary and botany. There is the social documentarian, writer of poems about the First World War, about his relatives, some of them deeply affected by that conflict, and about his native Yorkshire in all its elemental and industrially blasted beauty. There is the Hughes who married Sylvia Plath and suffered both her suicide and that of Assia Gutmann, manifested most obviously in *Birthday Letters* and in the sequence ‘Capriccio’, but present elsewhere — tragedies which bleed oppressively through so much of the verse, like a bloody corpse through sacking. There is the Ted Hughes of myth, inventor of the arch-trickster Crow, of Lumb the changeling and fertility figure impersonating an Anglican priest in *Gaudete*, and so on. There is Hughes the husbandman, writing impressive poems about farming experience in his sequence *Moortown*. And there is Hughes the Poet Laureate, composing elevated verses honouring a Royal Family too humanly fallible to merit his praise of them as emblematic of the nation’s spiritual centre; one result being, for this reader at least, bathos.

If there are several Ted Hugheses, equally there seem to be several types of Ted Hughes reader. A common one is the type who believes the poet ‘lost his way’ with the publication of *Crow* in 1970, and that his main achievement lies in his first two books, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960). A second type is the all-tolerating scholar, in a position to research the recondite and eclectic range of reference behind a good deal of Hughes’ more myth-based output. The assumption there is that as Hughes was a major poet, everything he wrote was significant and worthy of exegesis. A third type are those pragmatic and commonsensical fellows such as Philip Larkin, who dismiss “the myth-kitty” and verse which indulges it. A fourth, those readers who regarded him as culpable in the death of Sylvia Plath, and scrutinise the work like detectives looking for clues to a murder. A frequent perception among this group seems to be that Hughes is a much lesser figure in comparison to the doomed genius who was his first wife. If Google is any guide, Plath is certainly more famous, bringing up 603,000 references to Hughes’ 244,000 in April 2005.

My own sympathies as a reader of Hughes are strongly with that naturalistic and documentarian strand running back through his interest in and influence by D. H. Lawrence, via Edward Thomas and the other English ‘nature’ poets, through Wordsworth and back to Shakespeare, and encompassing his wide reading in American poetry, not least John Crowe Ransom, who influenced his earlier work, as well as an influence seldom commented on, Robinson Jeffers. For me the mythical aspects of his writing, lacking a rootedness in experience, often seem sterile and obscure. I make exception for sequences which appear less hermetically personal and in which I find the quality of the verse transcends the mythical framework, such as ‘Prometheus on his Crag’. I can happily ignore much of ‘Orts’, ‘Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama’, or the closing poems of *Gaudete*. Here, for example, is the opening of ‘The Owl Flower’ from ‘Cave Birds’:

Big terror descends.

A drumming flare, a flickering face of flames.

Something writhes apart into a signal,
Fiendish, a filament of incandescence.

As it were a hair.

In the maelstrom’s eye,
In the core of the brimming heaven-blossom,
Under the tightening whorl of plumes, a mote
Scalds in dews.

This continues for another fifteen lines or so. The tone is urgent, and the narrator is obviously animated; but the language in the first five lines is so vacuously rhetorical that I feel excluded by an intensity which, owing to the verse’s opacity, I cannot share. What, for instance, is that “Something” that “writhes apart into a signal”? A reader feels suspicious of a narrator who can employ an overblown adjective like “Fiendish” without appearing to have earned it. One can imagine Hughes, urgent and impassioned, reading this, but it seems more of a verbal imposition on a reader than a dialogue: a spectacle — like listening to a soapbox prophet. Floundering, one can guess that the poem could conceivably be a description of an owl swooping on a mouse, and that Hughes has conflated in the poem’s title animal and vegetable, as he sometimes did: in his drum-beating ‘Tiger-Psalm’, for instance, the tiger ends as a “Beast in

Blossom!”), and his early poem ‘The Green Wolf’ posits the vegetable earth as a predator; but this is at best a guess, and not supported by the rest of the poem. I can’t imagine many readers making much of it without a scholarly gloss. To what extent should specialist exegesis be part of reading poetry? At the least, the poem’s force should merit it.

In fairness, Hughes himself was aware of this problem of obscurity, and of the range of reading constituencies. In some of the ‘occasional prose’ in his brilliant essay collection, *Winter Pollen*, he seems uncertain about the fate of some of his animal poems, recounting how a “US urban poet” had quite failed to understand a poem by him about a wren; the American had never seen one, he had no relation to the subject matter. Yet compare the opening of ‘The Owl Flower’ to the start of ‘The Hare’:

I

That Elf
Riding his awkward pair of haunchy legs

That weird long-eared Elf
Wobbling down the highway

Don’t overtake him, don’t try to drive past him,
He’s scatty, he’s all over the road,
He can’t keep his steering, in his ramshackle go-cart
His big loose wheels, buckled and rusty
Nearly wobbling off

And all the screws in his head wobbling and loose

And his eyes wobbling

This is all cartoonish improvisation and exaggeration, but it captures exactly the essence of hareness, of a hare running down a road in front of a car — even, I would contend, for someone who has never seen one. The rhythms in the third ‘stanza’ are rumbustiously mimetic of the careering animal. Such animal poems — and there are many — remind one of Hughes’ self-confessed debt to similar pieces by Norman MacCaig, pieces that are all loving attention to their subject. A big part of Hughes’ gift remains his empathy with and insight into the creaturely world, and for whatever has not given up on its wildness, human as well as animal. At times this can lead him into a degree of sentimentality

about insects such as house flies, for instance; yet he can write a praise poem about the rat, in ‘Sing the Rat’, for example, which almost has one liking them. Derek Walcott, on this book’s jacket, calls Hughes’ oeuvre “a poetry of exultation” which, at its best, it is. The animal poems frequently have a sort of awed fascination for the creation; in our devastated 21st century, this can give the work an elegaic cast. An early poem, ‘A Fable’, shows the poet fully aware of what the human technological future might hold, in which “The last man croaked, like a toad in a baking stone, / Interested only in water, water”. Against this vision of a sterile future, Hughes sets not just the instinctual energy of the animals, but that of humans who have resisted or outwitted the levelling influences of contemporary life. He is a great poet of the trampish eccentric, or of unofficial human ingenuity on the tufted and unlegislated margins. He finds this in men such as his second wife’s father, Jack Orchard, with whom Hughes farmed the Devon holding, Moortown, and whom the poet commemorated in an elegaic sequence. In another poem, ‘A Knock at the Door’, the fascinated poet scrutinises a tramp who comes to his house asking for a drink; the tramp is a “sheltering bulk”, a sort of diminished descendent of ‘Dick Straightup’, the overblown masculine stereotype portrayed in *Lupercal*. And in ‘Sketching a Thatcher’, Hughes records a local character in a series of what seem inspired jottings — he once wrote that he thought sometimes that his poems were “only notes”. Here are the first sixteen lines:

Bird-bones is on the roof. Seventy-eight
 And still a ladder-squirrel,
 Three or four niches at a time, up forty rungs,
 Then crabbing out across the traverse,
 Cock-crows of insulting banter, liberated
 Into his old age, like a royal fool
 But still tortured with energy. Thatching
 Must be the sinless job. Weathered
 Like a weathercock, face bright as a ploughshare,
 Skinny forearms of steely cable, batting
 The reeds flush, crawling, cliff-hanging,
 Lizard-silk of his lizard-skinny hands,
 Hands never still, twist of body never still,
 Bounds in for a cup of tea, ‘Caught you all asleep!’
 Markets all the gossip — cynical old goblin
 Cackling with wicked joy.

Later, the poet asks: “Was everybody / Once like him? He’s squirmed through / Some tight cranny of natural selection.”

Such writing is all vivid surface; in its lively evocation and rhythmical gaiety it’s a world away from the heavy-handedness of the poet at his worst. It seems a poetry unconcerned with the notion of the poem as a perfect artefact: we are not meant to admire, but engage. At the back of it is the celebration of the full rich life, richly apprehended. Hughes once commented that one of the points of writing verse was to help its author come into fuller possession of his or her own experience. A good deal of his work stands as an implicit rejection of that world of narrowed possibilities accepted, however grudgingly, by the narrator in, say, many a Larkin poem. His verse makes one freshly aware — if one had forgotten it — how sterile and artificial much of contemporary life seems. In part, the poems’ animals and individualists are like the repressed parts of the psyche; they are exemplars of possibility. Hughes’ response to Donald Davie’s exhortation that, in the aftermath of 20th century history, we could be nothing but “numb” was a fever of energy. Even the character of Crow, nihilistic as it appears, is rooted in the conviction that life is an ultimate value, underpinned as the sequence is, Hughes pointed out, by American trickster literature. In it

optimism and creative joy are fundamental, and the attempts to live, and to enlarge and intensify life, however mismanaged, fill up at every point with self-sufficient meaning.

Winter Pollen, 239

Of course, it’s less straightforward than that. When Crow asks itself, “ought I to stop eating / and try to become the light?” the question is a human’s, not an animal’s. It arises from the narrator’s awareness of the cost of the attempts to “enlarge and intensify life”; not just to oneself, but to others. At bottom it is a self-interrogation about resources and their allocation; it is freighted with ontological guilt.

If Ted Hughes began by writing largely self-contained poems, many of the later pieces become increasingly intertextual with other poems in his oeuvre, or they assume knowledge of the poet’s biography and, implicitly, of the importance of that biography. This reached a peak perhaps with *Birthday Letters*, one of the bestselling volumes of poetry of all time; it had sold 250,000 copies a year after publication. Because the book’s poems dealt with Hughes’ relationship with Sylvia Plath, about whom he had maintained a thirty-five year silence, their importance as literary documents unavoidably preceded their importance as poems. We are in the world of poets as personalities; it is a soap-operatic world, if in an elevated register: *Eastenders* for literary

intellectuals. Paradoxically, then, the most memorable poems for me are those in which Plath and Hughes transmute to any young couple, negotiating the potential minefields of a life together. The power of these pieces transcends their biographical underpinning. When Hughes goes in for astrology-speak or overdoes psychoanalysis of Plath, the poems become bogged down in their context. They strain at least this reader's interest in Plathian psychology. As a sequence, *Birthday Letters* is both suffocating in its intensity and terribly sad, charting as it does a relationship between two gifted writers different and unsuited in fundamental respects which, like all intense relationships, is multi-layered, mysterious and, finally, incomprehensible.

Hughes is surely one of the greatest writers of free verse of the 20th century. He combines Lawrence's sensitivity with Jeffers' muscularity of line. It would be interesting to be around in a century or so, if human civilisation survives, among other reasons to see how time has sifted contemporary poetic reputations. How will Hughes' work weather? It is fun to speculate. *Birthday Letters* I would guess will still be read for its connection to Plath. I believe much of the myth-based work, however, will have rotted away like the dead wood it seems. Work which doesn't seem compelling on its own account, and can only be read in conjunction with interpretation by exegetes, doesn't seem likely to survive among common readers. What will surely remain will be not only Hughes' own powerful brand of social documentary, but a considerable body of astonishing nature poetry — assuming we still have a natural world and sufficient people with affinity for it. Peter Redgrove, a poet in some ways similar to Hughes in his energies and fecundity, in a fascinating interview with the American poet-editor Philip Fried, re-published recently in the *Manhattan Review* (Volume 11, No. 2), observed engagingly that the purpose of creativity was to stimulate creativity in others. Whatever one makes of this observation, it captures perfectly the exhilaration found not only in much of Redgrove's work, but in such animal poems as Hughes' 'Swifts': a masterful celebration not only of these bizarre migratory birds, so adapted to airborne life that they sleep on the wing, and have only vestigial legs, but of the creative moment in poetry, when the energies of the poem and poet, like the birds themselves, "sparkle", breathtakingly, "out into blue".