INTRODUCTION

I began reading Ted Hughes in 1957 when my attention was drawn to *The Hawk in the Rain* by a couple of enthusiastic reviews I happened to see. My admiration grew with each succeeding book. After *Lupercal* I began to teach Hughes; after *Wodwo* to write about him; and after *Crow* to think of him as a major poet of the first rank. His subsequent work, especially *Gaudete*, has confirmed him as the natural successor to the great English poets of the first half of the century, Yeats, Lawrence and Eliot. To have followed his development step by step over twenty years has been one of the richest experiences literature has yet given me. Every step seems bigger than the last, and Hughes may yet have far to go.

Ever since the appearance of *The Hawk in the Rain*, large claims have been made for Ted Hughes. Yet there is still no consensus about his importance, because there is no consensus about the nature, meaning and relative value of his poems. Since this is the first book on him, it must focus primarily on individual poems, all the important or representative ones, trying to take possession of them (or be possessed by them), asking what they are, what they mean, how they relate to each other, to the tradition, to the work of other contemporary and recent writers, to the experience of living in our time or in any time.

F. R. Leavis says of the business of the critic: ‘He endeavours to see the poetry of the present as continuation and development; that is, as the decisive, the most significant, contemporary life of tradition’ (*Revaluation*, 1–2). Hughes has a vital relationship with tradition. He draws heavily upon it; but he transforms what he draws. And he enters into a dialogue with it, both consciously and unconsciously. It is surely very significant that the set of names one finds oneself continually invoking in response to Hughes’ earlier work – Hopkins, Yeats, Lawrence, Wilfred Owen, Dylan Thomas – should be gradually replaced, in reading his later work, by a quite different set – Blake, Kafka, Eliot, Beckett and Vasko Popa. In his latest work there seems to be a further move towards much older influences – folklore, mythology and religion, the Greeks, Shakespeare, Milton – or, it may well be, towards a territory wholly his
own which happens to overlap the territory of all great writers who were preoccupied with the problem of man’s relation to the powers of the non-human universe. In his very best recent work he seems to move even further back, to the roots and sources of the myths and legends in the depths of the human psyche.

The objectives I have set myself in this book and the standards by which I should like to be judged are finely set out by Eugene Ionesco in ‘A Writer’s Problems’:

A criticism or an interpretation is good in so far as the interpreter approaches the work freshly, sincerely and objectively, in so far as he is prepared not necessarily to abandon his criteria, but to call them perpetually into question . . . The critic who describes the work, to be precise, someone who follows the work following it step by step, throws light on it; this is, in fact, the only way to do so. This is the way to tell whether it is possible to move through the universe of the work; we see where it leads, whether it leads anywhere, whether it contains culs-de-sac or blind alleys, and whether it has a coherence transcending its incoherences and contradictions. To write, also, is to think while in motion; to write is to explore. The critic must repeat the itinerary of the poet. Often the poet has moved forward in a kind of darkness or twilight. The critic covers the same ground with a lamp in his hand and illuminates the path. (Encounter, September 1964)

There will be many contradictions or inconsistencies in my interpretations. Partly this will be due to the inadequacy of my own insight, but partly it will be due to the fact that Hughes is not very interested in consistency. He is not attempting to formulate a philosophy or any fixed attitudes towards life. The poems are explorations, ‘reconnaissances’, bulletins from an internal internecine battleground.

All great writers are mapping unknown lands, that is, bringing more and more of the unknown into consciousness. These maps are then available for later writers. But the great writer will eventually reach a point where the old maps will take him no further. He is on his own. The old maps may even become an encumbrance or begin to divert him from his true path – the path which leads to the centre. They must be jettisoned, with everything else. It is, as P. Strauss has put it, ‘a technique of exhaustion’:

It’s as though man can only find back to himself after hurling himself up against all the closed doors of the universe, and finally, exhausted, of force having to give up. Hughes shows Crow exhausting all avenues – testing all
INTRODUCTION

the possibilities of illumination, transcendence, freedom, escape, and being rejected by them all – and this has the effect on the reader of a different kind of exhaustion: an exhaustion physical, mental, nervous and emotional. The experience is like having gone through some terrible destructive fight.

His most difficult task is to remove the obstacles, the clichés of thought, feeling and expression to bring himself into a state of full awareness, openness, excitement, concentration. The rest is a gift, but a gift not so uncommon as the emphasis of our education and culture on language as rational discourse has led us to believe.

The gift is partly metaphor:

Metaphor, for the authentic poet, is not a figure of rhetoric but a representative image standing concretely before him in lieu of a concept . . . All one needs in order to be a poet is the ability to have a lively action going on before one continually, to live surrounded by a host of spirits (Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy).

I believe Hughes to be a great poet because he possesses the kind of imagination which issues in the purest poetry, charged poetry, visionary, revelatory poetry that sees into the life of things, that takes over where all other modes of apprehending reality falter. Words, though controlled up to a point, are allowed to retain a life of their own and express more than the poet consciously knows. His imagination, which draws on his unconscious, on the racial unconscious, on his sixth sense and perhaps innumerable further senses, speaks through him. He is, in a word, ‘inspired’, though the word is not now fashionable. He performs a function essential to the race, a function analogous to that performed in more ‘primitive’ cultures by the shaman, whose function is to make the dangerous journey, on behalf of his society, into the spirit world, which is to say, into his own unconscious:

In preparing his trance, the shaman drums, summons his spirit helpers, speaks a ‘secret language’ or the ‘animal language’, imitating the cries of beasts and especially the songs of birds. He ends by obtaining a ‘second state’ that provides the impetus for linguistic creation and the rhythms of lyric poetry. Poetic creation still remains an act of perfect spiritual freedom. Poetry remakes and prolongs language; every poetic language begins by being a secret language, that is, the creation of a personal universe, of a completely closed world. The purest poetic act seems to re-create language from an inner experience that, like the ecstasy or the religious inspiration of ‘primitives’, reveals the essence of things. It is from such linguistic creations, made possible by pre-ecstatic ‘inspiration’, that the ‘secret languages’ of the mystics and the traditional allegorical languages crystallize. (M. Eliade, Shamanism, 510-11)
THE ART OF TED HUGHES

The ‘secret language’ is partly metaphor; it is also ‘the animal language’ in the sense that words can communicate as sheer sound beneath their meanings. They can, as Lawrence put it, ‘sound upon the plasm direct’. It is the language of another being within us buried much deeper than the repressed self psycho-analysis seeks to let speak; the being Lorca called the duende and Castaneda the nagual.

And in fact this other rarely speaks or stirs at all, in the sort of lives we now lead. We have so totally lost touch, that we hardly realise he is absent. All we know is that somehow or other the great, precious thing is missing. And the real distress of our world begins there. The luminous spirit (maybe he is a crowd of spirits), that takes account of everything and gives everything its meaning, is missing. Not missing, just incommunicado. But here and there, it may be, we hear it.

It is human, of course, but it is also everything else that lives. When we hear it, we understand what a strange thing is living in this Universe, and somewhere at the core of us – strange, beautiful, pathetic, terrible. Some animals and birds express this being pure and without effort, and then you hear the whole desolate, final actuality of existence in a voice, a tone. There we really do recognise a spirit, a truth under all the truths. Far beyond human words. And the startling quality of this ‘truth’ is that it is terrible. It is for some reason harrowing, as well as being this utterly beautiful thing. Once when his spirits were dictating poetic material to Yeats, an owl cried outside the house, and the spirits paused. After a while one said: ‘We like that sort of sound.’ And that is it: ‘that sort of sound’ makes the spirits listen. It opens our deepest and innermost ghost to sudden attention. It is a spirit, and it speaks to spirit. (Orphast: Talking Without Words’, Vogue, December 1971)

From the beginning Hughes is searching for a way of reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences, of the non-human cosmos. At first his main concern is to identify these energies and describe them, not only in human terms but in their own, that is in Nature’s terms. And the discrepancy between these two descriptions gives the most powerful of his early poems, for example the hawk and jaguar poems, their characteristic tension. Hughes is also concerned to discover whether negotiations are possible between man and Nature, that is between man and his Creator, and, if so, why they have so completely collapsed in our time and what the consequences of this collapse have been and may yet be. The destructiveness of Nature is so clearly seen and deeply felt that it seems in many of the poems in Wodwo and Crow that negotiation is impossible, but in some there are hopes and intimations and in most a determination to go on trying. After
INTRODUCTION

the descent into destruction he goes forward a step, and a step, and a step. And, slowly, something begins to come clear. The faces of things are transformed and inner meanings revealed. The imagination begins to yield its secrets, and with this renewed vision, neither negotiation nor, indeed, reconciliation seems quite beyond the scope of man.

I am advancing no dogmas about what poetry should be. But it is surely necessary to have in every generation at least one poet who is at the limit, concentrating extraordinary intellectual psychic and linguistic resources on the effort to get clear of all contingencies and explore that territory which only the poetic imagination, in one form or another, can reach. And those who are exclusively concerned with the contingencies and with the civilized human world, and who deny the need for the larger awareness won by the visionaries, have no foundation more substantial than a heap of begged questions.

If we never step back from our ‘civilized’ life to ask who we are, what life is, what nature, what our necessary connections with the whole non-human world, what ground have we for answering questions about human relationships and practical activities? It is because all the decisions are made without this grounding that we are making the world uninhabitable. Man has long worshipped false gods, and desecrated himself, his fellow men and nature; but it is only now that he has reached the point where his survival is in question.

It is to the great poet, more than anyone else, that we should look for diagnosis and healing, since science, philosophy and religion are all themselves symptoms of the chronic, perhaps terminal condition. And a great poet’s work has its greatest value for us the moment it is written, which is, of course, the moment it is least likely to be recognized as such, according to the rule that all great poets are dead poets, or at least senile. It is a critic’s greatest responsibility and challenge to evaluate the work of his contemporaries, and reviewers have much to answer for. It would be an unlucky generation which had no great poet ahead of it. What more often happens is that the great gift is delivered, and we are too lazy or afraid to open it.
BEGINNINGS

Edward James Hughes was born on 17 August 1930, in Mytholmroyd, deep in a sodden valley of the Yorkshire Pennines, near the Brontë country.

From the beginning, as he recalls in ‘Poetry in the Making’, he was fascinated by animals, first collecting toy lead animals until they went right round the fender, then drawing them and modelling them in plasticine, then acting as retriever when his older brother (who was later for a short time a gamekeeper) went shooting magpies, owls, rabbits, weasels, rats and curlews; and finally, and best, capturing them by writing poems about them.

Ted was the youngest of three children. His father, William Hughes, a carpenter, was one of the seventeen men from his entire regiment who returned from the Dardanelles. The boy’s imagination was filled with images of Flanders in the First World War (vividly recalled in ‘Out’) which closely matched those implanted there by his own experience of the bone-strewn moors and the farms which fringed them.

The valley seemed always dark, under the shadow of a huge, almost vertical, looming cliff to the north, a mere corridor between the cotton towns of south Lancashire and the woollen towns of the West Riding, a shadow trap imposing on the growing boy the need to escape, upwards, onto the high moors, exposed and bleak. Hughes’ spirit responded to that 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’.

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 moors don’t escape this, but they give the sensation purely. And finally, in spite of it, the mood of moorland is exultant, and this is what I remember of it.

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. (‘The Rock’)
BEGINNINGS

This shut-in, in-bred, industrial community of the Calder Valley has bred strong values – dignity and decency, cleanliness and honesty, hard work and thrift, good neighbourliness, solidarity. This shaped Hughes, and he has much to be grateful for. But the opposite side of the coin is stifling respectability, a self-righteous and self-denying puritanism, and an aggressive self-congratulatory materialism and philistinism. Against the realities of work and muck and brass, all intellectual or artistic activity is traditionally scorned as effeminate and wasteful. For a child to use an unfamiliar word in the playground is to risk being mocked for having ‘swallowed a dictionary’.

Yet the familiar words were a rich inheritance. The West Riding dialect has remained Hughes’ staple poetic speech, concrete, emphatic, terse, yet powerfully, economically, eloquent. It is a speech in which a spade is called a spade; facts are looked in the face, especially the unpleasant facts; and a saving humour is never far from reach to ward off all self-indulgence, evasion or pretentiousness. The regional anthem of the West Riding is a comic song in dialect about a man who catches his death of cold on Ilkley Moor, is buried, eaten by worms, which are eaten by ducks, which are eaten by his mates. The song ends with the grisly pun:

That’s wheer we gët us oan back.

When Hughes was seven, the family moved to Mexborough, in South Yorkshire, where his parents kept a newsagent’s and tobacconist’s shop until they returned to the Calder Valley in 1952. In Mexborough, like Lawrence before him in a similar area, Hughes was obliged to lead a double life, one with the town boys, sons of miners and railwaymen, the other in his bolt-hole – a nearby farm or a private estate with woods and a lake.

At fifteen he was writing poems, in galloping Kiplingesque rhythms, most of them about Zulus or the Wild West. One of his heroes, Carson McReared the terrible killer, the man with a hide like an armadillo, was ‘shot to hell’ in the Grand Canyon after shooting 1,200 men,

And knee deep in blood, where he had to paddle
Stood Diamond Ace, with an empty saddle.

A succession of perceptive English teachers at Mexborough Grammar School (culminating in John Fisher, who was able to
THE ART OF TED HUGHES

do a great deal for him) fostered his interest in poetry. Before he left school, he had matured to the point where he could write these lovely lines:

O lady, consider when I shall have lost you
The moon's full hands, scattering waste,
The sea's hands, dark from the world's breast,
The world's decay where the wind's hands have passed,
And my head, worn out with love, at rest
In my hands, and my hands full of dust,
O my lady.

('Song')

In 1948 Hughes won an Open Exhibition to Cambridge, but before taking it up he did two years of National Service as a ground wireless mechanic in the RAF on an isolated three-man radio station in east Yorkshire where he had 'nothing to do but read and reread Shakespeare and watch the grass grow'.

Hughes went up to Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1951. His supervisor was M. J. C. Hodgart (an expert, of course, on the ballads) whom he found very sympathetic. He rarely attended lectures, though he occasionally went to hear F. R. Leavis whom he found fascinating and highly entertaining. But the intellectual ethos of Cambridge and of the English tripos in particular he found sterilizing, and wrote no more poetry. Hughes was probably speaking for himself in 'Dully Gumption's Addendum':

The colleges stooped over him and night after night thereafter
He dreamed the morphine of his Anglicising:
Dreamed his tongue uprooted, dreamed his body drawn and quartered
High over England and saw Thames go crawling from the fragments –
And fell, and lay his own gravestone, which went on all night
Carving itself in lordly and imperturbable English.
So he woke numbed.

W. S. Merwin has recorded a remarkable story:

At Cambridge he set out to study English Literature. Hated it. Groaned having to write those essays. Felt he was dying of it in some essential place. Sweated late at night over the paper on Dr. Johnson et al. – things he didn't want to read. One night, very late, very tired, he went to sleep. Saw the door open and someone like himself come in with a fox's head. The visitor went over to his desk, where an unfinished essay was lying, and put his paw on the papers, leaving a bloody mark; then he came over to the bed, looked down at Ted and said, 'You're killing us,' and went out the door. (Carroll, The Poem in its Skin, 149–50)
BEGINNINGS

In his third year Hughes changed from English to Archaeology and Anthropology. His grounding in these disciplines has proved of immense and growing value in his creative work. His imagination is at home in the world of myth and folklore. Cambridge also gave him time to read a great deal.

Hughes graduated in June 1954, the same month in which his first poem appeared in a Cambridge periodical, ‘The Little Boys and the Seasons’ in Granta under the pseudonym Daniel Hearing. It is a pleasing poem, but too much under the influence of Dylan Thomas for the true Hughes to show through. During the next two years Hughes worked briefly as a rose-gardener, night-watchman in a steel works, zoo attendant, schoolteacher, and reader for J. Arthur Rank. Most of the time he lived in London or Cambridge, kept up his friendships there, and published a handful of poems in the Cambridge poetry magazines. In the early and middle fifties Cambridge was rich in budding poets, but the two Hughes poems published in the November 1954 number of Chequer, ‘The Jaguar’ and ‘The Casualty’, attracted an unusual amount of attention. The jaguar,

hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes...

was the first of Hughes’ beasts to be captured in all its vivid otherness in a poem. The last two stanzas were originally quite different from the version in The Hawk in the Rain. At the end it is the crowd of spectators who stare out through bars at the greater reality,

But what holds them from corner to corner swinging,
Swivelling the ball of his heel on the polished spot,
Jerking his head up in surprise at the bars
Has not hesitated in the millions of years,
And like life-prisoners they through bars stare out.

The central impulse of ‘The Casualty’ is also to lay open the reader to a wider, deeper reality than he is normally aware of. The witnesses

... stand, helpless as ghosts: in a scene
Melting in the August noon, the burned man
Bulks closer greater flesh and blood than their own ...

Early in 1956 Hughes and some of his friends decided to launch a poetry magazine of their own, the St Botolph’s Review. The
THE ART OF TED HUGHES

first and only issue contained four poems by Ted Hughes, 'Fallgrief's Girl-friends', 'Law in the Country of Cats', 'Soliloquy of a Misanthrope' and 'Secretary'. The Misanthrope looks forward to death when he will see 'every attitude showing its bone'. But he will 'thank God thrice heartily'

To be lying beside women who grimace
Under the commitments of their flesh,
And not out of spite or vanity.

Fallgrief is this same Misanthrope who, seeking to stand naked
Awake in the pitch dark where the animal runs,
determines to choose 'a muck of a woman' to match 'this muck of man in this Muck of existence', but finds, by chance, 'a woman with such wit and looks He can brag of her in every company'.

At the party held to inaugurate the St Botolph's Review, on 25 February 1956, Hughes met Sylvia Plath and within four months he had married her.

Sylvia Plath was a Bostonian, two years younger than Hughes, at Newnham on a Fulbright. She had had an illustrious academic career, both at school and college. Her first published work appeared in 1950 in Seventeen and the Christian Science Monitor. In 1953 some of her poems were accepted by Mademoiselle and by Harper's. But between acceptance and publication had come her '6 month crash' – breakdown, attempted suicide, hospitalization – the experience she later recorded in her novel The Bell Jar. By 1956, however, her recovery seemed complete. She married Hughes not only because of their mutual attraction and shared commitment to poetry, but also because 'he was very simply the only man I've ever met whom I could never boss . . .' He seemed like a faun to her, able to call owls to him, able to teach her 'the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth'; she felt like 'adam's woman'. (Letters Home, 234–8) In May Sylvia wrote to her mother:

Ted has written many virile, deep banging poems . . . We love the flesh of the earth and the spirit of that thin, exacting air which blows beyond the farthest planets. All is learning, discovering, and speaking in a strong voice out of the heart of sorrow and joy. (Letters Home, 248)

His was the stronger, surer poetic voice, and the immediate effect was of ventriloquism. Her 'Spinster', one of the first poems