

This chapter comments on the Calder environment, past and present, its people and its places, and discusses the literal and figurative landscapes that the region evokes in Hughes' poetry. Family and folk heroes, moors and Pennines, the kingdom of Elmet and the milltown ethos, the golden country of childhood and "the graveyard web"<sup>90</sup> - the Calder has become a cosmogony, and its personal notes play a fundamental role in sustaining the imaginative song of the poet. It is legitimate to treat the people and places which surrounded Hughes in his youth, because of the importance he attaches to them when commenting on his origins, and because of the consistent appearance of these details in his poetry.

Located in the industrial North of England, the Calder valley is part of West Yorkshire. The region Hughes most often addresses in his poetry is the upper Calder valley, where civilisation is halted by the rising elevation of the rugged Pennine mountain chain, the backbone of England. Place names such as Heptonstall, Crow Hill and Halifax are familiar to us through Hughes' poetry. These places are amongst the potent biographical centres that serve as familiars in Hughes' communication with his otherworld, guiding his repeated travels over a landscape littered with the anecdotal remains of a vanishing people. In this creative setting, imagination and memory form a bridge between the opposite banks of life and death. Hughes' poetry resurrects the intimate past of the Calder valley. He burrows down through the years of strong personal contact with the Calder in order to reflect upon and savour the dimensions of his personal roots within the imaginative framework of his poetry.

Hughes lived in the region until nearly eight years of age. His immediate family's move to Mexborough in South Yorkshire took him about forty miles from where he lived in Mytholmroyd, so contact was not altogether broken with the people and places left behind. His parents moved back into the area in 1952, back to their family and friends and origins. Hughes has been returning to the Calder ever since then, for the same reasons. Memories of his formative years in the wild and peculiarly beautiful reaches above the industrial scar of his home valley remain as a strong presence in his poetry. The woods, moors and waters of the tamed wilderness set aside today as national park or

as leisure and recreation reserves were the rougher childhood haunts of the Hughes brothers. A child's eye view of the life of the natural world is still part of his work, evident in those frank, avid, physical descriptions, those animated photographs in words, he gives of it.

In all other respects his writing has grown up into an accomplished music. It is complex in its nuances and responsive to that inner eye which fixes its gaze on the otherworld of a Calder cosmogony. There is a tugging awareness of death in most of the Calder settings that are featured in Hughes' poetry. His family members are buried in Heptonstall cemetery. There are many headstones and cenotaphs throughout the region, which date from its experience of the First World War, the cataclysm his elders kept alive when he was growing up. The closure of the long established factory system, the textile trade of many of the valley's small communities, is also seen as the death of a traditional way of life known by generations of his own family. For these reasons and more, Hughes is stimulated in his imaginative being by this country of the dead, this country so alive within him that he cannot let it go.

In his poetry and his prose, Hughes keeps returning to the Calder and to that "archaeology of the mouth"<sup>91</sup> gleaned from its human face. To understand the development of Hughes as a poet we must investigate this personal poetry. Poems about place and other people are also poems about oneself, for they reveal the interplay of emotions, attitudes and philosophies in a most striking manner. Such poems are a chronicling of both experience and the writing of poetry. Exploring the milieu of these poems enables us to come closer to the creative inner world of the poet.

The history of Hughes' family is a reflection of the greater community life of the Calder valley. Both sides of his family have strong ties with its workaday history. They belonged to an area centring on Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge, where most of them worked in the textile mills and some on the fringe farming land just below the moorlines. The accuracy of their history, as set down in Hughes' personal poetry, has been

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<sup>90</sup> "Climbing into Heptonstall" (*Wg*, pp.5-8).

<sup>91</sup> Untitled prefatory poem (*RE*, p.7). Titled "The Dark River" in *Elmet*.

substantiated from matters of public record, from the certificates of birth, marriage and death which are assembled in appendices A, B and C, respectively.

John and Mary Hughes were living in King Street, Hebden Bridge, when their son William Henry was born on 15 February 1894. He was the future father of Ted Hughes. John, who was thirty-eight, worked as a dyer. Mary, thirty-four, was a carder. They moved to Charlestown, Stansfield, a matter of a few miles, where John took up new work as a fustian dyer. His own father, Henry Hughes, had also worked in the mills as a carder. Mary's father, George Major, was a G & C maker, a glass and crockery maker. In a letter, Hughes ponders his great grandfather, this man from the past who was

called Major, was also a Major, and served (circa 1870) in Gibraltar. "Major Major of the Rock" was how Grandma etc. identified him - that was his tag. He married a Spanish woman. I wonder who she was. Where Olwyn's nose came in. Used to have a picture of her - small, thin, very dark. My brother's hair was blue-black.<sup>92</sup>

However, Mary Alice Major's birth certificate suggests that Hughes' musing about Spanish blood is the product of family legend, common to many families once the older generations are gone. George Major's wife was born June Ratcliffe. In 1858 George and June Major lived at 39 Canal Street, Manchester. Their daughter Mary was born there in November of that year. I have not pursued George Major's possible military service on Gibraltar.

On his mother's side, Hughes' grandparents were Mitchell and Annie Farrar. They were both twenty-six when they married. Mitchell had lived in Naylor Lane, Midgley, and worked as an overlooker - his father had been a warper in the mill - while Annie had come from her parents' farm on Upper Hathershelf, the one Hughes writes of in "The Rock":

A not too remote line of my relatives farmed the levels above Scout Rock, for generations, in a black weepy farm that seemed to be made wholly of old gravestones and

worn-out horse-troughs. Their survivors are still at it. And it was one of that family who once when he was out shooting rabbits on that difficult near-vertical terrain below his farm, not quite in living memory, took the plunge that the whole valley dreams about and fell to his death down the sheer face.<sup>93</sup>

To continue, their first child, Walter Farrar, was born 17 November 1893. He was to become very close to his nephew the poet. At the time of his birth, Mitchell and Annie lived at Bethel Terrace, Mytholmroyd, off Hurst Road and on the heights across from Stoodley View.<sup>94</sup> Mitchell was a cotton loom turner. When Miriam was born 29 July 1896, the family resided at 18 Windsor Road, Hebden Bridge. Edith, future mother of the poet, was born 18 September 1898. Her family at that time lived at 12 Illingworth Villas, Hebden Bridge, and Mitchell now worked as a power loom tackler. Lily was born 22 November 1900, followed two years later by Albert Smith Farrar. The family again moved house, this time to 52 Foster Lane, closer to town.

William and Edith Hughes moved away from mill employment where opportunities were narrowing after the First World War. They moved into the field of self-employment at the right time, but their stories belong to other chapters. Meanwhile, Edith's brothers are of particular interest, for the tragedy that befell them finds its way into some of Hughes' most memorable recent poems. "Sacrifice" (*Wg*, pp.19-21), for instance, has a direct connection with biographical fact. Its conclusion suggests that a favourite uncle took his own life by hanging himself in his attic.

It was the confessional nature of "Sacrifice" that first led me to seek a correspondence between literary details and matters of public record, particularly since elements of Hughes' poem were consistent with details set down in Plath's short story entitled "All the Dead Dears" (*JP*, p.183ff). In her story, the central character of Nellie Meehan is a fictionalised Edith Hughes. The objective facts underlying "All the Dead

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<sup>92</sup> A letter from Keith Sagar dated 6 November 1993, quoting Ted Hughes.

<sup>93</sup> T. Hughes, "The Rock", *The Listener*, op.cit., p.422.

<sup>94</sup> *Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd, Official Street Plans*, The British Publishing Co.Ltd., Gloucester, 1977.

Dears” derive from Plath’s extensive visits to Edith and William Hughes’ home, The Beacon, in the period following her honeymoon with Ted in Spain. These visits are documented in her letters from the end of 1956 and through 1957 (LH, p.266; pp.268-70; pp.315-18). The origins of “All the Dead Dears” are tied to these visits by Plath’s journals, of 1955 - 1957, in which notes for the story appear:

Mrs. Meehan-rich-flavoured dialect story set in Yorkshire (Wuthering Heights background) - of present vivid influence of ghosts of those dead on woman who almost has second sight. Begin “I saw an angel once” - “my sister Miriam” - tales of hanging, pneumonia death ... (JSP, p.149)

The notes and fiction Plath compiled are an important source for some of the personal detail about Hughes’ family that is discussed in this chapter. Both in her literature and in journals, Plath brings a trans-Atlantic eye to bear on the Calder. The fact that she sees it in very much the same way as Hughes does, and her “at-home” rendering of the family setting in “All the Dead Dears”, argue that she is a sympathetic witness.

Hughes’ parents lived at Heptonstall Slack, which Plath thinly disguises as Caxton Slack. In “All the Dead Dears”, Nellie Meehan’s younger brother, a master joiner, hangs himself soon after the Second World War, the circumstances reproduced in “Sacrifice”. Albert Smith Farrar, younger brother of Edith Hughes and a master joiner, took his own life by hanging himself in the attic of his home at 19 Aspinall Street, Mytholmroyd, at about 11 p.m. on Thursday, 3 July 1947. Nellie Meehan’s sister, Minnie, dies of pneumonia in Plath’s story. In real life, Edith Hughes’ older sister, Miriam, died of pneumonia at the age of eighteen. These facts appear in Appendix C, and in Appendix D, which has transcripts of newspaper reports of the death of Albert Farrar.

Hughes, by attributing the “vitality of her personal participation, her subjectivity” to Plath’s writing of short stories, and by deeming them to be “all autobiography” (JP, p.16), suggests that Plath’s faithfulness to the objective factors, underlying situations and settings in her fiction should not be underestimated. Hughes, as editor, specifies this when commenting on the stories that include “All the Dead Dears”:

They demonstrate, even more baldly than the stronger pieces, just how much the sheer objective presence of things and happenings immobilized her fantasy and invention. (JP, p.17)

Not that I agree with the denigration of “All the Dead Dears”, which is a fine story in its own right.

The uncle of Hughes’ “Sacrifice” is written about by Hughes in his “Meet My Folks!” chapter of Poetry in the Making:

An uncle of mine was a carpenter, and always making curious little toys and ornaments out of wood ... This same uncle of mine was a strong man. He used to fold six-inch nails over the back of his middle finger. Also, when I was very young, he made me a Noah’s Ark. Also, he used to have a number of conjuring tricks. (PM, pp.104-5)

This description antedates “Sacrifice” by some twenty years, but in the poem the uncle makes toys of wood and he is very strong, for his “dreams bulged into forearms”. Perhaps translating experience into art sometimes involves burying it psychologically. Hughes’ receptivity to the raw materials of his own life seems to have increased with the years. In “Sacrifice” he reshapes boyhood memories, such as flying wooden model planes with his uncle in the Banksfields area behind his uncle’s Mytholmroyd residence, which was only eight doors down from Hughes’ Aspinall Street address. Hughes’ poem represents the overt emotions and personal correlatives of the confessional poet. This intimacy with his subject, which is represented as both joyous and painful in “Sacrifice”, allows Hughes to imaginatively mythologise his uncle, to rework the ordinary nature of his days and to transform them into preludes to tragedy.

When we read that the uncle’s “fateful forehead sank/ Away among Westerns, the ruts of the Oregon Trail”, it is more than a metaphorical echoing of earlier description of how the “welts of his brow deepened, fold upon fold”. These cited lines might deplore how quickly the Western-obsessed child, which Hughes had been, forgot his uncle’s pioneering of the suicide’s trail. Rivalry amongst family members, talent without an outlet, missed opportunity, and a domesticity-hobbled zest for life feed into the title of

“Sacrifice”. The power of the tragic portraiture in this poem derives from Hughes’ sense of the poignancy of ordinary life. The uncle is remembered as an “armchair Samson”, whose “puppet-play of muscles” made “a nephew stare”. He possessed a laugh that was “an elastic vault into freedom”. However, like Samson, his experience of life sees him “baffled and shorn”:

Screwdriver, drill, chisel, saw, hammer  
Were less than no use.  
A glass-fronted cabinet was his showpiece.  
His wife had locked him in there with the china.

The uncle’s zest for life forms a contrast with the earlier imagery foreshadowing his fateful, tragic death:

On the canal bridge bend, at Hawkscluffe,  
A barrel bounced off a lorry.  
His motorbike hit the wall.  
“I just flew straight up - and when I dropped

I missed the canal! I actually missed the canal!  
I nearly broke the bank! For once  
I landed smack on my feet!  
My shoelaces burst from top to bottom!”

His laugh thumped my body.

The poem has much in common with “Dick Straightup” (L, pp.17-9), in its celebration of the force of being of an ordinary person. However, it is more personally rendered, in the dialogue awarded the uncle and the dictional emphasis (“uncle”, “nephew”, “my”, “I”) on family relationship. The universality of “Sacrifice” comes about through the mythologising of its personal subject into an archetypal context. Bruner has commented that myth “serves in place of or as a filter for experience”.<sup>95</sup> Rendering of the personal into the archetypal figure of the scapegoat, as suggested by the title “Sacrifice” and by the

text of the poem, counterbalances the confessional truths contained in the poem with the greater truth contained in the archetype. Bruner has also proposed the notion of tripartism, the working together of perception, feeling and thinking to give individual experience the coherence of cultural relevance.<sup>96</sup> It is this formula that Hughes brings to his most personal, his confessional, poems, for in this way there is a redeeming of personal experience through the universalising of it.

Walter Farrar, the older brother of Edith Hughes, is the subject of another recent confessional poem. "Walt" (*Wg*, pp.37-41) emphasises a tragic twist to Walter Farrar's life. Its title is indicative of its personal voice. Again, Hughes mythologises his uncle in "Walt", and, through doing so, his subject becomes the archetypal figure of the sufferer, an Oedipus, yet another scapegoat. Once more, it was the confessional form of "Walt" that led me to research the public records and to realise that Plath's literary work also represented Hughes' Uncle Walt. In "All the Dead Dears"<sup>97</sup> the character of Jake is a fictionalised Walter Farrar:

"I wonder your brother Jake's kept on so chipper, like he has these thirty years, Nellie," Clifford Meehan mused, taking up that fugue of family phantoms ... "With that witch of a wife Esther and his one surviving daughter Cora twenty-eight and numb as a tree. I remember Jake coming to our place, before he married Esther ... "

"Those days absolutely shone with bright and funny conversation," Nellie Meehan interrupted, her own smile pale and wistful, as if already frozen in some dated family photograph.

"... coming to our place and throwing himself down on the sofa and saying: 'Don't know as I ought to marry Esther; she's in weak health, always talking about ailments and

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<sup>95</sup> J. Bruner, *On Knowing, essays for the left hand*, Belknap Press, Cambridge (Mass.), 1966, p.33.

<sup>96</sup> J. Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge (Mass.), 1986, p.69.

<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, Plath's poem of the same title deals with memories of her own family, of her mother and grandmother; v. "All the Dead Dears" (*CP*, pp.70-71), written in 1957.



hospital.’ Sure enough, one week after they were married, Esther’s in hospital having an operation that cost Jake a hundred pound; she’d been saving it up till he’d married her and would have to pay for the whole do.”

“Slaved all his life for his woollen mill, my brother Jake did,” Nellie Meehan stirred the cold dregs of her tea. “And now he’s a fortune and ready to see the world, and Esther won’t stir a step out of the house; just sits and nags at that poor silly Cora; wouldn’t even let her be put in a home where she’d be among her own kind. Always taking herbs and potions, Esther is. When Gabriel was on the way, the only good one of the lot ... after that queer Albert was born with his tongue in wrong, Jake came right out and told Esther: ‘If you ruin this one, I’ll kill you.’ And then pneumonia took the two boys, good and bad ... ”

(JP, pp.188-9)

On the headstone of the Farrar family plot, alongside the graves of the Hugheses in Heptonstall cemetery, are inscribed facts that agree with the fictive details appearing in the above excerpt from Plath’s story.<sup>98</sup> Alice Farrar, Walter’s wife, died 19 September 1968 at the age of seventy-two. Walter died 4 March 1976 aged eighty-two. His will stipulated that his executors and trustees, his sister Hilda Annie Farrar and nephews David Duncan Farrar and Edward James Hughes, should use the moneys arising from his estate “to pay the income to arise therefrom to my daughter Barbara Mary Farrar during her life”.<sup>99</sup> This corroborates the disability that Plath’s story mentioned as afflicting the couple’s first child. Barbara Farrar, upon whom Plath’s Cora is based, died 30 January 1981 aged fifty-two.

Her two brothers, also mentioned in Plath’s story, died young. James Farrar died 12 June 1943 aged eleven and his brother Edwin died 28 March 1952 aged twenty-one.

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<sup>98</sup> A letter to me from Ann Skea dated 24 January 1992.

<sup>99</sup> See [Appendix D](#).

The brothers both died of pneumonia, as related in Plath's "All the Dead Dears". Walter was present at the death of young James, but it was his nephew, David Duncan Farrar, who was present at the death of Walter's elder son Edwin. He had been a wholesale clothier's apprentice, bound to his father and working by his side in the mill Walter had worked so hard to acquire.

The character of Jake in Plath's story is, appropriately to the confessional mode, named Walt in Hughes' poem of the same title. In "All the Dead Dears" Jake "slaved all his life for his woollen mill". In "Walt", Hughes supplies this same detail, but it is far more personally rendered and apprehended than it is in Plath's story:

The Millmaster, the Caesar whose frown  
Tossed my boyhood the baffling coin "guilty".  
His fingers are my mother's. They seem astray  
In quaverings and loss ...

"Farrar's [sic.] owned Mt. Pleasant Mill in Mytholmroyd", as the locals of Heptonstall recollect.<sup>100</sup> In Plath's "Stopped Dead", Walter is caricatured as "Uncle, pants factory Fatso, millionaire", and his tragic life is glimpsed:

You are sunk in your seven chins, still as a ham.  
Who do you think I am,  
Uncle, uncle?  
Sad Hamlet, with a knife?  
Where do you stash your life? (CP, p.230)

Plath's exaggeration, of Hughes' uncle being a "millionaire", is a relative statement. In their early marriage Plath and Hughes, like many newlyweds, struggled to make ends meet. In a letter to her mother Plath makes the same exuberant exaggeration:

Ted's marvellous millionaire Uncle Walt ... took us over to  
Wuthering Heights Friday in his car. He is a powerful,  
heavy man with a terrific, dramatic sense of humour.  
(LH, p.269)

Plath's original, unedited letter is less tactful in her description of Walter's family:

Ted's marvelous [sic.] millionaire Uncle Walt (married to a hypochondriac hag, with two sons dead, one an idiot, and only an idiot daughter, left) took us over to Wuthering Heights Friday in his car.<sup>101</sup>

Plath's letter dates from her first visit to Hughes' parents and family, in early September 1956. Her "All the Dead Dears" story is also derived from this period. It takes up the not so cheery and humorous aspects of Walter Farrar's life and describes him as part of "that fugue of family phantoms". Her later poem, "Stopped Dead", written in October 1962 after she and Hughes had separated, is consistent with the attitude towards the uncle that is displayed in "All the Dead Dears". The poem is not without elements of spitefulness, but it captures the morose confusion that afflicts the Claudius-like uncle, who can also be an "amazing Dickensian-Falstaffian uncle (my favourite relative)" (LH, p.318). Plath's admiration of Walt stopped short of his "devil wife and mad daughter".<sup>102</sup>

In passing, it is curious how the inclusion of autobiographical references in their writing is a trait Hughes and Plath have passed on to the next generation. In Frieda Hughes' first children's book, *Getting Rid of Edna*, which is dedicated to Olwyn Hughes, a magical sack contains, among other things, "a stuffed pike from an admirer in Devon".<sup>103</sup> Witchy Aunt Edna, who spends most of her life in bed, bears an uncanny resemblance to Sylvia Plath's caricaturing of Alice Farrar:

And so tonight I will long to get in bed and to sleep. Ted's witchy Aunt Alice illustrates this admirably when she stays in bed for no reason except there's no reason to get up if one only has to go back to bed again. (JSP, p.225)

In the second section of "Walt" (Wg, pp.37-41), "The Atlantic", Walt is close to death. His nephew's concern for him is part of an emotional sea, like the physical setting of the pounding Atlantic viewed from a cliff edge. As in "The Dark River" and "Familiar", recognition of genetic affinity ("His fingers are my mother's") affirms a

<sup>100</sup> A letter to me from Trevor Smith dated 9 September 1993.

<sup>101</sup> See [Appendix E](#), p.213.

<sup>102</sup> *ibid*, p.214.

<sup>103</sup> F.Hughes, *Getting Rid of Edna*, Heinemann, London, 1986, p.57.

significant personal connection, but Walter is lost to himself and the world, for “nothing will connect”. Walt seems characterised by the allusion to Eliot’s Waste Land, iii (“I can connect/ Nothing with nothing”).<sup>104</sup> Eliot’s allegorical work, paralleled by Hughes’ “Walt”, operates on the personal, historical and racial levels. In the first section of “Walt”, the First World War is predominant, whereas the second section is intensely personal. Both sections of “Walt” operate together to pose the question that Eliot seems to ask in his Waste Land: How can one fix this great mistake, this curse that befalls all of us? Walt’s nephew, knowing this question, readies to take him back to the nursing home:

We turn away. Then as he steadies himself,  
Still gripping the rail, his reaching stare  
Meets mine watching him. I can’t escape it  
Or hold it. Walt! Walt!

I bury it

Hugger mugger anyhow  
Inside my shirt.

Old memories, shared lives, are awash in “Mountains of dissolution”. The pain of this eventuality is keenly rendered.

In a letter home, from late August 1960, Plath illustrates the bond that existed between her husband and his uncle:

... Ted’s Uncle Walter, with his curious habits, had for some reason - probably secretly admiring Ted’s sticking to his chosen way of life - stuffed about \$150 into his pocket one night we were out at the local pub, playing darts with him and Ted’s dad, so we did not feel the strain of a holiday eating into our strict monthly budget. (LH, pp.391-2)

This bond is confessionally elaborated on and appraised by Hughes in “Walt”, in which he makes free use of classical myth and analogy. “He crawled in his ruins, like Timon”, writes Hughes, his body “crusted like Job’s”.

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<sup>104</sup> T.S.Eliot, Selected Poems, Faber & Faber, 1961, p.62.

Another letter written by Plath to her mother 2 August 1956 helps to explain why Hughes came to write strong confessional poems such as “Sacrifice” and “Walt” fairly late in his career:

He is educating me daily, setting me exercises of concentration and observation. This bullfight story is the most difficult thing I’ve ever written with the action descriptions. It made me realise that his vision is really photographic, while mine is inclined to be an impressionistic blur, which I am gradually clarifying by exercise and practice. (LH, p.267)

At the time this comment was made, Hughes’ poetic vision was primarily photographic. He has not dropped this feature of his poetry, but in The Hawk in the Rain, and in Lupercal, too, Hughes is predominantly recreating the realness of the world of nature, so his photographic vision is to the fore. Unlike Plath, for whom, in a relatively short time, photographic objectivity and impressionistic subjectivity developed as a strong partnership and as a confessional voice in her poetry, Hughes took much longer to do the same thing. It does seem to be a case of burying personal experience psychologically, accepting it as an important inheritance, and then coming to terms with its appearance in one’s poetry. This process has taken a long time for Hughes.

Early signs of its latter-day significance are evident in poems that Hughes has written about his brother Gerald, who is a connecting subject for several personal motifs present in Hughes’ poetry. Gerald is linked with the paradisaical time of youth in the golden country of the Calder, and with separation and war. Gerald, born 7 September 1920, was ten years older than his brother.<sup>105</sup> Ted was born 17 August 1930.<sup>106</sup> It was Gerald who led his younger brother into the wonders that bloomed and pulsed in the world of the countryside just outside their dour and soot-blackened milltown. Hughes recollects these times spent with his brother:

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<sup>105</sup> See Appendix A.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

At that time we lived in a valley in the Pennines in West Yorkshire. My brother ... was a good bit older than I was, and 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 places collecting magpies and owls and rabbits and weasels and rats and curlews ... He could not shoot enough for me. (PM, p.16)

Further recollections of their shared youth appear in the same book. Hughes details in prose the circumstances under which a paradisaical time ended:

When I was about eight, we moved to an industrial town in south Yorkshire. Our cat went upstairs and moped in my bedroom for a week, it hated the place so much, and my brother for the same reason left home and became a gamekeeper. (PM, p.16)

Of Gerald, Hughes writes that he “always got on very well with him” and that, in consequence, his “feelings about brothers ... are very plentiful and strong and easy to use” (PM, p.102). This is true of “My Brother Bert”, the humorous poem from Hughes’ Meet My Folks!, but other poems that are based on Gerald are a different matter altogether.

Poems about Gerald Hughes do not begin to surface in Hughes’ personal poetry until after a decade of writing. The first one, “A Colonial” (Re, p.25), is an enigmatic sketching of an Australian in London. The subject is bedaubed with animal imagery, specifically that suggestive of a kangaroo:

Waist ducking into the pelvis  
As under skylines  
Occupied with the animal routine  
Of getting over the ground at all costs.

However, the colonial’s question - “Where is the British Museum?” - argues his human status. An identification of the colonial with Gerald occurs in the references to Australia and the subject of war:

As in failing light  
he faded

Shoulders of parade-ground in the bomb-light ...

“A Motorbike” (M, p,104) comes from the same time as “A Colonial” , which evokes the otherworldly separateness of strangers. In “A Motorbike” the Second World War home front is depicted as life that is stalled and stagnant, for which the motorbike owned by Gerald is an emblem:

We had a motorbike all through the war  
In an outhouse - thunder, flight, disruption  
Cramped in rust ...

... it erupted

Out of the six year sleep ...

Postwar England “dwindled to the size of a dog-track” and a “terrible privation began”. The motorbike, bought by a stranger, a “quiet young man” who buys it and “kicks it into life”, becomes the vehicle for an escape “into a telegraph pole”. This young man, who gives life to the motorbike, escapes the post-war austerity in death.

These remote associations touching on Gerald, through the imaging of Australia, the emblematic use of his old motorbike and the references to the Second World War, are deepened in other poems. This personal dimension is strongly apprehended in the tone of “Two” (RE, p.80). While the young are companions in “Two”, the world is their cornucopia:

Then the stream spoke oracles of abundance  
And the sun poured out at their feet.

“Two” (RE, p.80) is a poem about the strong bonding of the brothers in their youth. Hughes has acknowledged the difficulty, which, until recent times, beset him when he attempted to represent his closest relatives:

Our feelings about some of our relatives ... are so  
complicated and so deeply rooted that they may be just too  
much for a writer to manage. (PM, p.102)

It is a more complex issue than his 1967 statement allows, as Hughes’ use of what Yeats termed *phantasmagoria* indicates. As discussed in Chapter 1, “Two” metamorphoses the brothers into Castor and Pollux. The poet’s subject, separation from his brother, demands the poetic artifice that characterises this poem. Feelings that are too “deeply rooted” and

“too much for a writer to manage” are overcome by the technique used by Hughes to realise the emotional timbre of his poem and its success as a literary work. The Second World War is “a sudden yelling”. It disrupts the golden peace of the golden world, and its impact is irreversible. The two become separated, and for the one left behind “The song died in his mouth”. The brother who is called “The guide” is metamorphosed into a bird. The other, despite his ritual “feather”, evidently his potential for flight, is left behind as his “guide” takes wing. “The Weasels We Smoked Out Of The Bank” (RE, p.63) is set amidst “time-long Creation”. Its attendant deity is “the wild gentle god of everywhere”, which, along with the “We” from the title, is suggestive of the spirit and setting of “Two”. Sanctity of place and an exuberant sharing in the miraculous world of nature are common to both poems.

The poet has created another poem about Gerald in a similar manner. “Waterlicked”, an uncollected poem first published in 1984,<sup>107</sup> is strongly related to the earlier “Two” by its bird imagery and its flight motif, which conclude the poem and cross-reference with the metamorphosis of the brothers into birds in “Two”. “Waterlicked” features, rather than separation, the pair at home in their paradisaical valley, the two brothers once more roaming and “hunting” together. From their failed fishing trip to “Bridgewater Canal”, towards Manchester, “Eastward an hour” from their Mytholmroyd home, the two return “To the blue twilit lintel” where they belong.

“A Solstice”, first published in July 1978, is also personally centred on Gerald.<sup>108</sup> It is, unlike “Two”, which was published about the same time, a candid poem; that is, there are people in its setting, not birds, and it records, in a confessional mode, the occasion of Gerald’s revisiting of his place of origin after an eighteen year “estrangement” in Australia. The motif of separation and estrangement is consistently featured in poems based on Gerald, especially because he is linked to the paradisaical valley of youth and a golden time. “A Solstice” features the reunion of two brothers after “eighteen years” of separation.<sup>109</sup> This original version of “A Solstice” is more powerful

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<sup>107</sup> T.Hughes, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 April 1984.

<sup>108</sup> T.Hughes, “A Solstice”, Sceptre Press, Bedfordshire, 1978, No. 310 of 350 copies.

<sup>109</sup> T.Hughes, “A Solstice”, *All Around The Year*, M.Morpurgo (ed.), John Murray, London, 1979.



than its adaptation in What Is The Truth?, Hughes' 1984 children's book, in which the poem's personal basis is masked. The second-person address to Gerald is misleadingly revised as a reference to "my friend". It is narrated by the character of the Schoolteacher, again breaking with its personal identity in a displaced version of the original poem. Its original title, "A Solstice", is dropped.

Its title and the "Four days to Christmas" of its text identifies the winter solstice, at which time the sun is furthest from the equator, seeming to pause before its return. This phenomenon is carried over into the imaginative world of the poem and into its representation of the Calder landscape. Time seems suspended and elongated in a setting of "Drip-tree stillness". The tailoring of the solstice by the poet even extends to tales of "Spring-feeling elation" and "a yeasty simmering/ Over the land".

In the memory reshaped within the poem, the riveting Pennine cold is offset by the presence of the poet's companion. It is his brother, and the setting reflects the emotions heightened by his presence. In the opening setting of "Mist-rawness" and "goblin hedge-oaks, sizzling/ Like power-pylons in mist", portents of the magical world and of powerful forces abound. Gerald's presence is treated in this vein:

And you have  
come  
From eighteen years Australian estrangement  
And twelve thousand miles in thin air  
To walk again on the small hills of the West,  
In the ruby and emerald lights, the leaf-wet oils  
Of your memory's masterpiece.

The closeness of the two brothers is further emphasised through the situation of the hunt. The two become one, as in "Our eyes feather over it [the land]/ As over a touchy detonator". This continues throughout, though the killing of a fox becomes a terminus, an image of separation and loss that is akin to that found in "Two":

And it is a dead fox in the dark woodland.  
And you stand over him  
Meeting your first real Ancient Briton  
In eighteen years.

And I stand awake - as one wakes  
From what feels like a cracking blow on the head.  
There the memory ends.

We must have walked away.

However, the poet has arrived at a realisation that is like waking from “a cracking blow on the head”. During the hunt, he was again his brother’s boyhood retriever. The death of the fox, a “magician”, fills him with the direst remorse. The fox has become totemic to the poet, not the object of a childhood hunt. Eighteen years of estrangement still lie between the brothers, for it is the poet’s realisation that their perceptions are entirely different.

“Anthem for Doomed Youth” (Wg, pp.24-5) deliberately wears the mantle of Wilfred Owen’s poem. Ostensibly, Hughes’ subject is a poaching trip undertaken in “the utility makeshift early fifties” involving himself, an unnamed female companion, perhaps the Shirley scorned in Plath’s journals (JSP, p199), Gerald and his wife. It is “the war’s drizzling afterdawn”, but “all adolescence” has other things on its mind. “Heads cocked for the Law”, “the rifle elated” in “a bumper year for the portly birds”, the two young men “owned the moors”. The dead grouse and the repeated crack of the “Winchester 69’s/ Dialogue with history” parallel Owen’s poem about the First World War. Suddenly, the brothers are “exorcists of (their) own Annunciation”. They are “conscripts of a dream!” The breaking of the dream is, simultaneously, the end of a cherished personal memory and an acknowledgement of the constant menace of war. The final image of the birds breaking open, “suddenly big, dark-hearted poppies”, explodes the myth that the cockiness of adolescence holds to be true throughout most of the poem. Sophocles’ cautionary words come to mind:

And none may be called happy until that day when he  
carries  
His happiness down to the grave in peace.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Sophocles, *The Theban Plays*, trans. by E.F.Wattling, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965, “King Oedipus”, p.68.

Life went on for Hughes after Gerald left home and served in the Second World War, but it was not the same:

My friends were town boys, sons of colliers and railwaymen, and with them I led one life, but all the time I was leading this other life on my own in the country. I never mixed the two lives up, except once or twice disastrously. (PM, p.16)

“Anthem For Doomed Youth” (Wg, pp.24-5) is steeped in metaphors of separation and division, despite its exuberant surface setting. The poem depicts the Hughes brothers on a poaching expedition to the moors near Oxenhope and Burnley, north of their parents’ house at Heptonstall Slack. Gerald is “manly from Africa”, where he served in the war. He is married, his “soul, a warm egg, / In her berringed fist”, and he is on a visit from “Australia and the sheep farms”, as Plath puts it in “All the Dead Dears” (JP, p.188). In the unedited letter home dated 2 September 1956, Plath compares herself, flatteringly, with Gerald’s wife and her alleged reception by William and Edith Hughes:

I think they both like me, and seem to find me more congenial than Gerald’s wife who visited them once, a blonde flighty glamor girl from Australia, evidently very giddy and always wanting to go to parties and dances.<sup>111</sup>

In “Anthem For Doomed Youth”, Gerald and Ted are poaching grouse before The Glorious Twelfth, the August opening of the shooting-party season. A parting of the ways and an end of youth are linked to war and expulsion from a sort of paradise that Hughes reflects upon in .

Archetypes are more than simply therapeutic constructs. Submerging one’s individual experience in the river of human experience is a baptism, as Jung comments:

But in loving this inheritance they love that which is common to all; they turn back to the mother of humanity, to the psyche, which was before consciousness existed, and in this way they make contact with the source and regain

something of that mysterious and irresistible power which comes from the feeling of being part of the whole.<sup>112</sup>

This is the spirit and purpose of Hughes' archetypal rendering of Elmet.<sup>113</sup> In the untitled prefatory poem ("The Dark River") of Remains of Elmet, it is obvious that the personal is a powerful presence in the archetypal (collective) contact with the Calder's human history. Walter Farrar, the poet's uncle, is the person addressed:

He has brought me my last inheritance,  
Archaeology of the mouth,  
Treasures that crumble at the touch of day -

The huge fish, the prize of a lifetime,  
Exhausted at the surface, the eye staring up at me,  
But on such a frayed, fraying hair-fineness -

Any moment now, a last kick  
And the dark river will fold it away.

He is a vital, yet precarious, link with Hughes' genetic past: "Six years into her posthumous life/ My uncle raises my Mother's face". Hughes consistently uses the fishing motif as an image of concentrated fluid thinking which tends to reconcile the unconscious and the conscious mind. His "Learning to Think" chapter in Poetry in the Making and his River collection illustrate this feature of his writing. Translation of angler's strategies into poetics helps Hughes in his search for the archetypal Elmet, which is a journey given purpose by his personal attachment to the subject.

"Familiar"<sup>114</sup>, published a month after "Waterlicked", is a poem about Hughes' paternal grandfather. It also includes Hughes' father and himself in its tracking of history of the blood. "Familiar" is a type of Thought-Fox poem in its hunting and capturing

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<sup>111</sup> See Appendix E, p.213.

<sup>112</sup> C.Jung, The Collected Works of C.S.Jung, Vol.5, Symbols of Transformation, trans. by R.F.C.Hull; H.Read, M.Fordham, G.Adler (eds), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1956, p.415.

<sup>113</sup> See C.Robinson, Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being, Macmillan, London, 1989, p.60: Robinson relates Hughes' emphasis on "the inner world of the imagination" to Jungian models.

format, in its sense of pleasure taken and achievement felt. “Eighty-four years dead, younger than I am” begins the poem. Later, “My father is hardly four. You are forty”. “Nearly eighty your daughter stirs my tea”, the poem continues, hunting the grandfather Hughes never knew. Out of his Aunt’s meanderings through old stories, his grandfather comes closer to the light of day. “Your burial left not a trace./ Even the grave’s lost”. Yet the stalking imagination makes good this loss and holds up the rescued image of the grandfather in the genetic inheritance that has passed from father to father to son:

Yet I’m proof  
 You’ve come through alive.  
You move a hand  
 And now, as I touch at your elegy, sweep  
 The phrases aside.  
Peer deeper  
 Into my misty mirror of paper.

In *Remains of Elmet*, “Heptonstall” (RE, p.92) rewrites its *Wodwo* antecedent poem of the same name. The poem brings together the poet’s father and the Calder centre. The “old man/ Of the hills” is both the hilltop knowle across from other places named in the poem - Stoodley, Blackstone Edge, Peckett, Hathershelf and Midgley - and “the face/ Blue with arthritic stasis/ And heart good for nothing now”. This “Heptonstall” is fully conscious of imminent personal loss, which will end forever the closest connection with the valley:

As the fragments  
 Of the broken circle of the hills  
 Drift apart.

“The mantel clock ticks in the lonely parlour/ On the heights road” focuses on time as an enemy in this personal setting.

Apart from the significance of family members, Hughes includes in his poetry the people of the Calder. He dwells, in particular, on people of the same generation as his parents. The industrial history that also runs throughout his poems based on the Calder

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<sup>114</sup> T.Hughes, “Familiar”, *Times Literary Supplement*, 18 May, 1984.

has indelible links with his grandparents and with their parents. When Hughes writes of the mills and chapels ethos, he draws on the extensive personal experience of his own family, including his own as a boy in the nineteen-thirties. “Dick Straightup” (L, pp.17-9) is a poem which celebrates a very well known character from the village of Heptonstall. The concluding section, the Obit, that appears in Lupercal, was added to the poem following the death of “the original of Dick Straightup”.<sup>115</sup> Richard Utley died around 1960, according to local memory, after living in Silver Street, Heptonstall, all his life. There is a photograph of him on the wall of the bar of the Cross Inn, Heptonstall.<sup>116</sup> This inn is the setting of “Dick Straightup”, which celebrates a vital local character, “who banged the big bass drum for Heptonstall”, along with “a hundred other great works, still talked of”. Hughes makes it clear that he celebrates the living stuff of legend, not the “dust of Achilles and Cuchulain” that “Itches in the palms of scholars”. The Obit, closing this poem links its human character with “the heaved calm/ Of the earth” of his Calder birthplace in which he lies buried:

This is a birthplace picture. Green into blue  
The hills run deep and limpid. The weasel’s  
Berry-eyed red lock-head, gripping the dream  
That holds good ...

Hughes relates the land, weasel and human being, emphasising a shared force of being and interconnectedness. This section of the poem is reminiscent of the imagery of strength and presence in “Pennines in April” (L, p.25), set down as “hills heaving/ Out of the east, mass behind mass”, and, replicating the water imagery of “Dick Straightup”, featuring “landscapes gliding blue as water”.

Another famed Calder character, William Holt, is portrayed in “For Billy Holt” (RE, p.90). The “longships”, “outcast and outlaw”, “rock lumps for words” and “Requisitioned rain, then more rain” mentioned here are all elements of the Calder that we meet consistently in Hughes’ depiction of its moods and people. However, Billy Holt, in this personal poem, personally embodies the history of the independent, hardy spirit of

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<sup>115</sup> K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., note to C58, p.153.

<sup>116</sup> A letter to me from T.Smith dated 9 September 1993.

the Calder area. Glyn Hughes, the author and poet living in the Calder town of Sowerby Bridge, interviewed William Holt and wrote of him with admiration in his autobiographical Millstone Grit:

What kind of a life has he had, this man who has the small stature of one who comes from generations of factory workers; this much-travelled man ... who is lying very grandly between the feet of his horse, reading Milton on a working day, in the sun on the moors above a town as active as a furnace; what kind of man is he, this William Holt, author, publisher, traveller, broadcaster, and 'veteran member of the Savage Club'; this friend of Dylan Thomas, of Jack Hawkins, of J.B.Priestley, of George Orwell, and of H.G.Wells, who gave him that early - almost, a first - edition of the Complete Works of Voltaire, in French that he is quite capable of reading, and which now line two shelves in his part of Trigger's stable?<sup>117</sup>

In other respects, William Holt epitomises the Calder's modern history and the resilience of its people. It is in tones of pride and deep regrets that Holt measures the impact of the machine age on the life of his home valley:

I was an offspring of the pioneers of the Industrial Revolution, the weavers and spinners who took the blitz of the machines, that came out of space to them, on the chin; and now they lie under the sod. They haunt me, the spirits of those men and women and even children who had to take this terrible invasion of the machinery into their lives.

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Indeed, it was a terrible invasion. Billy Holt, of the same generation as Hughes' parents, remembers the work of the mills early this century, before the First World War:

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<sup>117</sup> G.Hughes, Millstone Grit, Victor Gollancz, London, 1975, pp.45-6.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid*, p.46.

When I was twelve I began half-time at the mill. One week I had to work mornings starting at six o'clock; and then on alternate weeks I worked afternoons. Like the other half-timers, I felt sleepy when I went to school in the afternoon. The teachers put all the half-timers on the back row and if we fell asleep they didn't wake us. So I didn't learn much at school. I went to full-time at the mill when I was thirteen and then had to work fifty-six hours a week - ten hours a day, and Saturday mornings. The noise of the machinery of weaving is a monotonous roar so loud that you can't hear your own voice even if you shout; people communicate by lip-reading like deaf-and-dumb people. The noise became like a silence to me; nobody could interrupt me. I could think for hours and hours at a time; I was out in the wilderness, alone like the Old Testament prophets.<sup>119</sup>

Holt goes on to relate how he learned languages amidst the roar of the machines, reciting freely aloud and writing in the dust from the size and the china clay, as these, forming a constant precipitate in the cotton weaving mill, converted the machinery into slates.

Others did the same as William Holt. Some most remarkable minds came out of the Calder milltowns. These include Cockcroft and Wilkinson, Nobel prize winners from the same town of Todmorden. On the other hand, a bleaker human history predominated. Three to four hundred years of cottage industry weaving was smashed by the advent of the mills. A whole way of life was swept aside by "the invasion of the machinery", to quote Billy Holt, whose family, along with Hughes', fought to keep their heads above the floodwaters of change. Thompson focuses upon the textile towns of the Calder and neighbouring valleys, for this is the line from which the factory system advanced.<sup>120</sup>

It was the eighteen-thirties and forties that sounded the death knell for weaving communities such as Heptonstall. While the bottom town of Hebden Bridge, blessed by

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<sup>119</sup> G. Hughes, *Millstone Grit*, op.cit., p.49.

<sup>120</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the Working Class*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1965.



the waters needed for the fulling mills, adopted the factory system, the proud and skilled Heptonstall weavers plied their age old craft in mullion-windowed homes nearly a third of a mile straight above the upstart Hebden Bridge. True, these generations of craftsmen and their families lived an independent lifestyle in the glorious Pennine heights. However, there were dark times and harsh conditions, too:

What is the situation of the wife of the hand-loom weaver during the parturient efforts? She is upon her feet, with a woman on either side; her arms are placed round their necks; and, in nature's agony, she almost drags her supporters to the floor; and, in this state the birth takes place ... And why is this the case? The answer is, because there is no change of bedclothing.<sup>121</sup>

When the growth of the mills in the valley bottom made the weaving community obsolete, Heptonstall saw its darkest days:

The demographic pattern of Heptonstall-Slack was extraordinary: in a population of 348, over one-half were under twenty (147 under fifteen), while only 30 were over fifty-five; this did not represent a growing community, but a low expectation of life.<sup>122</sup>

Hughes' poetry makes many references to the diminished life of the people of the Calder valley. His poems are conscious of the horrors that are part of the record compiled by social historians such as Thompson, who retrieves the evidence tendered by a clergyman about conditions for mill labourers at Cragg Vale circa 1840:

He related the story of a boy whom he had recently interred who had been found standing asleep with his arms full of wool and had been beaten awake. This day he had worked seventeen hours; he was carried home by his father, was

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<sup>121</sup> E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the Working Class*, op.cit., p.290; cf N.J.Smelser, *Social Change in the Industrial Revolution*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1959, p.402ff.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid*, E.P.Thompson.

unable to eat his supper, awoke at 4 a.m. the next morning and asked his brothers if they could see the lights of the mill as he was afraid of being late, and then died. (His younger brother, aged nine, had died previously: the father was sober and industrious, a Sunday school teacher).<sup>123</sup>

Beginning with characters such as Crag Jack, Hughes' paternal grandfather (and from Crag Vale, one would suppose),<sup>124</sup> and Richard Utley (or Dick Straightup), Hughes moves towards a peopling of the Calder and towards a personal interpretation of its social history. In the process, the physical landscape of the Calder becomes a complex figurative setting of variable moods.

"Dully Gumption's Addendum" (*Re*, pp.10-1), first published in 1962 and collected in *Recklings* (1967), is an autobiographically based characterisation of the valley folk, who "are not detached enough from the stone", to reiterate Hughes' words from "The Rock":

She suckled him in an unlit crevice of country  
Where words grew out of the ground freakishly  
With something of a Neanderthal slouch.

Hughes celebrates the unsophistication of the "Neanderthal slouch" in the Gumption family's speech, its rawness of dialect connecting it to the roots of language, rather than to a mannered English. In fact, poems such as "Crag Jack's Apostasy" and "Dick Straightup", which come before "Dully Gumption's Addendum", laud the renegade independent spirit and the robust nature of Calder folk.

These poems celebrate the contact that their personae have with the vital forces stemming from an ancient world. They are in direct contrast with poems set in more "civilised" circles; for instance, "Huge global trouble all to earn" (*O*, #9) considers the trivial aspects of modern society, typifying these as "money to dress up/ To go out to eat". The materialistic humans represented in the poem "sit on, bored and tired,/ Clinging

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<sup>123</sup> *ibid*, p.347.

<sup>124</sup> I owe this information to Keith Sagar, author of several texts on Ted Hughes and a close friend of the poet.

together with words”, before descending through “yawning deprivation/ Into anaesthesia”.

In “Hardcastle Crag” (RE, p.13), the gorge specified by the title is “a grave of echoes”. The “leaf-loam silence/ Is old siftings of sewing machines and shuttles” and “the silence of clogs over cobbles”. Breezes release “the love-murmurs of a generation of slaves/ Whose bones melted in Asia Minor”. Hardcastle Crag, for the poet, is an “echoey museum” of the personally apprehended history of the Calder.

There are other memories, too, in Remains of Elmet. “Sunstruck” (RE, pp.70-1), ostensibly commentary on a Saturday cricket match and tied to a photograph of Hathershelf Scout, throws up the good and the bad of the lived life of the Calder. There is the “wage-mirage sparkle of mills”, defunct, and “the veto of the poisonous Calder”, but there is also the life of the match, epitomised by the imagery of “Lord Savile’s heather” high above the sunken valley and the “freedom of Saturday afternoons”. The workaday environment is temporarily dispelled:

The bowler had flogged himself to a dishclout.  
And the burned batsmen returned, with changed faces,  
Like men returned from a far journey,  
Under the long glare walls of evening

To the cool sheet and the black slot of home.

Similarly, “Football At Slack” (RE, p.68) is a memory of “Men in bunting colours” amongst “puddle glitter”, all under a sky that is, in the wake of storm, becoming “a golden holocaust”. The shouting of the footballers is “washed and happy”.

“Crown Point Pensioners” (RE, p.89) is a warm, sentimental poem that is attached to the old folk residing at Crown Point, Heptonstall, for their “vowels furl downwind, on air like silk”. They are “Singers of a lost kingdom”, remembering the mills that are gone, the chapels that are gone, but their “yarning moves over it [the valley below], this way and that./ Occupying the blanks”. They, like the poet’s uncle in the untitled prefatory poem to the collection (“The Dark River”), are regarded as a valuable resource, their “archaeology of the mouth” providing a tenuous, vital link with a cherished past.

Aspects of the Calder that are raised in Remains of Elmet recur in two poems from Wolfwatching. The first of these, “Slump Sundays” (Wg, p.4), explores sacrifices and their unexpected bitter harvest. The title of the poem identifies the post-war slump period that drained the lifeblood of the Calder valley, a time of mill closures. The title is also reminiscent of a Wodwo short story, “Sunday”, in which the autobiographically based character Michael rues “Aunt-infested Sunday tea” (Wo, p.59). In “Slump Sundays” the folk taking tea together are “mourners” of the souls “mouldering/ Inside those great barns”, the shells of the mills. Survivors of war, “the seed-corn/ Lugged back from the Somme”, talk around the table in that “mother-tongue”, which, in “Crown Point Pensioners” wove a strong sense of attachment to origins.

“Slump Sundays” is followed in Wolfwatching by “Climbing into Heptonstall” (Wg, pp.5-7), which examines the fate of the valley four decades later. In contrast to the subdued and suffering atmosphere of “Slump Sundays”, “Climbing into Heptonstall” is a barbed, whimsical satire of the same history of sacrifice and deprivation. The poem opens with the scene of a “Tourist Guide, with his Group” looking down “on to Hebden”, upon the congestion of the valley floor and upon the black walls and black buildings that amount to an industrial museum. In “Remains of Elmet” (RE, p.53), the tourists “pick among crumbling, loose molars/ And empty sockets”, an image of mastication carried over into “Climbing into Heptonstall”. A “madman’s yell” demands that they quit the scene, “Let forgetting/ Ease down the old gut of the glacier”. A bitter litany of perfidious usury and exorbitant sacrifice then follows. Out of the industrial yesteryears, the “weaver’s baffled, half-deaf shout”, a “birth-death confinement”, emerges as a wail. The misery of the past is as pervasive as the soot, precipitated from the “cold/ And substitute/ Flame lit by Wesley”, with which the sombre stonework is ingrained. All this is strongly reminiscent of Blake’s “London”, in which “the Chimney-sweeper’s cry/ Every black’ning Church appalls”.<sup>125</sup>

Hughes is fascinated by the human strata of the Calder valley landscape, as Remains of Elmet makes apparent. Travelling back into the wild landscape that the Calder impressed on his youth, Remains of Elmet finds what it can of the pagan

hardiness, primitivism and simplicity which have come clear of time. Hughes lauds the kingdom of Elmet in his authorial note to the collection as “the last British Celtic kingdom to fall to the Angles”. Its fall was not directly brought about by Romanisation, nor by the waves of Anglo-Saxon and Norse invaders, though these Teutonic peoples were antecedent to the modern age. William’s devastation of the North and Norman rule did not alter the Calder’s rural character. Only in the more recent transition, from cottage industry spinning and weaving to the machine age, were the Calder’s agricultural roots permanently loosened. Yet, in Hughes’ vision of Elmet, its ancient character may still be glimpsed.

It is to religion, to Methodism in particular, that Hughes ascribes the blame for the confused and baffled suffering of weavers and spinners and various workers in challenged trades and industries. They and their families were drawn into a cruel and counterfeit system, and they were not comforted by the “cold/ And substitute/ flame lit by Wesley”, in the words of “Climbing into Heptonstall” (*Wg*, pp.5-7). Hughes’ parents were married in the Wesleyan Methodist church. Hughes’ attack on Methodism’s part in shaping the industrial society of the Calder Valley is presumably launched out of a long-held conviction. Historical confirmation may be found for his position, in the fact that Thompson reminds us that modern historical studies of the positive contributions of Methodism to the working-class movement are not endorsed by its late eighteenth and early nineteenth century critics, the likes of Blake and Cobbett, for instance.<sup>126</sup> The subservient nature of official Wesleyanism placed the poor of the milltowns at the disposal of a growing industrial bourgeoisie. Methodism became a ticket to employment for the many, and a consolidation of riches for the few:

By the 1820s (we are told by a contemporary) “the great mass of weavers” were “deeply imbued with the doctrines of Methodism”. Some of the self-made men, who were now their employers, were Methodists or Dissenters whose frugality - as Wesley had foreseen - had produced riches.

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<sup>125</sup> W.Blake, *William Blake: Poems and Prophecies*, M.Plowman (ed.), Dent, London, 1927, p.31.

<sup>126</sup> E.P.Thompson, *The Making of the Working Class*, op.cit.,p.41f.

They would tend to favour fellow-religionists, finding in them a “guarantee for good conduct” and a “consciousness of the value of character”.<sup>127</sup>

Hughes’ poetic virulence towards Wesley and Methodism arises from early experience of  
the womb that bore

him,

Chimney above chimney, hill over hill,

A happy hell, the arguing immortal dead,

The hymns rising past farms ... (RE, p.13)

Relics of the Calder’s industrialisation are now accorded museum status. This is what Hughes’ Wolfwatching poem, “Climbing into Heptonstall”, is all about. Before the Slump (to use a ubiquitous Yorkshire expression for the onset of bad times), Hughes’ ancestors lived amidst the soots of a reasonably healthy industrial ethos. An offshoot of the industrialisation that scarred the valley bottom was that areas immediately outside the transport nexus and away from the power sources were left untouched. The stone-walled hill farms, raising their sheep and pigs, running their chickens and growing their wet oats, continued their struggles above the valley and below the moortops. Causeystone walking tracks wend over the hills and dales today, many of them in use for centuries. Packhorse bridges in arched stone span the Hebden Waters. HIPPENS, or stones spaced across boggy ground, still keep a walker’s shoes dry. Everywhere away from the industrial arteries of the railway, the roads, the Rochdale Canal and the Calder River keeps in touch with the multilayered human settlement pattern of the Calder.

Walking tour booklets guide a traveller throughout a countryside in which human contact stretches back to the prehistory of the Iron Age.<sup>128</sup> Hardcastle Crags, a beauty spot dear to the Hughes family and so named because of its two glacially deposited crags of millstone grit, is a woodland retreat in a deep gorge of tumbling waters. Crimsworth Dean, the site of Lumb Falls and the “Happy Valley” of Sunday jaunts, and Redacre

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<sup>127</sup> *ibid*, p.359.

<sup>128</sup> M.Darke, Mytholmroyd Heritage Walk, *op.cit.*; Pennine Walks Around Hebden Bridge, Arc & Throstle Press, Todmorden, 1989, Calder Civic Trust Ltd..

Wood are unspoiled areas near Hebden Bridge and Mytholmroyd. Widdop and “Wuthering Heights” are on the top of this world, on the ancient moors that remain more or less undefeated by a millennium of humanity’s efforts to tame them. It is to the moors, to their lonely and exposed and expansive beauty, that the poems are often written. Hughes best explains their compelling presence:

Whether you looked east, west, north or south, the earth was held down by that fine line of moor, ... a gentle female watery line, moor behind moor, like a herd of enormous whales crowded all around ...<sup>129</sup>

These Pennine heights struck Sylvia Plath:

Climbing along the ridges of the hills, one has an airplane view of the towns in the valleys. Up here, it is like sitting on the top of the world, and in the distance the purple moors curve away. (LH, p.269)

Hughes is involved, in a pragmatic sense, with the moors of the region. In 1994 he joined other celebrities in protesting against the growth of wind farms, energy producers, on the moors around Halifax, particularly those on Overton Moor, above Hebden Bridge and stretching towards Haworth:

Oscar-winning actress Emma Thompson, novelist Iris Murdoch and Britain’s Poet Laureate Ted Hughes were among 60 celebrities who wrote to the Times Literary Supplement decrying wind farms in Brontë country as “an assault on our artistic and cultural heritage”.<sup>130</sup>

The swish of thirty-two metre high-tech windmills astride the feminine curves of the moors of the Calder is not the type of progress that endears itself to Hughes.

However, the attraction of the moors, the heights, comes at some cost to Hughes’ personal poetry. They are vantage points from which the “elemental power-circuit of the

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<sup>129</sup> T.Hughes, “The Rock”, The Listener, op.cit., p.422.

<sup>130</sup> A.Wheatley (of Reuters), “Britain’s Wind Farms Blow Up Storm of Protest”, Nexus, AAP Database, 01:30, 25 April 1994.

universe” may be experienced and extolled in the poetry.<sup>131</sup> The moors are also a lonely, desolate realm, far removed from the world of people and encouraging in the poetry an alienation from more earth-bound life. This is particularly the case with Hughes’ early poems that dwell on the Calder landscape in a powerful but clinical fashion. One finds in these poems isolate imaging of the self, as in this passage from “The Horses” (THR, pp.15-6):

Grey silent fragments  
Of a grey silent world.

I listened in emptiness on the moor-ridge.

Coming down from these lonely heights encourages a human dimension in Hughes’ personal poetry. Poems about Heptonstall, most potent of named autobiographical centres, are instrumental in effecting the move away from isolate settings. “Crown Point Pensioners” (RE, p.89), “Heptonstall Cemetery” (RE, p.122) and “Heptonstall” (RE, p.92) are examples of these poems, in which the connections with family, through memories and visits to their graves, and connections with the older people, who are of his parents’ generation, canalise intense personal feelings through the settings described. The physical ruggedness of the Calder, particularly its moors, often excites a supernatural presence in the settings of poems, which possess overtly Gothic elements not unlike those of Brontë’s Wuthering Heights. Many critics, because of an apparent endorsement of a violent and dark masculinity, have taken this feature of his poetry to task. “Heathcliff Grows Up”, a complimentary review of Season Songs, reflects the concern that some critics have about the “Smash and bash” poetry that appears to deny the complexity of the human world.<sup>132</sup>

Hughes is neither a “national poet”, nor a “regional poet”. Nevertheless, his poetry is vibrant with myths and legends drawn from the English experience of multiple invasions over a long period of time. Hughes’ England is fed by the earthy, pagan life that stems from Celtic, Druidic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Viking roots. His poems

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<sup>131</sup> T.Hughes, in Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., “Ted Hughes and Crow (1970)”, p.200.

<sup>132</sup> R.Gray, “Heathcliff Grows Up”, Sydney Morning Herald, 28 May 1977, p.18; J.Bayley, “Smash and bash” (Review of Gaudete), The Listener, 2 June 1977, p.726.



celebrate this ancient and vital, culturally diverse legacy, even those contemporary and commemorative poems, which come from his public office as Poet Laureate. Indeed, his first “official poem”, “Rain-charm for the Duchy, a blessed, devout drench for the christening of Prince Harry”, is hearty and exuberant because of the nourishing imagery of the Earth Mother, and it is rich with symbols of fertility and joy:

And the Torridge, rising to the kiss,  
Plunging under sprays, new born,  
A washed cherubim, clasping the breasts of light.<sup>133</sup>

Bringing the constructive ritual and vital elements of a pagan, agricultural tradition into a spiritually tired, technological society is the spirit of many of Hughes’ poems. They are attempts to bridge the great gap that lies, in modern perception, between our own times and those of our remote past. This is why we read of a pond with “legendary depth”, “as deep as England” (L, pp.55-7) in “Pike”. In “Low Water” (R, p.88), a river is a fertility goddess, who “stirs her love-potion - ooze of balsam/ Thickened with fish-mucus and algae” as she “eyes you steadily from the beginning of the world”. Hughes’ collections of poetry written for children encourage the imagination to travel far back in time, to when, for instance, “the Badger’s fort was dug when the whole land was one oak” (WIT, p.13).

The Calder valley is rich in the same folklore, legend and life, and, because of its great personal significance to Hughes, it is a model and a vehicle for many of his poems. Over the years Hughes has peopled the Calder of his poems; he has added a people’s being and experience to the elemental landscape his poetry originally featured. From the earliest poetry onwards, the rugged, lonely landscape beyond the towns of the industrial North possesses an untamed beauty, an imposing presence: indeed, in Hughes’ earliest poems the landscape is presented as dwarfing its human inhabitants. In keeping with his poetry of struggle, they are either momentarily won over by the spectacular displays put on by an elemental and muscled nature, or they retreat further from what they believe are its furious, menacing energies. There seems to be no middle ground, as “Horses” (THR, pp.10-1) and “Wind” (THR, p.40) illustrate. These two poems introduce the now familiar Calder setting, but they present it in vigorous, stark terms, as a raw and shining entity

which lacks the social and personal dimensions that it later acquires. “Horses” and “Wind” are compelling and subtle poems, yet they possess a rigidity which stems from the battleground landscape over which terrible, beautiful forces pass.

Hughes’ second major collection, Lupercal (1960), is concerned with the value of myth and legend and with exploring the ritual intercourse of the human world with the natural world. The natural world is imbued with complexities of mood; hence, a psychological element deepens and extends the landscapes featured in Lupercal. In The Hawk in the Rain, landscape is hooked up to “the elemental power circuit of the universe”,<sup>134</sup> and it hums and thrums with energy that awes and terrifies the personae in such poems as “Horses” and “Wind”. Consequently, those human beings appear as shadowy figures against a landscape that is luminous, intense and thunderingly realistic. “Roarers in a Ring” (THR, pp.42-3) depicts farmers at a local inn surrounded by moorland that “foamed like a white/ Running sea” with snow that “fell as for Wencelas”. This occasion is festive; “the ale went round and round”; the farmers, “faces sweating like hams”, “kept a laugh in the air” and “their grand bellies shook”. The poem foreshadows some of those found in Lupercal, because Hughes delineates these farmers and their drunken joy more closely than any of the other characters featured in The Hawk in the Rain. However, it is essentially through their ignorance that the farmers are sustained:

While the world under their footsoles  
Went whirling still  
Gay and forever, in the bottomless black  
Silence through which it fell.

The farmers’ Dionysian joy in being insulates them from the intellectual angst that affects other personae in The Hawk in the Rain; that is, a confrontation with the devouring, chill darkness of the cosmos, which is the situation in “Meeting” (THR, p.39). The forces of the universe are manifested in images of beauty and power, but its “bottomless black/ Silence” (“Roarers in a Ring”) and “the master-/ Fulcrum of violence” (“The Hawk in the

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<sup>133</sup> T.Hughes, Observer, 23 December 1984, p.6.

<sup>134</sup> E.Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p.200.

Rain”) underscore its alien character. This perception of the universe is not predominant in Lupercal. Calder Valley characters are celebrated by name, as are local places. The personalising of the Calder Valley begins with poems in this collection.

Titles such as “Crow Hill” and “Pennines in April” now name the Calder Valley as the source of their physical settings. These three poems also illustrate the diversity of mood and theme which characterises Lupercal. “Crow Hill” (L, p.14) opposes and mixes aspects of human and creaturely life in the open Calder. The dreams of Calder farmers withstand the unremitting weathering process of rain and wind and damp, and the wearing down of hills is, simultaneously, the creation of marvellously alive animals and birds:

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.

“Pennines in April” (L, p.25) is a tribute to the region, to its strength and naturalness which free the imagination to celebrate the joy of being alive in such a setting. These poems involve the moods of humanity, in the form of dreams, imaginative life and the complexities of the waking world, and their Calder Valley settings interact with their human and animal denizens.

The linking of impulses, which are found in both the human and natural worlds, is a significant feature of Lupercal. “The hills heaving/ Out of the east, mass behind mass”, “landscapes gliding blue as water”, are “barrellings of strength” in “Pennines in April”. The “miles of silence”, the power and spectacle, compose a metaphor of the Calder Valley in springtime, linking the speaker to the energy “rolling westward through the locked land” as an enormous and exultant wave:

Those barrellings of strength are heaving slowly and heave  
To your feet and surf upwards  
In a still, fiery air, hauling the imagination,  
Carrying the larks upward.

These Lupercal poems have much in common with those in The Hawk in the Rain. However, the contrasts of mood, perspective and theme bring a greater complexity and

create a Calder landscape. In “Dick Straightup” these aspects extend the ideas present in “Crow Hill” into a more personal and empathetic theme, so personalising the energies celebrated in the earlier poem. The “sodden moors” and “blowing mist” of “Crow Hill”, its “ridges of ruined stone”, could not detract from or suppress the forces of vitality which have “thrown the hawk upon the wind,/ And lit the fox in the dripping ground”. Similarly, “Crag Jack’s Apostasy” (L, p.55) praises the sacred nature of the life led by its human character in the open Calder Valley, out of the shadow of “all the dark churches”. Crag Jack knows that his “god’s down/ Under the weight” of the Methodist and Baptist chapels and their milltown ethos, but he communes with the vitality that is enduring in the Calder, a godhead that is sometimes composed of remembered fragments of dreams, “Of a wolf’s head, of eagles’ feet”. He is glad to have “kicked at the world and slept in ditches”.

Wodwo (1967) deepens the human presence in the Calder landscape. The motif initiated in “Thistles” (Wo, p.17), the first poem in Wodwo, is of a heritage of stubbornness and hardihood. In “Thistles”, the “stain of a decayed Viking” and “the gutturals of dialects” persist in the Calder valley folk, whose families tend to be ancient and rooted, products of migrations that occurred long ago. “The Warriors of the North” (Wo, p.159) also looks at the Viking heritage of “salt-bleached eyes”, but this poem observes the dilution of inheritance, “the gruelling relapse and prolongeur of their blood/ Into the iron arteries of Calvin.” In Lupercal, “Crag Jack’s Apostasy” declaims against “the dark churches”, while “The Warriors of the North” points to the human lineage, a rich, violent, vital heritage, that is supplanted by puritanical Christianity. Pagan origins, associated with hot-blooded invaders from a land of “frozen swords”, are replaced by the “iron arteries” of an emergent tradition, a new order which fosters the regimens of deprivation and inflexibility that diminish life.

Images of dissolution and dislocation are conspicuous in “Heptonstall” (Wo, p.165), which is the name of the village above the poet’s birthplace, and the place where members of his family are buried. In this poem, decomposition is rife in a setting where “only the rain never tires”:

Black village of gravestones.

The hill’s collapsed skull

Whose dreams die back

Where they were born.

“Out” (*Wo*, pp.155-7) continues the spirit of oppressiveness evident in “Heptonstall”, making images of oppression and abandonment. Where “Crow Hill” projects an image of hope growing out of a harsh landscape, “Out” portrays a landscape in which hope is extinguished:

Under rain that goes on drumming its rods and thickening

Its kingdom, which the sun has abandoned, and where

nobody

Can ever again move from shelter.

In the family drama of “Out”, these images refer to the father and son, as discussed in the previous chapter. However, the images are more inclusive, specifying the pall of the experience of the First World War, which affects not merely one household but the whole environment. The Calder Valley of *Wodwo* is darker and more desperate than the birth-valley of *Lupercal*. The psychology of repression, born of the “iron arteries of Calvin”, throws up images of helplessness, loss, decomposition, particularly in the imagery of rain, “rain that goes on drumming its rods and thickening/ Its kingdom”. It is the warscape of the Somme as well as the landscape of the Calder Valley that is described. A vicarious experience of war, a recent suicide (of Sylvia Plath) and a grim religious inheritance, all help to darken the tone.

In *Wodwo*, weather becomes a metaphor for the psychoses that are wearing down and eating away at the Calder setting. Imagery of rain in “You Drive in a Circle” (*Wo*, p.173), rain that swamps the landscape and rots the very shoes of the speaker, is used in this manner to convey a brooding sense of human powerlessness and ennui, emphasising a “descent into destruction of some sort”.<sup>135</sup> Darkness, rain, black rockfaces, confinement, gravestones and funerals - these are the discernible legacy of the personalised settings of *Wodwo*, to which even the stubborn hardiness tracked in “Thistles” must finally submit. “Ballad from a Fairy Tale” (*Wo*, pp.166-7) has a funereal setting: it unfolds in the windswept Heptonstall cemetery, which is “Opposite the house/

Where my father was born/ Where my grandmother died". Use of "my" and "I" in this poem, and in others such as "Out", is early evidence of the confessional element in Hughes' personal poetry.

The vision of Wodwo might be likened to the view from the mullion-windows that survive in Heptonstall's seventeenth century weavers' cottages perched high above Hebden Bridge. Their outlook is both bleak and rich. The radio play and short stories in this collection are indirectly related to the surrounding poems. Among the stories, "Sunday" (Wo, pp.56-70), in particular, has obvious personal roots. Crow (1970), however, buries this emergent personal focus in its mythical labyrinth. Crow is an archetypal figure who exists in the mythical framework as a catalyst, as a trickster, constantly trying things out and paring everything down to its elemental state. At the same time, Crow is on a quest, to find out, among other things, why he is stronger than Death. Nevertheless, the collection contains elements of the Calder that are not linked explicitly to the encompassing myth or to its ubiquitous protagonist.

These elements of the Calder undergo a process of disintegration in Crow. They are scattered and laid waste, forming desolate images of personal dislocation. A Romantic quest, from the dark pall of "Two Legends" (C, p.13) to the holocaust glare of "Notes for a Little Play" (C, p.86) and beyond, runs parallel to that undertaken by the indomitable Crow. In "Crow Alights" (C, p.21), the sense of abandonment and dissolution that characterises Wodwo is deepened in the image of a "shoe, with no sole, rain-sodden,/ Lying on a moor". The hollowness of the pun, of "sole" and "soul", gives the flavour of Crow's grim humour. "The Contender" (C, p.41), a sardonic deconstruction of the suffering of Christ, includes an emblem of the moors, in an image of temporary respite, "a relief/ Like heather flowers". It was one of the poems that Hughes withdrew from Crow and later published in the limited edition of Crow Wakes.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> E.Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p.205.

<sup>136</sup> K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., p.49; Mr.Tarling (printer) writes as follows: "These poems were excluded for personal reasons from (Hughes') Crow opus and he offered them to me in March 1970."

The two collections Gaudete and Cave Birds are strongly related to Crow, a trilogy of painful steps toward resolution of grief, and the balm of reconciliation with the real world waiting outside the mythical interior. The search or questing for wholeness of the self is paramount, for without the spiritual journey the self cannot be reborn. For the poet, the process and themes of his writing in these three collections is restorative. It is clear, in this regard, that Hughes' mythopoeic collections are essentially constructive myths. It is also clear that elements of the Calder Valley are present in these collections. This is especially evident in Cave Birds, which is followed by Remains of Elmet (1979).

An initial setting that is somewhere "in the North of England (G, p.11) is powerfully rendered in Gaudete. The streets and lanes of the unnamed town are choked with corpses. This setting hyperbolically externalises the then recent deaths, of Sylvia, Assia, Shura, and Edith, which had also fed into the black and despairing depths of Crow. Gaudete proceeds, from the "blackest clot of the whole nightmare" (G, p.13), to a sustained dream sequence which mirrors death. In this state, the character of Lumb is dissolved and reborn. The same process of death and rebirth is condensed in Cave Birds. In Cave Birds, an exploration of the disintegration and reintegration of the self is attended at each stage by appropriate bird-spirits. However, unlike Crow and Gaudete, Cave Birds has no specific protagonist. Instead, a fluid self, an amorphous Everyman, undergoes transformation and, in "Bride and Groom Lie Hidden For Three Days" (CB, pp.56-7), discovers life. In this poem, a rediscovery of relationship, the partnership between the sexes, urges sacrifice of the egotism with which "The Scream" (CB, p.7) initiates the journey of the self. Aspects of "The Scream", the first poem in the collection, are related to the Calder of Hughes' childhood. The poem begins with "There was the sun on the wall - my childhood's/ Nursery picture". It includes hawks and mountains in its reference to landscape, and "Calves' heads all dew-bristled with blood on counters", which one would find at the butcher-shop in the Calder valley of the nineteen-thirties. The poem also mentions an accident victim by the colloquial appellation of "my mate".

While the framework of Cave Birds is mythical and allegorical, it also enshrines a personal drama that runs parallel to the bird allegory. "The Scream" suggests the autobiography that is a layer of the allegory, and, because the narrator remains an autobiographical constant in Cave Birds, references to the Calder and the poet's life

accumulate. These personal references, particularly those pertaining to Edith Hughes and Sylvia Plath, form a confessional framework existing alongside the metaphysical. “In These Fading Moments I Wanted To Say” (CB, p.20) depicts the wintry Calder scene “of mountains and their snow”. The scene is appropriate to the imminence of the death of the poet’s mother and, in the text of the poem, drawn from her memories of the predominant Calder weather.<sup>137</sup> Imagery of “loose bones/ On a heathery moor, and a roofless church” may be a figurative representation of the Old Church at Heptonstall in “First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin” (CB, p.26). Heptonstall’s proximity to “Brontë country”, Haworth being only a good walk across the moortops, shapes the Gothic vividness of the setting, which includes “Wild horses, with blowing tails and manes/ Standing among graves”. The linking of the roofless church and the adjacent graveyard, together with details of wind across the moors and Brontëesque images, certainly suggests the specific Calder setting that acts as a potent personal anchor in this poem.

Moortown and Remains of Elmet were both published in 1979. Under the banner of Moortown, an earlier collection, Orts, appears in a greatly altered format. “For weights of blood” (O, #25) uses the material of granite, its “eternal” hardness, to highlight the “soft-hand absence” of those Calder folk whose legacy might be seen in “Granite farms”, “Granite bridges”, “Granite walls” and “Granite headstones”. A hauntingly personal Heptonstall image concludes this poem:

Granite oblations  
 Propped on the summit  
 For faceless presence  
 By soft-hand absence.

In contrast to Orts, a transitional personalised quest, which seems to be in the process of detaching Hughes’ poetry from the mythical format of three preceding collections, and in contrast to Moortown, which is immersed in the physical world epitomised by the farming cycle, Remains of Elmet is attached to Hughes’ home valley. Landscape in the Elmet poems is often metaphysical and metaphorical. This feature of Hughes’ writing is reminiscent of Wodwo, of poems such as “Out” and “Heptonstall”, where rain is an

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<sup>137</sup> See ch.4.



imaging of confinement and loss, where rockbound, granite heights are the bones of the many dead. In Remains of Elmet the metaphor is altered and a metaphysical realm is entered, a place behind the eyelids, a conduit between the experienced and imagined nature of the Calder heartland. The prefatory poem ("The Dark River") (RE, p.7) is a significant statement of poetic intention. "To fly a dream, populated with glimpses" and "A happy hell, the arguing immortal dead" sketch the cosmogony of Hughes' personal subject. "Where The Mothers" (RE, p.10) portrays the essential, ancient moors as possessed by "A silent evil joy" visited on them by "the howlings of heaven". The Calder landscape in "The Trance Of Light" (RE, p.20) is "Heavy with the dream of a people".

River (1983) and Flowers and Insects (1986) continue the process of rediscovering the self through immersion in the greater life of the wider world. The success of these two collections, and the delight that is evident in Hughes' poems making up these collections, argue the conscious nature of his decision to feature personal poems on the Calder in Wolfwatching. "Telegraph Wires" (Wg, p.16), "Slump Sundays" (Wg, p.4) and "Climbing into Heptonstall" (Wg, pp.5-7) might be regarded as revised, more personal Elmet poems, but for the fact that they appear in Wolfwatching a decade after Remains of Elmet was published. These poems are surrounded by others, which are intensely personal in their focus on Hughes' family. Furthermore, they link with many other uncollected poems published throughout Hughes' long career. His hitherto uncollected poems are only now beginning to receive more public exposure, particularly since New Selected Poems, 1957 - 1994 concludes with twenty of them, as well as distributing another thirteen uncollected poems through the selection. In this last group, nine poems from Recklings are listed as uncollected - recognition from Hughes that their accessibility was limited by the rare book status of that collection.

Hughes' representation of the physicality of the Calder has changed greatly over the years, from the raw and shining entity of an early poem such as "Horses" (THR, pp.10-1) to the rapidly mutating industrial and post-industrial landscapes of "On the Reservations" (Wg, pp.49-53). "Warm Moors",<sup>138</sup> published in 1966, recaptures the essence of childhood. Its description of the moors is developed as a pristine experience of

non-being as its speaker “climbs to the sun” with the lark’s song of itself. The self vanishes under the spell of the moorline that “fumes like a pane of ice held up to the thawing blue”. The Calder, at earlier stages of Hughes’ life, offered natural invigoration.

Remains of Elmet deepens and extends earlier images and tonal associations pertaining to the Calder. The shackling images of confinement, found in the darkening treatment of the valley from Wodwo through to the allegorical collections of the seventies, do not predominate in Remains of Elmet. Indeed, its poems exhibit a variety of moods in their representation of the landscape of the Calder valley. “Moors” (RE, p.19) presents “a stage for the performance of heaven”, the “witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat”, the “stilted majesty” in the openness and in the wildly derelict heights far above the sunken valley. “The Trance Of Light” (RE, p.20) continues the marked contrast between valley floor and moortops that forms a dichotomy in Remains of Elmet. The imagery of rain is, in the landscape of the heights, transmuted from its Wodwo status to become the “prophetic mouth of the rain” in a place “Heavy with the dream of a people”.

By contrast, “First, Mills” (RE, p.34) illustrates in a succession of images how, after so many deaths, the valley has become moribund:

Over this trench  
A sky like an empty helmet  
With a hole in it.

Nonetheless, “The Canal’s Drowning Black” (RE, p.74) and “The Long Tunnel Ceiling” (RE, pp.76-7) find in the valley, through “a shake-up of heaven and the hills”, seeds of “the wild god”, an echo of “the wild god of everywhere” from “The Weasels We Smoked Out Of The Bank”. Thriving “between the tyres, under the tortured axles”, loach and trout in “their paradise and mine” continue to represent the forces of nature appreciated by the speaker. Despite the still dominant view that the “sunk mill-towns were cemeteries”, as expressed in “Remains of Elmet” (RE, p.53), the higher ground is infused with elation, exotic legend and Gothic romance in poems such as “Widdop” (RE, p.110), “Churn-Milk Joan” (RE, p.59) and “Emily Brontë” (RE, p.96). The valley, too,

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<sup>138</sup> T.Hughes, “Warm Moors”, Critical Quarterly, Spring 1966, p.55.

has its potent places, such as that specified by “Hardcastle Craggs” (RE, p.13), where “a hide-out of elation/ Is a grave of echoes”.

Interesting examples of Hughes’ use of the historical “you”, for a self distanced by time and a mature perspective, are found in the two poems “Grouse-Butts” (RE, p.60) and “Grouse butts”.<sup>139</sup> The latter and very different poem is uncollected, though it could have gone into Elmet, especially because, in keeping with that collection, “Grouse butts” is a poem that reshapes the past. In “Grouse butts” the earlier Remains of Elmet poem of the same name is implicitly referred to in the new poem:

A grouse-butt’s good for grouse.  
A nest of guns you thought,  
The bird-murderer’s house -  
No, it’s the last earth-fort

Where an ancient bird hangs on,  
An Aboriginal Brit ...

The poem proceeds to argue that the grouse estates are preferable to the new factory-breeding of grouse - “millions crying in a shed -/ For the gourmet millions”. In the open range system, the huntsmen “husband their prey” and are “harvesters of a seed” that is “saved from yesterday”. The huntsmen “nurse and worship the breed”. A personal memory enters “Grouse butts” to strengthen the judgements which are passed and which form the argument of the poem. The memory is strongly in favour of the huntsmen and the grouse estates:

... protect its sanctuary lands  
From what I was, in the past,  
When a boy crawled, down on his hands,  
And would have slaughtered the last

And emptied the horizons  
Of the grouse’s laughter and cheer,

In wanton ignorance,  
As they are emptied of deer.

An eerie, stark elegy for the valley and all its deaths, all its dead, appears as “Telegraph Wires” (Wg, p.16). It is a “lonely moor” setting, where “Towns whisper to towns over the heather”. The “unearthly airs” of the wires are catastrophic: “The ear hears, and withers”. However, on these heights the universe plays with a child’s innocent joy:

In the revolving ballroom of space,  
Bowed over the moor, a bright face

Draws out of telegraph wires the tones  
That empty human bones.

There were the days when Hughes did not see a face, let alone “a bright face”, in the blackness of the cosmos. He now infuses the Calder scene with human features, a comment on his personal involvement with the subject matter.

Finally, “On the Reservations” (Wg, pp.49-53) forms a modern parable, which is trans-Pacific in its range of reference, though focused in its social empathy on the counties of the North Country. The Indians of this parable are “the lads ... the spores of/ nowhere” from “Between Mersey and Humber”. In the first section, “Sitting Bull on Christmas Morning”, a male pit-worker, a coal miner, is delineated. Into his Christmas stocking go slices of his life. He never asked for any of these things, which somehow came to him, not to be denied or refused. There are “sooty fields”, “this lifetime nightshift”, “his second birthday’s ragbook/ From before memory began”. He is “tribally scarred” with coal dust, but he has “freed hands” and he stands with “his foot in his stocking”, unbroken, himself, alive in his own place, “Two eye-pits awash in the millennia”. The positive nature of this portrait of the fragmentation of human life in the modern world differs from “A Bedtime Story” (C, pp.71-2). In that earlier poem, the speaker, faced with the fragmentation of life, simply “gave up”, which is anything but the case in “Sitting Bull on Christmas Morning”.

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<sup>139</sup> T.Hughes, “Grouse butts”, *The Listener*, Vol.114, 15 August 1985, p.30.

The wife of the protagonist of the first section of “On the Reservations”, in the second section of the poem, “Nightvoice”, “thinks her aerials/ must be bent”. She dreams the nightmare of workaday existence, “every/ pit-shaft a/ mass-grave”. She is the dreaming consciousness and conscience of “the slag-heaps wrong/ land wrong/ time”. She is desperately trying to hold it all together, to preserve the spirituality and joy of their married life:

Remembering how a flare of pure torrent  
sluiced the pit muck  
off his shoulder-slopes while her hands  
soapy with milk blossom anointed  
him and in their hearth  
fingers of the original sun opened  
the black  
bright book of the stone  
he'd brought from beneath dreams  
or did she dream it.

“The Ghost Dancer”, as the final section of “On the Reservations”, turns attention to a punk rocker who “stuns your ear with song”. He “utters/ Out of the solar cobalt a howl” that spurns the history of workhouse and Empire. His battle cry is “Start afresh, this time unconquerable”. He is “Bomb-lit, rainbowed, aboriginal”, and his voice of anger is an energy raised against the system that cultures “the lads ... In the laboratories/ Between the Mersey and Humber”. His is the spirit that will not be denied its primal scream, its anarchic joy of being. He is the furious, menacing energy that will impact on the status quo. He represents the human equivalent of those terrible, beautiful forces that shape the natural world, those forces that Hughes once saw only in nature in the days of The Hawk in the Rain.

Poems about the Calder have a long history in Hughes' work. Their evolution into open poems about family and into complex landscapes "heavy with the dream of a people" occurs over this long period of writing. There can be no doubting the personal significance that the Calder Valley holds for Hughes as a consistently revisited subject.

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