

# The Parochial Courage of Ted Hughes

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Almost twenty years after his death, the *status* of Ted Hughes as a major English poet seems assured. However, his *place* in the context of the modern and contemporary poetry is less clear. A large and varied oeuvre incorporating poetry, prose, drama, translation, essays and critical writing – and even larger archives of unpublished material – provides the basis for competing interpretations and suggests that one reason for the uncertainty about Hughes's place is that the full range of evidence has not yet been fully considered. Indeed, the understanding and reception of Hughes's published work by both scholarly and more popular audiences is increasingly contested. This is most recently exemplified in Jonathan Bate's revisionist classification of Hughes's poetry into 'mythic' and 'elegiac' modes, in which Bate reserves his highest approbation for Hughes's more direct and personal work about 'love and loss' – paradigmatically *Birthday Letters* – and effectively characterises the central thrust of Hughes's creative effort since the publication of *Lupercal* in 1960 and the publication of *Birthday Letters* in January 1998 as obscurantist displacement activity.<sup>1</sup>

This attitude to Hughes's work is perhaps most marked in the contemporary poetry world – the world of workshops, readings, open mics, festivals, independent publishers and little magazines, in which the first-person lyric holds sway and where sentiments such as, 'I don't give a damn about mythic crows and foxes, it's people that matter,' are by no means uncommon.<sup>2</sup> It is generally agreed that Hughes is a 'great poet' ('Wind', 'Pike', 'Hawk Roosting', *Birthday Letters*), but otherwise a bit bewildering. Certainly, in terms of influence, the 'Ted Who?' tendency revealed by Keith Sagar in his 2013 paper in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal* is still very much in evidence.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, there is still a need to explore

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Comment made by a regionally well-known Yorkshire poet at a reading hosted by the author at 1 Aspinall Street, Mytholmroyd (Hughes's natal home) as part of the Elmet Trust's 2013 Ted Hughes Festival.

<sup>3</sup> Keith Sagar, 'Ted Who?', *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, III.1, pp. 2-7. Sagar's paper is based on an analysis of 'The State of Poetry', a 'symposium' edited by Ian Hamilton for issue 29/30 (1972) of *The Review*. Thirty-five poets, critics and editors were asked to give their views the most encouraging and discouraging features of the poetry scene 'in the last decade' and the 'developments'

the place of Hughes in the wider context of English poetry, and a short article by the Irish poet and journalist Patrick Kavanagh might provide a means of doing so. In May 1952, Kavanagh published the seventh edition of his short-lived 'journal of literature and politics', *Kavanagh's Weekly*. In the editorial, 'Mao Tse-Tung Unrolls His Mat', Kavanagh defends his journal against accusations of being 'parochial' – that is, being too narrowly focused on Irish literary and political issues – and provides the basis for interpretations of the terms 'parochial', 'provincial' and 'metropolitan' that might be of use in informing an understanding of Ted Hughes.<sup>4</sup> Kavanagh writes:

Parochialism and provincialism are direct opposites. The provincial has no mind of his own; he does not trust what his eyes see until he has heard what the metropolis – towards which his eyes are turned – has to say on any subject. [...] The parochial mentality on the other hand is never in any doubt about the social and artistic validity of his parish. All great civilizations are based on parochialism – Greek, Israelite, English [...] In Ireland we are provincial and not parochial, for it requires a great deal of courage to be parochial. When we do attempt having the courage of our parish we are inclined to go false and play up to the larger parish on the other side of the Irish Sea. In recent times we have had two great Irish parishioners – James Joyce and George Moore. They explained nothing. The public had either to come to them or stay in the dark. [...] Advising people not to be ashamed of having the courage of their remote parish is not free from many dangers: there is always that element of bravado which takes pleasure in the notion that the potato patch is the ultimate. To be parochial a man needs the right kind of sensitive courage and the right kind of sensitive humility.<sup>5</sup>

Applied to modern and contemporary English literary culture, 'metropolitan' might refer to the elite culture centred on the capital, an amorphous grouping of publishers, prizes, festivals and readings, journals, salons, established and up-and-coming poets, entrepreneurs, impresarios, critics and so on that define, direct and dominate the nation's poetic ecology. 'Provincial' refers to the mentality that looks at the metropolitan establishment from outside, accepts its hegemony and seeks to find a place within it by conforming its expression and interests to those apparently sanctioned or promoted by it. Kavanagh's ennobling sense of the 'parochial' reserves that term for artists who eschew provincial conformity and demonstrate

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they hoped to see in the next. Of those polled, only nine mentioned Hughes, six of those negatively. Philip Larkin (14), Geoffrey Hill (9) and Robert Lowell (8) were the poets securing most approbation.

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Kavanagh, 'Parochialism', *Kavanagh's Weekly*, Vol.1, No. 7. (Dublin, 24<sup>th</sup> May, 1952), p. 2. Partially reprinted as 'Parochialism & Provincialism' in *Patrick Kavanagh, A Poet's Country: Selected Prose* (Ed. Antoinette Quinn), (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2003), p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> *loc.cit.*.

the courage to pursue their own expression and interests without regard to metropolitan fashion – and presumably with a similar disregard for the consequences that may flow from such a decision. Kavanagh's concept of 'parochial courage' is defined by the risk an artist takes of potentially excluding him or herself from critical or popular approbation – from success – for the sake of the authenticity and integrity of their expression.

There are senses in which all three of Kavanagh's terms might apply to Ted Hughes. After all, Hughes was a provincial grammar school boy from Yorkshire, who had an ambition to become a famous poet from his mid-teens and gravitated to the capital from his mid-twenties onward, becoming a Faber poet, living in London for extended periods and moving easily as an influential figure within the metropolitan literary scene for much of his life. Despite this, my contention is that Hughes was at root a profoundly parochial poet. His parochialism is expressed in a number of ways. Hughes's friend Lucas Myers asserted that although Hughes subsequently became, 'a Cambridge undergraduate, an unwilling American, a Londoner [...] [a] Devonshire farmer, a European and a cosmopolitan', at core he 'remained a Yorkshireman' and Hughes retained the most obvious signifier of his origins – his Yorkshire accent – throughout his life, never seeking to efface it.<sup>6</sup> In an interview with Ekbert Faas, Hughes characterised his Yorkshire voice as his 'most intimate self' and doubted whether he would have 'ever have written verse' without it.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, a hundred or so of his poems directly address or arise from his twin Yorkshire parishes of Mytholmroyd and Mexborough.

Writing about personal landscapes *per se* is unexceptional. Even metropolitan poets do it. Nevertheless Hughes's Yorkshire-focused work provides insights into some distinctive elements of his parochial courage, which is not so much topographical or autobiographical as intellectual. *Remains of Elmet* wraps up personal and autobiographically-derived poems about his natal upper Calder Valley in a mythic expression arising from a quasi-Heraclitean view of the Universe as a cycle of birth, growth, death, decay and transformation, an infinite recycling of matter and spirit. In his preface to the book, Hughes writes that it seemed that 'the end had come' for the industrial and agricultural order that had prevailed in the upper Calder Valley since the 'early 1800s', with the mills and chapels 'virtually dead' and the population 'changing rapidly' (*RE* 8). 'Hill Walls' describes a world in which there are 'No survivors', merely the 'shattered ribs' (*RE* 30) of dry stone walls, which in the following poem, 'Walls' are characterised as a 'harvest of long

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<sup>6</sup> Lucas Myers, *The Essential Self, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (London: Richard Hollis, 2011), p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 202.

cemeteries' (*RE* 33). Similarly before 'Lumb Chimneys' 'can flower again/They must fall into the only future, the earth' (*RE* 14). Although Hughes includes in the collection poems which include historical ('Heptonstall Old Church'), cultural ('Football at Slack') and even political content and themes ('Mill Ruins' seems to be informed by an atavistic protectionism), the collection is dominated by a mythic fatalism in which the whole field of human endeavour – biography, history, industry and culture – is subsumed into the inexorable cycles of nature. The economic malaise of the upper Calder Valley and the social, demographic and environmental consequences that flowed from it – all the result of human agency, and subject to remedy by that agency, politics allowing – is determinedly interpreted as a natural process. Largely absent from *Remains of Elmet* is any sense of sustained analytical engagement with history or politics, any sense of the potential of active human agency to effect change and – perhaps most importantly in the context of this argument – only a limited sense of solidarity with the community described.

Comparisons of Hughes's poetry about his childhood landscape with the work of two contemporaries of similar stature confirm that the distinctiveness of his parish arises not from a commitment to people and place, but in his singular vision and expression, in which the communal and public dimension generally has diminished importance, effectively detaching the poems from politics and perhaps history. Tony Harrison's *The Loiners* (the very title an affectionate parochial homage to the people of a place), is a work written in critical but fond solidarity with his natal community.<sup>8</sup> *The School of Eloquence* imports a more overt class-consciousness into his expression, with the major battleground being Harrison's Yorkshire accent and dialect (which is also Hughes's accent and dialect) and in his famous, 'We'll occupy/your lousy leasehold poetry', he speaks on behalf of and as part of his community against both metropolitan and provincial with a sense of shoulder-to-shoulder solidarity that is largely absent in Hughes's expression.<sup>9</sup> – which might be seen as Harrison's *Remains of Elmet* – addresses the fragmentation of his natal community with a similarly impassioned, although essentially pessimistic solidarity.<sup>10</sup>

In his elegiac poem 'Hallaig', Sorley Maclean addresses the Highland Clearances and the ongoing plight of the Scottish gaidhealtachd in a meditation on the eponymous township, located on his native island of Raasay. Like Hughes in his *Remains of Elmet* poems, Maclean describes the dereliction of the largely

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<sup>8</sup> Tony Harrison, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), pp. 14-77. 'Loiner' is the colloquial name for a native of Leeds.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 119-262.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 263-279.

unpeopled landscape – ‘the window is nailed and boarded’, ‘the road is under mild moss’ – and laments the eviction of his ancestors by the estate’s factor, George Rainy:

In Screapadal of my people  
Where Norman and Big Hector were,  
Their daughters and their sons are a wood  
Going up beside the stream.<sup>11</sup>

Maclean comments disparagingly on the plantations of non-native sitka spruce ‘crowing’ on the tops of hills – ‘they are not the woods I love’. The speaker’s ‘love’ is reserved for the native birches – the ‘daughters and sons’ – that have regenerated amid the ruins and that are presented as a hopeful and organic symbol of resettlement and renewal.

I will wait for the birch wood  
Until it comes up by the cairn,  
Until the whole ridge from Beinn na Lice  
Will be under its shade.<sup>12</sup>

The use of the metaphor of birch trees to represent the renewal of the people is superficially similar to Hughes’s vision of ‘Lumb Chimneys’ ‘flowering’ from the earth they will one day fall into. However, whereas Hughes’s vision is conditional, pessimistic and abstract (the chimney has not yet collapsed; Hughes’s Heraclitean fatalism simply assumes that ‘one day’ (*RE* 14) it will do so), Maclean’s birch trees are symbols of regeneration rooted in the actual landscape. Further, in the image of the ‘Proud [...] pine cocks’ that ‘crow on the top of Cnoc an Ra’, Maclean brings into focus the poem’s fundamental and ongoing political dimension with this representation of the alien landlord class that has evicted the people, suppressed their culture and language and expropriated their land.<sup>13</sup> Maclean’s parochial courage, as with that of Harrison, is rooted not simply in the accidents of birth and biography that result in a personal attachment to place, but in *commitment* – a historically and politically informed consciousness that is characterised by solidarity with place and people. This dimension is rarely present in Hughes’s poetry and the fact of this absence is why his ‘parochial courage’ is not to be found in an address to his physical or literal parish. Hughes’s parish is intellectual, philosophical and visionary and his parochial courage lies in his determination to explore and expound his singular vision and worldview in the conservative context

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<sup>11</sup> Sorley Maclean (Somhairle MacGill-eian), *White Leaping Flame (Caoir Gheal Leumraich): Collected Poems*, edited by Christopher Whyte and Emma Dymock, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2011), p. 230.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* loc.cit.

of English poetry and its bias in favour of what might be coined the 'human-interest lyric'.

The components of Hughes's thought and worldview are many and complex and in this paper I can do no more than tease out what I see as the key strands. Broadly, Hughes begins from the premise that humanity has fallen from an Edenic state in which people lived simply and freely, in harmony with nature, each other and in balance with their natures. Sometimes Hughes gives the impression that he believes this golden age status was last enjoyed in the 'Palaeolithic' (more properly Mesolithic), by the 'Red Indians' and similar cultures, 'the last sane human beings' (*LTH* 359). On other occasions he seems to imply that pre-industrial agrarian societies (for example, alleged Bronze Age goddess-worshipping societies, pre-Reformation Catholic England) were at least approximations to such an Eden. However, as a result of an unholy combination of factors – the degeneration of Renaissance humanism into the Enlightenment's elevation of the individual, the rise of amoral and atheistic science and philosophy, the life-denying legacy of Puritanism, the industrial revolution, the rise of rapacious capitalism (although Hughes never uses that politically loaded term), nation states and conflicting ideological systems – the world is now dominated by deterministic materialism, denuded of meaning and purpose and characterised by repression and destruction (of nature, of tradition, of human beings, human nature and human potential). The 'modern world' is Eliot's *The Waste Land* and its hyperbolic expression is the First World War, the horrors and shadow of which informed Hughes's work throughout his life (*WP* 269).

For Hughes, humanity's fall – however that is understood – has created in the current period an unprecedented ecological, spiritual, cultural, economic and social crisis – which is ultimately a crisis of how to live. Hughes's intellectual and ideological response to this emerges through his writings in three broad areas. The first of these responses is a resort to nature that developed into an almost Pantheistic vision, much of which might reasonably be read as committed eco-poetry – a discourse in solidarity with nature against the depredations and desecrations of humanity. The second area comprises Hughes's embracing of irrationality and the 'spiritual', including the occult, Neoplatonism, mythology, Shamanism, 'the White Goddess' – and even Monarchism – as elements of a highly singular understanding of the world. The third area lies in Hughes's development of mythic expression to carry the complexity and obscurity of this unorthodox intellectual load without overt didacticism, although, as Paul Bentley has argued, it may be that Hughes's adoption of the mythic mode allows him to covertly address

public and historical themes without outing himself as a 'political' poet in the same overt way as Harrison or Maclean, for example.<sup>14</sup>

This complex of beliefs, themes and practices constitutes Hughes's singular parish and his ongoing resort to them, often in complex and extended forms, constitutes his parochial courage. As I've previously indicated, most consumers and producers of modern and contemporary poetry in England during Hughes's lifetime and today have been conditioned to have a preference for the 'human interest lyric' - short, accessible, first-person poems arising from personal experience (what Bate terms the elegiac mode). One might track the elements of this narrowing trend from the Georgians through the imagist strand of Modernism, the New Critical focus on the 'well-made poem', the Movement's quotidian focus and failure of nerve, confessionalism, the democratisation of poetry via creative writing courses and workshop culture and the recent rise of protagonistic poetry rooted in lifestyle and identity. This type of poetry tends to default to reactions to experience, accounts of 'loss and love' and assertions of self and personal history.<sup>15</sup> The dominance of this form of the lyric leads to a prejudice against *external* content, ideas, ambition and scale in poetry. As the 'regionally well-known Yorkshire poet' whose views I quoted earlier might say, 'Who gives a toss about Giordano Bruno and mythically transformed alchemical birds? What we really want to know is did he love his first wife?' (In easily digestible gobbets and with the Cabalistic schema an optional extra for initiates only.) Sean O' Brien, also drawing on Kavanagh to comment on this aspect of the reception of Hughes's work, asserts, 'Gods make their own importance' [...] but that doesn't mean anyone's listening.'<sup>16</sup>

Another reason for the nature of Hughes's parochial expression – perhaps the reason why he did not write in a more historically aware and politically-committed way about his literal parish(es) in the way that Harrison and Maclean do – may lie in his provincial petit-bourgeois origins, in which both his family and his grammar school education stressed individual effort as the means of escaping his relatively humble background in order to secure a more elevated place in an established (metropolitan) order. Family ambition for Hughes was considerable from an early age and his affair with Assia Wevill in the wake of Sylvia Plath's suicide caused his mother to become anxious that scandal would ruin his reputation

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Bentley, *Ted Hughes, Class and Violence*. (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 2016.

<sup>15</sup> In a paper of this nature the argument is inevitably generalising, but I would argue that the oeuvres of Philip Larkin, Michael Longley and John Agard (for example) are predominantly made up of poems that fit my characterisation of the 'human interest lyric'. Of younger poets, it seems to me that Zaffar Kunial, Melissa Lee-Houghton, Fran Lock and Kim Moore are also working, in very different ways, in this mode.

<sup>16</sup> Sean O' Brien, 'Ted Hughes: Time Not History', pp. 34-40, in *The Deregulated Muse*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1998), p.40.

and prevent him from receiving a knighthood; Hughes himself wondered if the Queen will 'give me audience'.<sup>17</sup> Earlier in his career, in prose works such as 'The Rat under the Bowler', Hughes's political attitudes seemed to share something with those archetypal class-conscious literary provincials, the Angry Young Men.<sup>18</sup> However, by the seventies he was expressing monarchist sentiments that seemed to endorse the ongoing political and spiritual significance of the monarchy even in the context of his developing anti-industrial, ecological world-view.<sup>19</sup> Of course, as Laureate, Hughes went on to offer devoted personal service to the royal family, writing poems to celebrate royal births, marriages and anniversaries, and developing close relationships with the Queen Mother and Prince Charles in particular.<sup>20</sup> Hughes's singular attitude to the Crown combines a quasi-mystical faith in the institution with more traditional middle-class deference and respect. As such his monarchism is both a manifestation of his parochial courage and a residual vestige of his provincialism.

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<sup>17</sup> Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev, *A Lover of Unreason: The Life and Tragic Death of Assia Wevill*. (London: Robson Books, 2006), p.129.

<sup>18</sup> Ted Hughes 'The Rat Under the Bowler', in *Saturday Night*, 78:10 (Nov 1963), pp. 21-7.

<sup>19</sup> For example, the short poem Hughes wrote on the occasion of the Queen's Silver Jubilee in 1977 ('1952-77', CP 381) sees the Crown as unifying the 'soul' of the 'nation', ensuring it remains 'whole'.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Bate describes how Hughes was frequently invited to be a guest of both the Queen Mother and Prince Charles at Birkhall, Balmoral. Both attended his memorial service at Westminster Abbey in May, 1999. Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes, The Unauthorised Life*. (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 483, 553.