

In his writings, on other poets and on himself, Ted Hughes emphasises the immutable and inviolate relationship between the poetry produced and the life of the poet. His commitment to this view emerges strongly, for example, in a comment he made on Dylan Thomas:

Everything we associate with a poem is its shadowy tenant, no matter how New Critical purist we try to be... Thomas's life, letters and legends belong to his poetry, in that they make it mean more.... (WP, p.81)

This comment applies to Hughes' own poetry and prose. Indeed, he comments on a symbiotic relationship between his biographical self and his poetic self when replying to Peter Orr's question on whether topical issues move him to write poems:

You only produce the poetry you find in yourself. It's not something that you easily apply to something that interests you. ¹

Hughes' answer implies the poetic impulse begins as a subconscious process, and that his poetry is derived from the raw materials of amorphous personal experience.

The relationship of the poetic self to the true self is of great interest to Hughes. His article entitled "The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T.S.Eliot" argues that communion with the "genetic nucleus, the true self, the self at the source, the inmost core of the individual, ... is healing, and redeems the suffering of life, and releases joy" (WP, p.275). Hughes, in his alchemical and shamanistic poetry, as discussed by Ann Skea, ² puts such belief into practice: the resulting poetry is regenerative, passionate and joyous. However, it is the assembly of selves, a relating of "the present self to the past self – or selves", ³ which is the focus of this thesis. In Hughes' poetry, "the self at the source" is humanised by his use of poems as explorers of an autobiographical context, and his personal poetry complements his alchemical, shamanistic and nature poetry, thereby forming the unity of his poetic vision.

¹ T.Hughes, *The Poet Speaks*, Record 5, P.Orr (ed.), Argo, 1965.

² A.Skea, *The Poetic Quest*, University of New England Press, Armidale, 1994.

³ D.Wallace & H.Gruber, *Creative People At Work, Twelve Cognitive Case Studies*, Oxford U.P., N.Y., 1989, p.32.

In a recent interview conducted by Drue Heinz, Hughes makes tangible reference to “the true self”, which he seems here to equate with the childhood self:

Well, as far as my writing is concerned, maybe the crucial thing was that I spent my first years in a valley in West Yorkshire in the north of England...⁴

Later I will note that he sometimes reshapes this supposedly unchanging and authentic self. This is central to my thesis. We need not accuse Hughes of deliberate manipulation of experience: we can, however, note that even poets like Hughes and Wordsworth who set such store by their early years can be found involuntarily reshaping their concept of them. One might call this reshaping the foundation of their personal mythologies.

In the same interview, Hughes responds to a question about confessional poetry:

Maybe all poetry, insofar as it moves us and connects with us, is a revealing of something that the writer doesn't actually want to say, but desperately wants to communicate, to be delivered of. Perhaps it's the need to keep it hidden that makes it poetic – makes it poetry. The writer daren't actually put it into words, so it leaks out obliquely, smuggled through analogies. We think we're writing something to amuse, but we're actually saying something we desperately need to share.⁵

Between them, these two quotations explain my choice of thesis subject.

In an interview given in 1977, Hughes was asked a question about the “underlying story” of *Gaudete*: the interviewer, Ekbert Faas, hinted that there might be “some kind of autobiographical myth” underlying the collection. At the time Hughes was inclined to play down the role of autobiography, replying that personal incident was “just a way of getting at the poems”.⁶ But his later statements, such as those quoted from the 1995 interview with Drue Heinz, suggest a greater willingness to acknowledge

⁴ T.Hughes, “The Art of Poetry LXX1”, *Paris Review*, Vol.37, No.134, Spring 1995, p.58.

⁵ *ibid*, p.75.

⁶ E.Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980, p.202, p.213.

autobiographical elements in his poetry, especially in connection with that “something that the writer doesn’t actually want to say, but desperately wants to communicate, to be delivered of”. The publication of the openly autobiographical Birthday Letters, embodying so much that Hughes evidently could not bring himself to communicate before, decisively confirms this.

J. A. Cuddon, in agreement with Hughes’ ideas on the “confessional” poet, maintains that much poetry, as a record of the state of mind, feelings and vision of life of the poet, is confessional. He states that some of Plath’s poems, along with those of Lowell and some others, fulfil a definition of confessional poetry, in that they are “overtly self-revelatory” and “detailed in their analytical exposition of pain, grief, tension and joy”. In Cuddon’s dictionary, confessional poetry is regarded, in the narrowest context of his definition, as historiography, as a term “usually confined to the works of writers in the UK and USA in the late 1950s and 1960s”.⁷ However, many of Hughes’ most recent personal poems are, according to Cuddon’s definition, confessional. His poems dating from Crow onwards have included an intensely personal, confessional core of poems. Hughes’ experience of great pain, grief and trauma has found its way into the poems he writes, as has the healing, redemptive, reconciliatory effect of his reshaping of the past.

Critical writings have gone beyond Cuddon’s definition of confessional poetry, in that the perception of the confessional poet as one who is extreme is held to be the key criterion of what makes poetry confessional. Rosenthal perhaps began this perception when writing on Plath’s “absolute, almost demonically intense commitment by the end to the confessional mode”. He refers to “the confusion of terror of death with fascination by it” that is present in some of Plath’s works, or those he knew of in early 1965. Rosenthal offers a balanced view of Plath’s diversity of poetic output, yet consistently returns to her confessional poems:

But there are poems too that are hard to penetrate in their morbid secretiveness, or that make a weirdly incantatory black magic against unspecified persons and situations, and

these often seem to call for biographical rather than poetic explanation.⁸

Hughes' "Do not Pick up the Telephone", to an extent, is the type of poem that Rosenthal comments on in Plath's poetry. In Hughes' poem, repetition seems consciously to mimic a ritual of cursing or transference of a sense of evil. Its biographical explanation, its establishment of a "dialogue" with Plath's "Words heard, by accident, over the phone", its association with autobiography, and its wider relevance, through the telephone focus of Hughes' "Flame",⁹ to Hughes' life, is a significant determinant of its critical appreciation.

Peter Dale, commenting on Plath's more autobiographical or confessional poems, states the effect on the critic of such poetry:

The critic wishes he might concentrate on the "art" and gloss over these niggings for autobiography to "complete" this poetry of fragments. Yet to do so would deny the central "living" qualities of the poems. With what reticence he can, he has to admit that the circumstances of their composition must influence his judgement; poetry is probably and finally the most autobiographical of the arts.¹⁰

"Two" (RE, p.80) is described by Hughes as marking "the end of a kind of paradise" when his brother Gerald went off to fight in the Second World War.¹¹ One, given this important biographical supplement, is freer, while aware of Dale's comment, to appreciate the art whereby Hughes metamorphoses a Castor-and-Pollux persona-and-brother, not into stars, but birds.

Hughes, on the topic of confessional poetry, now comments on the poet's authority and responsibility to re-inscribe personal information:

⁷ J.A.Cuddon, A Dictionary of Literary Terms, rev.edn, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1979, p.152.

⁸ M.L.Rosenthal, "Poets of the Dangerous Way", (Spectator, 19 March 1965, p.367), Sylvia Plath, The Critical Heritage, L.W.Wagner (ed.), Routledge, London & N.Y., 1988, pp.60-1.

⁹ See further discussion, p.26f.

¹⁰ P.Dale, "O Honey Bees Come Build" (Agenda, Summer 1966, pp.49-55), Sylvia Plath, The Critical Heritage, L.W.Wagner (ed.), Routledge, London & N.Y., 1988, p.65.

¹¹ T.Hughes, in a letter to Ann Skea, as quoted by Ann Skea in her letter to me dated 24 January 1992.

If most poetry doesn't seem to be in any sense confessional, it's because the strategy of concealment, of obliquity, can be so compulsive that it's almost entirely successful.¹²

Hughes implicitly acknowledges that his own poetry contains a significant body of personal, confessional poems. However, in 1966 Hughes made this comment on confessional poetry:

Their [Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton's] work is truly autobiographical and personal, and their final world is a torture cell walled with family portraits, with the daily newspaper coming under the door.¹³

In the same article, Hughes distinguishes between the works of Lowell, Sexton and Plath by stating that the only aspects Plath shared with her fellow American poets were their East Massachusetts origins and the poetic shattering of the self to reassemble or reinvent a new self. One is immediately put in mind of Hughes' mythopoeic collections, particularly Cave Birds (1978), which perform this function in his own poetry. More recently, in 1995, Hughes demonstrates that he is more comfortable with the term confessional poetry:

The novelty of some of Robert Lowell's most affecting poems in Life Studies, some of Anne Sexton's poems and some of Sylvia's, was...the deliberate way they stripped off the veiling analogies...No, until the revelation's actually published, the poet feels no release. Sylvia was an extreme case, I think.¹⁴

Hughes' willingness to entertain the thought that poets in writing autobiographically are writing confessionally is a radical departure from his former position on the matter. His

¹² T.Hughes, "The Art of Poetry LXX1", op.cit., p.75.

¹³ E.Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p.180.

¹⁴ T.Hughes, "The Art of Poetry LXX1", op.cit., pp.75-6.

inferred distinction between Plath's and his own personal and confessional poems is all the more valid because of the self-inclusiveness of his criticism.

Hughes, in "Context", comments on the sanctity of the organic origins of the poetry he produces:

His [The poet's] gift is an unobliging thing. He can study his art, experiment, and apply his mind and live as he pleases. But the moment of writing is too late for further improvements or adjustments. Certain memories, images, sounds, feelings, thoughts, and relationships between these have for some reason become luminous at the core of his mind: it is in his attempt to bring them, without impairment, into a comparatively dark world that he makes poems. (WP, p.2)

His comment represents a Neo-Romantic view of inspiration and imagination. The "luminous...core of his mind" brings poems "into a comparatively dark world" with full respect for the sanctity of their origins and the integrity of the process of creation. Emphasis is placed on "the moment of writing", at which point it is "too late for further improvements or adjustments" to what is appearing. It is common for poets to experience such feelings and express such views, and equally common for them to find their practice diverging from their theory. Byron once said, "I can't correct; I can't and I won't" – but we know he did correct, if not in the way others would have liked.¹⁵ Robert Graves was another poet who constantly polished his poems, but he always admitted this and even drew attention to it. Hughes likewise *does* make further improvements and adjustments. The creative moment can recur. A poem can legitimately be taken up again and altered, or re-presented in such a way as to alter its effect. One compelling reason for making alterations may be the gradual acceptance by the writer of that "something that [he]

¹⁵ Byron's contradictory attitude to revising and proof-editing, including the well-known "I can't correct; I can't and I won't" is summarised and documented by Thomas Guy Steffan in Byron's Don Juan: the Making of a Masterpiece, Texas U.P., Austin, 1971, pp.100-14.

doesn't actually want to say, but desperately wants to communicate, to be delivered of", and which he at last finds himself able to express.

Paul Jay comments on Wordsworth's attempt, in The Prelude, to return to his own past to restore his creative powers through rewriting it.¹⁶ This same process applies to Hughes, because his rewriting of the past is restorative, therapeutic and cleansing, purgative and atoning, and, ultimately, redemptive. Perhaps his most personal work should be called redemptive confessional poetry. He writes with a great willingness to take on his shoulders a load of guilt. The association of guilt with conscience¹⁷ is a significant linking concept to keep in mind with Hughes' poetry. Real and imagined past transgressions, which Hughes feels are inconsistent with his own internalised values and standards, form the material of his confessional poems. At one level of confession, Hughes deals with public guilt by shouldering it himself, and through transforming personal memories into universal statements. This is so in "Dust As We Are" (Wg, pp.10-11), a redemptive poem based on the First World War and on the poet's memories of the trauma that his father brought back from that conflict:

My post-war father was so silent
He seemed to be listening. I eavesdropped
On the hot line. His lonely sittings
Mangled me, in secret – like TV
Watched too long, my nerves lasered.

In "Anniversary" (NSP, pp.291-3), guilt about the selflessness and pain of the mother is expunged through the redemptive confessional of the poem:

My mother is telling Miriam
About her life, which was mine.
...
And that is the horse on which I galloped
Through the brick wall

¹⁶ P.Jay, Being in the Text: Self-Representation from Wordsworth to Roland Barthes, Cornell U.P., Ithaca, 1984, p.55.

¹⁷ G.H.Gudjonsson, The Psychology of Interrogations, Confessions and Testimony, John Wiley & Sons, N.Y., 1992, p.68f.

And out over the heather simply
 To bring him a new pen. This is the pen
 I laid on the altar. And these
 Are the mass marriages of him and his brother
 Where I was not once a guest...

...

My mother's face is glistening
 As if she held it into the skyline wind
 Looking towards me. I do this for her.

Apart from the confessional nature of some of Hughes' personal poems, autobiography runs deep in his personal poetry. His transfiguring of past experience achieves a convincingly human universality. Olney quotes Stephen Spender on this matter:

The autobiographical is transformed. It is no longer the
 writer's own experience. It becomes everyone's. He is no
 longer writing about himself: he is writing about life.¹⁸

Hughes, in agreement with Spender, views his poems as "attempts to prove the realness of the world, and of myself in this world, by establishing the realness of my relation to it".¹⁹ Whereas Roland Barthes rejects the notion of an essential, unchanging core of self, and later critics like Stephen Greenblatt have explored the notion of self-fashioning, Hughes has tried to maintain a more Romantic, Wordsworthian view of the self, as described earlier.²⁰ But in fact a comparison between Hughes' earlier and later work shows that he has attempted to reconstruct his "self" and his past, even though he may not have been fully aware of what he is doing. In short, his practice confirms the view that the self is a construct, and that it changes.

¹⁸ J. Olney, *Metaphors of Self, the meaning of autobiography*, Princeton U.P., Princeton, 1972, p.263.

¹⁹ T. Hughes, "The Rock", *Worlds, 7 Modern Poets*, G. Summerfield (ed.), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974, p.126.

²⁰ For self-fashioning see S. Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning, From More to Shakespeare*, Chicago U.P., Chicago, 1980.

If, as I suggested earlier, there are critics who hold the view that to be confessional poetry must be extreme, then Hughes' own comments pose an alternative view. Hughes has written, "it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit".²¹ Many other poets have made this same comment. Eliot believed a childhood experience might lie dormant for many years, to "re-appear transformed in some verse-context charged with great imaginative pressure".²² Coleridge, writing of Wordsworth's poetry in the Lyrical Ballads, commented on the use of biography "to give the charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the supernatural".²³ Amongst his journals, Byron observes that "an *effort* of memory" might rekindle the light of experience momentarily, but, he asks, "who can be sure that the Imagination is not the torch-bearer?"²⁴

The perception that "confessional" is a rigidly historiographic literary term is misleading, in the sense that poets do reorder autobiography. John Berryman, of his own poetry and poetry in general, has commented on the ritual buried in his deepest experience:

Poetry is a terminal activity, taking place out near the end of things, where the poet's soul addresses one other soul only, never mind when. And it aims...at the reformation of the poet, as prayer does.²⁵

Berryman's comment is not divorced from my discussion of Hughes' writing of redemptive confessional poetry. In Hughes' work, it is surely the case that, through redemption of the past each time a truly personal poem is created in the present, a reformation, *ipso facto*, of the poet occurs. Berryman, writing on the authorial "I" appearing in poems, remarked that "much poetry is very closely about the person. The

²¹ E.Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p.192.

²² T.S.Eliot, The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism, Faber & Faber, London, 1933, pp.78-9.

²³ S.T.Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, J.M.Dent & Sons, London, 1906, p.161.

²⁴ L.A.Marchand (ed.), "The trouble of an index", Byron's Letters and Journals, John Murray, London, 1982, pp.16-17.

²⁵ C.Thornbury (ed.), John Berryman, Collected Poems 1937 – 1971, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, N.Y., 1973, p.xxix.

persona looks across at the person and then sets about its own work".²⁶ The highly compounded authorial "I" is an assembly of certain past selves, relevant to the experience that lies at the heart of the poem, and including the true self. These selves, in the process of creation of the poem, interact with the present self, all within the crucible of the imagination. The confessional nature of writing poetry is present, but experience is mutated. Stendhal wrote, "I can be good, if ever I am good, only in what I extract entirely from my heart".²⁷ He expresses the integrity of feelings that come from the writer to the writing.

Tennyson, in a letter to Henry Hallam, comments on the problem besetting a writer when too close, in terms of time, to a significant personal experience:

That you intend to print some of my friend's remains (though only for private circulation) has given me greater pleasure than anything I have experienced for a length of time...I hope to be able at a future period to concentrate whatever powers I may possess on the construction of some tribute to those highly speculative endowments and comprehensive sympathies which I ever loved to contemplate; but at present, though somewhat ashamed at my own weakness, I find the object yet is too near me to permit of any very accurate delineation.²⁸

Tennyson's In Memoriam was published many years after his friend's death. Eliot commented on the uniqueness of this work by Tennyson, who had assembled lyrics so that they formed one long poem, which was "the concentrated diary of a man confessing himself".²⁹ In Elmet (1994) and New Selected Poems (1995) Hughes has included many personal poems relating to aspects of his life which had hitherto remained unexplored in his published work. Finally, in 1998, there appeared Birthday Letters, the collection

²⁶ J.Berryman, The Freedom of the Poet, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, N.Y., 1976, p.321.

²⁷ Stendhal, The Private Diaries of Stendhal, R.Sage (ed. & trans.), W.W.Norton & Co., N.Y., 1962, p.534.

²⁸ Tennyson, "To HENRY HALLAM", (14 February 1834), The Letters of Alfred Lord Tennyson, C.Y.Lang & E.F.Shannon (eds), Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1982, p.108.

²⁹ T.S.Eliot, Selected Essays, Faber & Faber, London, 1932, pp.333-4.

which these earlier publications can now be seen to have prefigured. Like In Memoriam, it is a sequence including many of the author's most successful personal poems; and, again like Tennyson's masterpiece, it has emerged many years later than the autobiographical experience from which it descends. Hughes' most personal poems transmute past experience, and, as B. H. Boruah observes about writers and their fiction, the resultant poems conform to the notion that "artistic transfiguration embodies an element of truth in that it involves an identification of oneself with the transfigured life".³⁰

James Olney writes about an aspect of the writer's transfiguring of experience that is addressed by my thesis title in its "Reshaping the Past" descriptor of the poetic process whereby Hughes transfigures autobiographical material. In a comment similar to others quoted, to that, for instance, made by Eliot, Olney raises the idea of memory as a poetic tool for recovery of past lives, past selves, which are then universalised:

It is through the operation of memory, which draws all the significant past up into the focus of the present, that the autobiographer and the poet succeed in universalising their experience and their meaning... [They discover], by looking through the glass of memory, a meaning in...experience which was not there before and which exists now only as a present creation.³¹

This is a description of a poetic process, the reshaping, reordering and re-inscribing of past experience, and a poetic effect, a universalising of the particulars of remembered experience that stems from the transmutation of what is remembered.

Hughes believes that "every poet does no more than find metaphors for his own nature".³² The personal symbolism in his poetry now operates in a similar way to that of Sylvia Plath to form the powerful music present in their poems. This has been obvious since Hughes' Crow (1970) collection, and more so since the release of Wolfwatching

³⁰ B.H.Boruah, Fiction and Emotion, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p.126.

³¹ J.Olney, Metaphors of Self, op.cit., p.263.

³² T.Hughes, Shakespeare's Poem, No.17 in a limited and signed edition of 150 copies, Lexham Press, London, 1971, p.2.

(1989) and other recent collections. However, few critics commented on the emergence of an autobiographical openness in his work. Keith Sagar commented on the personal nature of a particular poem in Cave Birds (1978):

“Something was happening” is an open, living poem where feeling flows freely, not diverted into complex canals as in too many of the bird poems. It ends with a startling image I cannot explain of the one person in the world who seems to be aware of him, who registers, who, perhaps, opens a path for him to a different and more hopeful dimension of existence.³³

The ending of “Something was happening” appears to be a mask that has been incongruously added to the poem to shield its autobiographical basis. Its final image of “the eagle-hunter/ Beating himself to keep warm/ And bowing towards his trap” makes the foregoing text of the poem conform to the cave bird drama. However, without this addendum, the poem is a personal work that stems from the death of Hughes’ mother. The dread and paralysis that surround this bereavement afflict the speaker.³⁴ Bishop’s interpretation of the end of the poem also touches upon the personal nature of the poem:

The eagle-hunter begins to sing, significantly, just one poem after the poet himself successfully hauled together the root elements of his own voice in an act of celebration.³⁵

The end of “Something was happening” is an exceptionally powerful example of the balance or even conflict between autobiographical elements and non-autobiographical elements that one may find in Hughes’ personal poetry.

Thomas West comments on what he perceives to be the paradoxical nature of autobiography as it appears in Hughes’ work:

³³ K.Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, 2nd edn, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1978, p.178.

³⁴ See ch.4.

³⁵ N.Bishop, Re-shaping Poetry, Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology, Hertfordshire, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p.191.

[If] in one sense Hughes' poetry is anti-autobiographical, it is, in a subjective sense, supremely and obsessively biographical, almost functioning for the poet as a charm or counter-magic against some problem that besets what the reader feels to be the poet's own lesser self, an ordinary, waking self.³⁶

One is put in mind of Yeats' view of how a poet re-orders autobiography when creating a poem. His essay entitled "A General Introduction for My Work" begins with a pronouncement:

A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria.³⁷

This is true of Hughes, who, in his personal poems, re-orders his breakfast-table self via a number of poetic techniques, which will be examined throughout this thesis. An example of Hughes' employment of personal symbolism might illustrate how he transfigures autobiography into art.

Personal symbolism in Hughes' poetry performs as vital a function as it does in Plath's poetry. He has drawn attention to the role of her personal symbols, present as "a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus" (CP, p.16), in forming the powerful patterns and music of her poems. Significantly, he has also commented that Plath's "limitation to actual circumstances...[was] part of the solidity and truth of her later poems" (JP, p.17). His own most powerful personal symbol, that of the fox, represents a totemic bonding of Hughes with those closest to him, with Plath in particular.

"The Thought-Fox" (THR, p.14) empowers the fox, representing it as both pure animal and burgeoning creativity. A fusion of instinctive force, a welding of animal and human worlds, results in the progress and presence of the final poem. The fox is hunted,

³⁶ T. West, Ted Hughes, London & N.Y., Methuen, 1985, p.15.

³⁷ W.B. Yeats, Selected Criticism, A.N. Jeffares (ed.), London, Macmillan, 1964, p.255.

but it comes of its own free will to the hunter. A dream state operates powerfully on the text of this poem, and this is what forms the deep sense of its rightness, the subconscious inevitability of the passage of both fox and poem. The fox, from the outset, is a totemic presence; a supremely powerful symbol imbued with personal significance, which, in this case, is self-identification.

Of “The Thought-Fox”, Hughes, in his Poetry in the Making (1967), writes:

It is about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox. What sort of fox is it that can step right into my head, where presumably it still sits ... smiling to itself when the dogs bark. It is both a fox and a spirit ... The words have made a body for it and given it somewhere to walk ... If I had not caught the real fox there in the words I would never have saved this poem. I would have thrown it into the wastepaper basket as I have thrown so many other hunts that did not get what I was after ... So, you see, in some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live forever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. (PM, pp.20-1)

The unique nature of the fox snared in “The Thought-Fox” is emphasised by Hughes. Its deeper and more personal significance is also revealed, for the fox, as he writes, is both “a fox and a spirit” and “with me wherever I go”. The employment of the fox symbol in the wider poetry endorses its totemic nature.

Prefacing his comment on “The Thought-Fox”, Hughes relates how he never succeeded, as a boy, in keeping foxes alive. He tells of a farmer who on two occasions killed cubs that Hughes had hoped to raise. At another time a poultry farmer released a cub Hughes had caught while the farmer’s dogs waited. He also tells us that “The Thought-Fox”, written in bleak London after a year of writer’s block, was his first animal poem. He wrote it in a few minutes (PM, pp.18-9). There is an element of compulsion evident in this, which arises from an historic, personal basis. W.S.Merwin has related an incident from Cambridge concerning Hughes’ affinity with the fox figure of his dreaming:

At Cambridge he set out to study English Literature. Hated it. Groaned having to write those essays. Felt he was dying of it in some essential place. Sweated late at night over the paper on Dr. Johnson et.al. - things he didn't want to read. One night, very late, very tired, he went to sleep. Saw the door open and someone like himself come in with a fox's head. The visitor went over to his desk, where an unfinished essay was lying, and put his paw on the papers, leaving a bloody mark; then he came over to the bed, looked down at Ted and said, "You're killing us", and went out of the door.³⁸

Hughes recounts the same dream many years later, and the fox is noticeably more anthropomorphous:

It came up and stood beside me. Then it spread its hand - a human hand as I now saw, but burned and bleeding like the rest of him - flat palm down on the blank space of my page. At the same time it said: "Stop this - you are destroying us". Then as it lifted its hand away I saw the blood-print, like a palmist's specimen, with all the lines and creases, on wet, glistening blood on the page. (WP, p.9)

Hughes' switch from English to Anthropology at Cambridge was decided by this dream. His obvious and lively interest in folktales and myths, and the considerable presence of these inputs as subject matter in his writing further underline his primitivist leanings. The nature of Hughes' re-formulation of the dream about the fox is, significantly, strikingly similar to re-formulations of other experiences that took place in the process of revising and resituating poems.

³⁸ K.Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, op.cit., p.8.

There is also the matter of Hughes' dreaming, which is raised by Sylvia Plath. Her letter dated 29 April 1956 shows the totemic nature of the fox to Hughes: "He tells me dreams, marvellous coloured dreams, about certain red foxes ... " (LH, p.244) In other letters, Plath comments on "our sympathy for foxes" (LH, p.436) and on the pleasure that her mother's Christmas gift of a book on foxes brought to Hughes (LH, p.440). A journal entry, dated 20 July 1957, concerning the autobiographically based novel, *Falcon Yard*, that she was working on, includes the heading "Menagerie with a Red Fox" (JSP, p.169).

"The Wishing Box", a short story Plath published in 1957, is based on Hughes' dreams. The story blurs fact and fiction in a playfully inventive tale that is not without a serious undercurrent, as its early section conveys through the character of the wife, whose exasperated frustration is fuelled by living in her husband's huge creative shadow:

Meanwhile, indefatigably, Harold continued to recount his dreams over breakfast. Once, at a depressing and badly-expected time of Harold's life before he met Agnes, Harold dreamed that a red fox ran through his kitchen, grievously burnt, its fur charred black, bleeding from several wounds. Later, Harold confided, at a more auspicious time shortly after his marriage to Agnes, the red fox had appeared again, miraculously healed, with flourishing fur, to present Harold with a bottle of permanent Quink. Harold was particularly fond of his fox dreams, they recurred often (JP, pp.56-7).

A totemic association of the fox and Hughes is the common thread in both written pieces by Plath. Subconscious belief, through dreaming, establishes the depth of relationship whereby Hughes may name the fox in "The Thought-Fox" a "spirit" that "is with me wherever I go". The poem itself expresses the achievement of this relationship. Elements of the dream state and of the real world gather and shimmer in the darkness to pour green light into "the dark hole of the head". The fox captured here is totemic, and it is a tangible representation of the restored health of the creative faculty.

Plath's comment in the excerpt taken from "The Wishing Box" finds expression in Hughes' poems featuring the fox totem. In general, there is some sort of correlation between the health of the fox and the life of the poet, be it "badly-expected" or in the

midst of “a more auspicious time”. More significantly, Hughes’ own words also associate the fox with his life with Sylvia Plath, as the following extract from a letter published by Anne Stevenson demonstrates:

Of course, as a biographer, I should have liked a more positive contribution from Hughes himself. As it is, after Bitter Fame was published, Hughes gave me a characteristically powerful image: in protecting Sylvia from his friends, he wrote, he had felt like a hunter holding the fox in his arms to save it from his own hounds - the fox biting him the while.³⁹

Hughes’ analogy is linked to a poem, “The Huntsmen, on Top of Their Swaying Horse-Towers”:

The huntsmen, on top of their swaying horse-towers,
Faces raw as butcher’s blocks, are angry.
They have lost their fox.

They have lost most of their hounds.

I can’t help.

The one I hunt

The one
I shall rend to pieces

Whose blood I shall dab on your cheek

Is under my coat. (G, pp.184-5)

³⁹ A.Stevenson, Poetry Review, Vol.80, No.1, Spring 1990, p.88.

This poem comes from the Epilogue of *Gaudete*. “She Rides the Earth”(G, p.184) immediately precedes our subject poem. Its speaker poet addresses a goddess muse, whose capacity to inspire is paid for by the pain of devotion. Indeed, “The Huntsmen, on Top of Their Swaying Horse-Towers” is a pain-ridden surrender to the goddess. The fox in the poem represents both Plath and Hughes. The two are the “I” of the poem, while the addressed Goddess is the “you”. Plath’s memory is hunted in this part of the Epilogue, as the poem “Waving Goodbye, From Your Banked Hospital Bed” (G, p.185) asserts. Her significance, her final meaning, her essence, are part of the poetic ritual to “Soak it all/ In the crushed-out oil of the life”, as it is stated in “I Skin the Skin” (G, p.196). The offering is then given to the goddess to eat. “Having First Given Away Pleasure” (G, p.192) also argues that the poet’s life, no less than Sylvia’s life, must be offered up to the goddess for renewal:

... Pain is hardest of all.
It cannot really be given.

It can only be paid down
Equal, exactly,
To what can be no part of falsehood.

This payment is that purchase.

Poems in between “The Thought-Fox”and “The Huntsmen, on Top of Their Swaying Horse-Towers” are virtually sans foxes, except for “Crow Hill” (L, p.14) and the delight in that poem which “lit the fox in the dripping ground”. The fox disappears from Hughes’ poetry from 1960 to 1976. Upon its return to the world of poetry, the fox is born dead. However, the fact of death does not diminish the potency of the fox totem. In Part 6 of “Autumn Nature Notes” (SS, p.49) a neighbouring farmer’s guest, “Waving his gun like a paddle”, squanders the life of a true neighbour, a companion of the spirit:

I thought I’d brushed with a neighbour -
Fox-reek, a warm web, rich as creosote,
Draping the last watery blackberries -
But it was the funeral service.

Two nights he has lain, patient in his position,
Puckered under the first dews of being earth,
Crumpled like dead bracken. His reek will cling
To his remains till spring.

Then I shall steal his fangs, and wear them, and honour
them.

Naturalistic metaphor and a tone of respect stress the “warm web” of relationship, particularly as it is felt by the speaker. There are elegiac elements in the first stanza of the poem that touch on the human world, but the unity of fox and wider life is stated forcefully in the progress of the whole poem. Totemic empathy is conveyed most strongly in the expansive sentiment and form of the final line.

The very next poem, “The Seven Sorrows” (SS, pp.51-2), is also autumnal. The fate of the fox, the sixth sorrow, is accompanied by an elegiac tone. Autumnal symbolism links the fate of the fox with age and the inevitability of death; hence, the seventh sorrow takes on a human face:

And the sixth sorrow
It is the fox's sorrow
The joy of the huntsman, the joy of the hounds,
The hooves that pound
Till earth closes her ear
To the fox's prayer.

And the seventh sorrow
Is the slow goodbye
Of the face with its wrinkles that looks through the window
As the year packs up
Like a tatty fairground
That came for the children.

A “fox’s prayer” merges with the passage of autumn and with a human sense of diminishment through personal loss. The “fox’s sorrow” and “the slow goodbye” venture beyond capture of the mood of the close of the season. There is a sweet sadness here, in the relationship built between the fox totem and “the face with its wrinkles that looks through the window”. It might be deduced that the unexpected depth of tone stems from an autobiographical basis that has more at heart than the passing of autumn.

“The Seven Sorrows”, particularly its lines focusing on “the slow goodbye/ Of the face with its wrinkles that looks through the window”, appears related to “He Hears Lithe Trees and Last Leaves Swatting the Glass” (O, #16) and to “Heptonstall” (RE, p.92), both of which are about Hughes’ father. Many of Hughes’ closest relatives had died or were nearing death when Season Songs was published in 1976. In this year his uncle, Walter Farrar, died, as did Herbert (Jack) Orchard, his father-in-law. His own father, William Hughes, was eighty-two years old. The experience and anticipation of family loss feed into “The Seven Sorrows” to produce its tone of melancholic inevitability, and seasonal imagery is underpinned by strong personal feeling.

“Foxhunt”, published in 1977 and collected later in Moortown (1979)⁴⁰, is a “Two days after Xmas” “near noon” poem from Hughes’ Devon house. Mainly a poem of observation, it records impressions, largely those that come to the ear. A foxhunt is in progress

A machine with only two products:

Dog-shit and dead foxes.

“As I write this down”, Hughes concludes the poem, “He runs still fresh, with all his chances before him”. However, the fate of the fox is clear: its “silver tongue in the world of noises” will be a sacrifice to the banal gods of sport. The sympathies of the speaker cannot forestall the inevitable desecration of the fox spirit, nor can they overpower the crass realities of the hunt.

⁴⁰ K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, Mansell Publishing, London, 1983, p.233.

“A Solstice”, published in 1978, features the totemic fox in a poem which celebrates the return of Hughes’ brother Gerald to England after “an eighteen year estrangement”. The closeness of their relationship is emphasised by the presence of the fox in the poem. However, the shooting of the fox becomes a metaphor of loss, of realisation that the brothers’ shared and joyous world of youth cannot be recaptured. The poem ends with an emptiness of heart and a sense of finality that are replicated in “Two”, a poem from Remains of Elmet.

The fox totem again relates Hughes and Plath, this time in “Actaeon” from Earth-Numb (M, p.122). The fox and hounds metaphor of “The Huntsmen, on Top of Their Swaying Horse-Towers” is dramatically reversed in “Actaeon”. Now it is the male speaker, following the classical example of Actaeon, who is hunted by his own “zig-zagging hounds”. His crime was to look upon the beauty of the goddess as she bathed, and, thus, he despoiled her. There are poems in Gaudete that follow this same thread. “In A World Where All Is Temporary” (G, p.179) is an example:

I forestalled God -

I assailed his daughter.

Now I lie at the road’s edge.

People come and go.

Dogs watch me.

As can be gathered from discussion of Hughes’ potent and personal fox symbol, the role and significance of such symbols in his poetry is profound. Other poetic techniques that Hughes employs to mutate autobiography in his personal poems deserve mention here, but full discussion will, necessarily, occur throughout the thesis as poems are examined.

His use of pronouns is particularly striking in the personal works, as demonstrated by the following example. “Laws of the Game”, published in 1992,⁴¹ might be interpreted

⁴¹ T.Hughes, “Laws of the Game”, Poetry Book Anthology 3, W.Scammell (ed.), Hutchinson, London, 1992, p.37.

as a tribute to Plath in the form of an acknowledgement by Hughes of his indebtedness to her as an influence on the direction that his writing has taken. This interpretation ascribes the “she” and the “you” of the text to Plath and Hughes. In Hughes’ personal poems an historical “you” sometimes represents a past self, recollected, reinterpreted and reinvented.⁴² It was a matter of fair interpretation to read “Laws of the Game” in this way when the poem was first published, and even when it was first collected as “The Other”. The following analogy might, quite reasonably and logically, descend from the failed relationship of Plath and Hughes:

... Still her ambition
Claimed the natural right to screw you up
Like a crossed-out page, tossed into a basket.

The simile suggests a relationship between two writers. Furthermore, the Plath estate passed to Hughes upon her death:

Everything she had won, the happiness of it,
You collected
As your compensation
For having lost. Which left her absolutely
Nothing. Even her life was
Trapped in the heap you took. She had nothing.

Concluding lines of “Laws of the Game” quite conceivably refer to the legacy of Plath to Hughes:

Too late you saw what had happened.
It made no difference that she was dead.
Now you had all she had ever had
You had much too much.
Only you
Saw her smile as she took some.
At first, just a little.

⁴² See “You Drive in a Circle” (Wo, p.173) or “Grouse butts”, Chpt 3, p.108-109.

Hughes, speaking of Plath and himself, said, “Our minds soon became two parts of one operation”, a sentiment found in “Lovesong” (C, pp.88-9), and, in the same interview, he commented that “our telepathy was intrusive. I don’t know whether our verse exchanged much, if we influenced each other that way – not in the early days”.⁴³ There is room to see the musing last lines of “Laws of the Game”, in the context of the title of the poem, as a personal tribute to Plath, particularly when this poem, uncollected, was first published.

However, Hughes, by renaming “Laws of the Game” as “The Other” (NSP, pp.305-6), opens an entirely different interpretation of the text of the poem, which remains unchanged. The new title identifies Assia Wevill as ‘the other woman’, and the “she” and “you” of the poem become Plath and Wevill. Hughes’ new title is a direct reference to Plath’s “The Other” (CP, 201-2). Hughes, interestingly, places it as a poem on the cusp of poems that are obviously about Plath, ending with “The Dogs Are Eating Your Mother” (NSP, pp.304-5), and poems that are obviously about Wevill, beginning with “The Locket” (NSP, pp.306-7). This poem, because of its ambivalence of meaning before its change of title, and because of its placement upon collection, illustrates the complexity of both pronominal reference and sequencing in Hughes’ personal poetry. Finally, its non-inclusion in *Birthdays Letters*, a collection devoted to Sylvia, confirms that “The Other” is not a Hughes-Plath poem.

Hughes’ deflection of critical interest in the autobiographical nature of his personal poetry is a practised and longstanding affair. He is widely thought of as a poet who avoids directly personal statements and subject matter. His management of the poetry he produces helps shape this perception. A considerable number of his personal poems remain uncollected. Some are collected in limited release editions that drew little critical attention, such as *Recklings*, which was published in January 1967 as a printing of only 150 copies. Compare this to other mainstream collections, such as *Wodwo*, which was published in the same year, but as a printing of 3000 copies, initially, in England alone.⁴⁴ Ten years of personal poetry is collected under *Recklings*, a rare collection. *Orts*

⁴³ T.Hughes, “The Art of Poetry LXXI”, op.cit., p.77.

⁴⁴ K.Sagar & S.Tabor, *Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980*, op.cit., p.21, p.23.

(1978) repeats the procedure. Another ten years of personal poetry again finds a home in a rare collection. The Orts collected under Moortown, which was published little more than a year after the release of the limited edition, does not contain the full complement of original poems. The new version of Orts is minus twenty of its original poems, though some of these turned up in Remains of Elmet as important personal poems.

Facts of publication offer insights into the connection of Hughes' personal poetry with its autobiographical milieu. The most striking of these facts concerns "the May poems". Edith Hughes died in this month in 1969. Poems and collections touching her memory are published during the month of May. Gaudete was published in May 1977, Remains of Elmet in May 1979. The Epilogue of Gaudete contains poems, "I Know Well", for instance, which address the memory of the poet's mother. Remains of Elmet is dedicated to the memory of his mother. Its prefatory poem, "The Dark River", is joined by others, such as "Heptonstall Cemetery" and "The Angel", which elaborate on the memory of Edith Farrar, his mother's maiden name. "First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin" and "In These Fading Moments I Wanted to Say", collected in Cave Birds are also "May poems", and both focus on Edith Hughes.

The more personal poems are often displaced from their chronologically relevant individual collections. Two poems illustrating this practice are "You Hated Spain" and "Do not Pick up the Telephone". Both poems find their way into Hughes' Selected Poems 1957 - 1981, which was published in 1982. "You Hated Spain" is placed between poems selected from Crow (1970) and poems selected from Cave Birds (1978). "Do not Pick up the Telephone" is placed between poems from Under the North Star (1981) and poems from Gaudete (1977), in that peculiar reverse chronology. Both poems first appeared together in 1980, in Ploughshares, a journal published in Cambridge, Massachusetts.⁴⁵

Despite their displacement, the two poems plainly fix their own autobiographical descent. "You Hated Spain" (SP, pp.135-6) originates from the honeymoon Hughes and Plath spent in Spain. That was in 1956. His poem was first published twenty-four years

⁴⁵ K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., entry C367, p.186.

after this period. It attributes thoughts and attitudes to Plath that her own writings from that time in Spain do not entirely support:

Spain frightened you.

Spain

Where I felt at home. The blood-raw light,

The oiled anchovy faces, the African

Black edges to everything frightened you.

His ideas of Spain, the blood, the death, the “Goya funeral grin” culture, the “dust-red cadaver” of landscape, are not as strongly expressed in her writings on Spain. Plath’s “Fiesta Melons” (CP, pp.46-7), for instance, is a happy metaphorical feast amidst a “harvest of melon-eating/ Fiesta goers”. In “The Goring” (CP, p.47), she sees the conclusion of a shared afternoon at a bullfight differently from Hughes. In her poem a picador’s death in the ring is not rendered in terms of an awareness of the seed of her own death that she carried inside her. Instead, she deliberately contrasts the “botched”, “ill-judged” actions, the “Cumbrous routine” associated with the killing of bulls in the ring, with the purer actions of a bull:

Instinct for art began with the bull’s horn lofting in the
mob’s

Hush a lumped man-shape. The whole act formal, fluent as
a dance.

Blood faultlessly broached redeemed the sullied air, the
earth’s grossness.

Hughes, in “You Hated Spain”, on the other hand, emphasises the death rather than the art inherent in the bull’s action:

And the horn

That hid itself inside the blowfly belly

Of the toppled picador punctured

What was waiting for you. Spain

Was the land of your dreams: the dust-red cadaver

You dared not wake with, the puckering amputations

No literature course glamorized.

The juju land behind your African lips.
Spain was what you tried to wake up from
And could not.

He is reshaping the past because of a personal compulsion to understand what he obviously did not at the time when he and Plath were honeymooning in and around Benidorm, Spain. Her poem comes from that time, while his comes from a much later time, the period after his Crow opus, itself the dark mirror reflecting the impact on him of deaths in the real world: Sylvia Plath's suicide in 1963, Assia Wevill's suicide in 1969, compounded by its inclusion of Hughes' daughter, Shura, and Edith Hughes' death in the same year. Hughes has his own viewpoint, and it is one that, in relation to "You Hated Spain", has shifted over time. Plath did not like the bullfight, as "The Goring" shows, so Hughes' representation of her feelings in his poem was not entirely wrong. While it is difficult to make confident statements about why Hughes felt impelled to refashion experience, it is, indeed, evident that he has done so.

The second of the two displaced poems under discussion, "Do not Pick up the Telephone" (SP, pp.154-5), also defines its real life origins. Plath's "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" (CP, pp.202-3) comes from July 1962, as established by the date Plath affixed to it. Hughes, as editor of her Collected Poems, does not make any entry of annotation on this particular poem. There is no need. The milieu of this poem is well known, largely through the work of Plath biographers, but also through the sequence of poems in Collected Poems which chart the breakdown of the marriage of Plath and Hughes.

The tone of her poem is indignant and shocked. It wavers between hostility and disgust and disbelief, but its certainty about personal betrayal and contamination is constant. Some of the lines of his poem resound with an elegiac significance. "Why is your oracle always the same in the end?" "Do not pick up the detonator of the telephone". "What rake off for you from the cemeteries?" These lines, in particular, have direct connections with other poems Hughes has written, some of them quite recent. The "detonator" and "flame" imagery found in Hughes' telephone poem is a sustained

metaphor in “Flame”, published by Hughes in 1991.⁴⁶ It is based on the receipt of news of the deaths of his defacto wife and daughter, Assia Wevill and Shura. In “Something was happening” (CB, p.39) news of his mother’s death comes over the telephone to her sister Hilda while Hughes is in the room. News of Sylvia’s death also reached him via the telephone; hence, its “oracle” is a fatal terminus that is “always the same in the end”.

Considered together, “Do not Pick up the Telephone” and “You Hated Spain” have a great impact. They merge the opposing forces and circumstances found in life - love and death, idealism and fallibility, hope and despair. Changing the names of personal poems, rewriting them, or adapting them for placement in a collection foreign to their spirit and milieu are consistently employed practices whereby Hughes disguises the significance of the personal element in his poetry. There are numerous instances of these practices throughout his writing career, and these are elaborated on in the chapters that follow.

The number of obviously personal poems collected in Wolfwatching (1989) first drew me to the subject of Ted Hughes’ personal writing. Here were startlingly fresh poems (I thought back then) about the full-blooded short-sightedness of adolescence, and others straining after the imponderable mysteries that parents often are for a child, and other poems that revisited halcyon days, that fluid time of coming into awareness and then fixing people and places permanently in the mind’s eye. I was surprised, upon looking back to 1957 when Hughes’ prolific career as a full-time writer began, to discover that he had written personal poems at every stage of that career.

The perceived centrality and importance of Hughes’ “personal” poetry demands an attempt to define a “personal” poem. By nature all poetry is personal, so my argument must distinguish between, for instance, what makes Hughes’ poems of place “personal” when he is writing about the West Riding of Yorkshire where he spent his formative years, but not “personal” when he is writing about his experiences farming in Devon. Of course, such a distinction is impossible. However, the criteria for my selection of key “personal” subject areas in Hughes’ poetry are justifiable. Firstly, Hughes has nominated

⁴⁶ T.Hughes, “Flame”, Poetry Book Society Anthology 1990, F.Steel (ed.), Hutchinson, London, pp.42-3.

his Calder valley origins as “the crucial thing”⁴⁷ behind his writing of poetry, and he has spoken to Faas about the significance of the dialect that is vital to his poetry:

They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult ... since it's your childhood self there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt I would ever have written verse.⁴⁸

Hughes, because of his stated disposition to believe that the tongue of his origins binds him to his “real self or the core of it”, favours the place of his origins over all others he might write about in his poetry. This is true, as demonstrated by his long history of basing poems on the Calder Valley, in particular, and on the surrounding region. Unlike, for instance, poems based on Devon, which feature in Moortown, Season Songs, River, and Orts, Hughes' poems based on the Calder are consistently present and prominent in his poetry from The Hawk in the Rain (1957) to now. This stated, Devon can generate personal poems, but, because of limitations of space, and because of Hughes' own emphasis on the early years, Yorkshire poems will be treated.

Another criterion for my choice of geographical area is the social-historical matrix Hughes draws on in his poetry based on the Calder region. Poems about mills, villages, local folklore, named places, and so on, are directly linked to an autobiographical foundation. We learn about the effect that the First World War had on the region through Hughes' relating the active service experience of his father and an uncle. The textile industry, with its attendant mills-and-chapels ethos, is rendered strongly in Hughes' poems, because many of his relatives, on both sides of his family, had long been involved in the mills. Friends of the family, such as Billy Holt, take a place in Hughes' poems based on the Calder region, and help to chart its human history and the character of its people. Poems about his mother explore the spirit of the heather-clad

⁴⁷ See p.2, fn.4.

⁴⁸ E.Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, op.cit., p.202.

moors of this Brontë landscape, as well as the workaday life of the valley bottoms. Gerald Hughes, the poet's brother, further connects Hughes to his early childhood, to ramblings over the hillsides, to looking for the remains of an ancient Briton, and to the sharp smell of fox in the thrilling world of nature.

Hughes, in a review entitled "Regenerations", makes an interesting comment:

And the imitation dreams, the general schema of the shamanic flight, and the figures and adventures they encounter, are not a shamanic monopoly: they are, in fact, the basic expression of the poetic temperament we call "romantic". (WP, p.58)

The significance of this comment is that it can be applied to Hughes' mythopoeic collections, to Crow (1970), but more particularly to Gaudete (1977) and Cave Birds (1978). These collections are versions of the Heroic Quest, for in each of them a character searches for the truth of both his own nature and his relationship to the nature of the greater world outside himself. Romantic consciousness of the self is expressed in traditional forms in Hughes' mythopoeic collections. There is a journey from darkness towards light, from, for instance, the "blackest clot of the whole nightmare" in Gaudete (G, p.13) to a "glare" so insistent that "the darkness too is aflame" (G, p.200). There is a progression from images of aesthetic isolation of the self to an engagement with life, which is the movement we perceive, for instance, in Crow. In "Two Legends" (C, p.13) the self is "a black rainbow/ Bent in emptiness/ over emptiness", but in the final poem, "Littleblood" (C, p.94), there is a self-spirit that is engaged with life.

Symbolic modes of romantic poetry are consistently present in Hughes' poetry. Sensuous imagery embodying feelings, rather than pure description alone, is characteristic of his poetry. So, too, are the subjective use of mythological fable, and the adoption of dramatic personae in Hughes' poetry. In his personal poetry, these symbolic modes are particularly evident, as a poem such as "Two" (RE, p.80) demonstrates with its contrasting strands of imagery of cornucopia and abandonment, and with its tonal swing from joy to pathos. As discussed, Hughes manipulates the mythos of Castor and Pollux in "Two" so that it subjectively represents the separation of two brothers. Hughes' personal poetry is both lyrical and romantic, because it fuses feeling and perception in the musical

voice of its texts. Of course, Hughes himself has emphasised the importance of the lyrical qualities of poetry:

To my mind, the best of the verse usually called free
always aspires towards ... formal inevitability – a fixed,
unalterable, musical and yet hidden dramatic shape.⁴⁹

His poetry uses this free verse, lyrical structure to great effect. Consider the lyrical qualities, the expressive speaking voice, of “You Hated Spain”. Its reordering of experience is consciously and classically mythological as if in tribute to Plath. Hughes’ personal poetry is becoming many of the things he has said of Plath’s writing. When discussing Olwyn Hughes’ roles as executor of the Plath estate and as sister-protector of her brother Ted, Janet Malcolm writes that the “warily silent Hughes has protected his secrets better than his sister has: no one can use his words against him”.⁵⁰ He has not and they can be is my immediate response. Hughes believes that his life has been invaded, as he pointed out in the strongest terms to Jacqueline Rose.⁵¹ His increased openness about Plath’s work and his editorial management of it have occasioned, to use his own words, “explosive drama”, which was “the beginning of bigger explosions”.⁵² The openness of his contemporary personal poetry is in keeping with his openness about Plath. This thesis will now proceed to chart the evolution of Hughes’ personal poetry.

However, before proceeding I must acknowledge Hughes’ publication of Birthday Letters (1998). This was immediately recognised as a strikingly personal collection focussing on Sylvia.⁵³ I predicted, more than two years ago, in an earlier draft of this thesis, that a collection of this kind would be the next collection to be published by Hughes after New Selected Poems. Birthday Letters is a substantial collection of 197 pages. The strength of its appeal, because of what Miller terms the “domestic, confessional” nature of its poems, is demonstrated by huge initial sales. This thesis, because of time constraint, cannot deal comprehensively with the wealth of new poetry

⁴⁹ T.Hughes, “The Art of Poetry LXX1”, op.cit., p.92.

⁵⁰ J.Malcolm, The Silent Woman, A.A.Knopf, N.Y., 1994, p.50.

⁵¹ T.Hughes, “Letters to the Editor”, Times Literary Supplement, 24 April 1992.

⁵² T.Hughes, “The Art of Poetry LXX1”, op.cit., p.71.

⁵³ See, for example, K.Miller, “Et in America ego”, Times Literary Supplement, 6 February 1998, pp. 3-4.

that the collection presents. Discussion of selected poems from Birthday Letters will occur in the chapter featuring poems about Plath, and discussion of the nature of the new collection will be an important part of the final chapter. The new poems confirm the validity of both my approach and argument.

Poems about war run Stygian-like throughout Hughes' poetry. His interest in the subject comes mainly from the experience of his father, William Hughes, who served in the First World War. His Uncle Walt also served in that war, as did Billy Holt, a friend of the family, and many other people known by Hughes when he was growing up. His father's reticence in recounting his experience of war, the family and friends who bore disfigurements from their service, the piecemeal horrors that he became privy to, and the many cenotaphs standing as solid testimony to the cataclysm which had befallen the world of his elders, all impressed themselves on Hughes from an early age. Another reason for his interest in war was that he had just missed the Second World War and may, like the Auden generation after World War One, have felt some guilt about missing something that both his father and brother had experienced.⁵⁴ His brother Gerald served in the Second World War, but it is to his father's war that Hughes consistently turns.

Hughes lived in a close-knit rural-industrial community still devastated by its experience of the First World War. In "The Rock", his adult mind has forgotten none of the vivid and dramatic impressions of the war that was over before he was born:

But everything in West Yorkshire is slightly unpleasant.
Nothing ever quite escapes into happiness. The people are
not detached enough from the stone, as if they were only
half-born from the earth, and the graves are too near the
surface. A disaster seems to hang around in the air there for
a long time. I can never escape the impression that the
whole region is in mourning for the First World War.⁵⁵

The strong affinity that Hughes has for his father's war is signalled by the "I can never escape" clause. His "secondhand" experience of that war is, nonetheless, intensely personal. The vivid, even vicarious imaginative life of the child plays its part in forming

⁵⁴ A repressed experience that comes out in poems such as "A Motorbike" and "That Morning", as mentioned in later chapters.

⁵⁵ T.Hughes, "The Rock", *The Listener*, 19 September 1963, p.423.

poems about the First World War, but Hughes brings maturity and an enlightened historical perspective to bear on his subject. His poems strive to heal the destructive cultural experience of war, epitomised by World War One as the dehumanising advent of technology-assisted killing on a scale never before known.

In a review of an anthology of First World War poets, written in 1965 and aptly titled “National Ghost”, Hughes gives a clue to his own writing about World War One:

Perhaps what we would like from these poets is fuller descriptive and objective evidence ... We have to remember how they were taken by surprise. It’s that surprise which makes all the difference between the human measure of the first world war and the second. Four years was not long enough, nor Edwardian and Georgian England the right training, nor stunned, somnambulist exhaustion the right condition, for digesting the shock of machine guns, armies of millions, and the plunge into the new dimension, where suddenly and for the first time Adam’s descendants found themselves meaningless. (WP, p.72)

By implication, Hughes sees himself as being in the position to have digested the full effects of the First World War. He is able to write about these from a position of both personal involvement and historical distance.

Statistics, because of their bald enumeration, sometimes fail to convey the human dimension of catastrophic issues experienced by small communities. The Lancashire Fusiliers, to which Hughes’ father belonged, raised some thirty thousand troops during the first world war, and of these 13,642 were listed killed.⁵⁶ However, the human dimension of the Calder region’s catastrophic experience of war is present in the personal and community memories of the First World War that are found in Hughes’ stories, as well as in his poetry. In “Sunday”, this type of memory is pervasive:

⁵⁶ J.Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914 - 1918*, Vol.2, Gale & Polden, Aldershot, 1949, p.462.

Harry Rutley, pale, slow, round, weighed his jack. He had lost the tip of an ear at the Dardanelles and carried a fragment of his fifth rib on the end of his watch-chain. Now he narrowed his eyes, choosing a particular blade of grass at the end of the green. (Wo, p.58)

The young narrator of “Sunday”, Michael, is familiar with the cloud of tragedy that surrounds his father and his friends as they play Sunday bowls. The Memorial Gardens and other features of setting identify its real life counterpart as Mytholmroyd in the nineteen-thirties, the place where Hughes was a young child like Michael from his story. Introducing his short stories collected as Difficulties of a Bridegroom, Hughes writes that “Sunday” (1957) is “about my boyhood in Yorkshire” (DB, p.vii). When Billy Red the rat-catcher is preparing for his feat on the hot cobbles of the Top Wharf Pub yard, Hughes connects him with the cataclysm of some twenty years beforehand:

Billy Red peeled his coat off, exposing an old shirt, army issue, most of the left arm missing. (Wo, p.67)

The fiction of “Sunday” buzzes about the Calder valley life of the nineteen-thirties, in accompaniment to the blue-bottles in the pub yard. The repeated signs of the First World War in this setting, where “to the farthest skyline it was Sunday” (Wo, p.57), suggest how the memory of war is inextricably bound up with the life of the depicted community.

Before he began to produce a significant number of poems dealing with the subject of his father’s war, Hughes showed his interest in the subject. “The Wound” (Wo, pp.104-46), a verse play aired on radio 1 February 1962, is an early manifestation of this interest.⁵⁷ Its macabre underworld settings are, in part, a refraction of Hughes’ indirect experience of the Great War through its impact on his father, mother, uncles, and the wider community. The central character of “The Wound”, Ripley, is being led through a monstrous nightmare landscape by a father figure of sergeant rank, which was William Hughes’ rank in the First World War:

RIPLEY: It’s icy. My feet are going dead.

SERGEANT: Keep going.

RIPLEY: Sarge it's ____

(They shout. Great splash)

SERGEANT: All right, boy?

RIPLEY: It's up to my chin, and I'm on tiptoe. There must be a trench or a hole or ____

SERGEANT: Swim for it, boy, the bottom's gone. Swim for your life.

(The sergeant pulls himself ashore)

All right, boy, catch my hand. (Wo, pp.12-3)

My research conflicts with some things in print and with others that Hughes has spoken of when introducing poems about his father. However, such conflict is limited to William Hughes' early war service in the Dardanelles. An inquiry to the Army Medal Office, Worcestershire, England, netted me a lengthy reply, which raised some questions in this regard. Part of the transcript reads as follows:

Records show that No.10315 Sergeant William HUGHES of the Lancashire Fusiliers earned the 1914 - 15 Star when he entered the BALKANS operational area on 22 July 1915. The Individual Medal Card does not quote the Battalion in which he was serving when he first served overseas. It is known that the 1st, 5th, 8th and 9th Battalions of the Regiment served in the DARDANELLES. He later transferred to the 1/5 Lancashire Fusiliers and was given the Regimental Number 241024. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal in recognition of his distinguished service in FRANCE and FLANDERS.⁵⁸

Using Major-General Latter's two-volume period regimental history, it is possible to establish that William Hughes first served in the 9th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers. This was the only battalion of the regiment to enter the Balkans operational

⁵⁷ K.Sagar & S.Tabor, Ted Hughes, a bibliography 1946-1980, op.cit., G18, p.201.

⁵⁸ A letter to me from A.J.Parsons, Officer-in-Charge, dated 24 May 1991.

theatre, the Dardanelles, on 22 July 1915, which is the date cited by army records for the award of William Hughes' 1914 - 15 Star.⁵⁹ The 1/5th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers entered that same operational theatre on 2 May 1915, and were committed to W and Y beaches on the 5 May 1915.⁶⁰ They followed in the footsteps of the 1st Lancashire Fusiliers, which had landed on W and Y beaches on 25 April 1915, winning "6 V.C.s before breakfast", as is their proud claim. Sir Ian Hamilton recommended that their courage and sacrifice be commemorated by official recognition of their landing on the beaches by the term "Lancashire Landing", but this was not acted upon by the War Office.⁶¹

The 9th Battalion had been formed on 31 August 1914 at Bury and it was the first of Kitchener's New Army measures.⁶² Looking into the war service records of the 9th Battalion led me to question Keith Sagar, who first claimed that only about seventeen members of the entire regiment to which William Hughes was assigned survived Gallipoli.⁶³ This statistic has since found its way into most critical works on Hughes. However, Sagar's reply to me indicates how these things may easily occur:

The source is a series of notes I received from Olwyn Hughes in 1973, which contained the following paragraph:

My father was also on the Dardanelles, an operation from which I believe something like seventeen men returned from his entire regiment. I don't know if this is worth mentioning - the regiment if you want to check ... was the Lancashire Fusiliers .⁶⁴

⁵⁹ J.C.Latter, The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914-1918, op.cit., Vol.2, "Calendar of Moves", p.137ff.

⁶⁰ *ibid*, p.108.

⁶¹ The Times History of the War, Vol.6, The Times, Printing House Square, London, 1921, p.88; General I.Hamilton, Gallipoli Diary, Vol.1, Edward Arnold, London, 1920, p.136; W.J.Harris, English County Regiments, The Lancashire Fusiliers", This England, Summer 1984, Artisan Press, Cheltenham, 1984, p.66.

⁶² J.C.Latter, The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914-1918, op.cit., Vol.1, p.91.

⁶³ K.Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, op.cit., p.6.

⁶⁴ A letter to me from Keith Sagar dated 1 May 1992.

Keith Sagar wrote to me some eighteen months later, having used the detail of army records I had supplied to him to question Ted Hughes about his father's war service. The text of most of this letter is as follows:

... Last Sunday I went to York to hear a reading by Ted. He read several new poems from a sequence about his father. The following day I wrote to him:

Introducing one of the poems about your father you said he was in the First Fifth Lancashire Fusiliers which landed on Gallipoli on 6 May, and that only eleven men "got off". The Gallipoli landings began 25 April 1915, but according to army records, your father did not enter the Balkans operational area until 22 July ... There were fresh landings at Suvla Bay on 6 August in which your father probably took part. The last British troops left Gallipoli 8 January 1916. The 9th left Gallipoli with only 4 officers out of 29, and with fewer than 100 men. So the figure of eleven (or seventeen as Olwyn recalled it to me in a letter twenty years ago) cannot refer to the whole regiment, but presumably to the landing party or battalion or company of which your father was a member. I take it you were just speaking from your memory of what your father had told you and family tradition? Do you have any records against which to check any of this?

I have now had a reply in which he says:

Interesting what you say about Lancs. Fus. I only recall my Dad's "First of the Fifth" - he had a jingle about it, which I've forgotten. His DCM watch has 1/5th, but he got that in Sept. 1918. I never actually asked him just where he landed,

would you believe it. But if he joined up ... in Bury, within a day or two of war being declared (in the queue, he was two away from Billy Holt), I had assumed he joined the 1/5 then ... And I understand that only the first conscripts [sic.] (first few days) went into the 1st ... Still, I'm not sure! Then he was in Egypt etc. The survivors I remember not as 11 but as 3.⁶⁵

William Hughes first saw action in the Suvla Bay landings that attempted to open up the Gallipoli campaign. The 9th Battalion of the Lancashire Fusiliers, as the first of the New Army or Kitchener battalions of the regiment, had been fitted out into khaki drill and sun helmets, then been given ten days special training for its imminent landing on the Gallipoli peninsular. On 6 August 1915 the 9th received orders authorising it to be transported from the island of Imbros to effect a landing at Suvla Bay along with massed troops from the Empire.

Major-General Latter's regimental history records all this, and the factors that combined to frustrate the successful landing of troops at Suvla Bay. The secrecy of the operations precluded adequate reconnaissance of the landing site, operational maps were inaccurate, and then the lighters setting out for the beach from the anchored transport ships ran aground on shoals about fifty yards off the sand.⁶⁶ Turkish artillery shelled the beach along with fierce machine gun fire on the lighters and the struggling troops. The 9th Battalion split into three companies as they sought their operational target of Hill 10.

It took them another two days to attain the spur of Hill 10, which represented commendable forward progress since the maps had been wrong and the landing a failure. They had lost their commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Welstead, in the landing. Another fourteen officers were dead or wounded, and an unknown number of ordinary ranks were casualties. Then some died when Turkish artillery set the scrub ablaze, others died of thirst, and others were fired upon by another British regiment on their right.

⁶⁵ A letter to me from Keith Sagar dated 6 November 1993.

⁶⁶ J.C.Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914-1918*, op.cit., Vol.1, p70ff.

On 9 August 1915, the battalion came under the direst Turkish shelling and fire for the entire night. By 22 August the 9th was involved in bitter trench warfare and repeated charges across no-man's land. Its intensive experience of war had cost the battalion dearly:

Though details are lacking, it is clear that the Battalion clung gallantly to its objective for nineteen hours without any response to its repeated calls for help and finally had to fall back to its starting point, with less than 100 men left and no officers or warrant officers left. Of the 29 officers who had embarked for Gallipoli on the 5 July, only 4 were still unhurt by the 22 August.⁶⁷

William Hughes later transferred to the 1/5th. He earned the Distinguished Conduct Medal (D.C.M.) while serving with the battalion in France and Flanders. It is this time of the war that dominates Hughes' poetry. It is recreated in poems as a pivotal crisis in which life triumphs, largely because his father's survival was heavily challenged and most fortuitous.

Captain G.B.Horridge (5th Btn., Lancashire Fusiliers) gives some idea of the intensity of battle and the precarious nature of the soldier's lot in the period leading up to the Allied offensive of August 1918:

I couldn't give anybody an order because I thought, well, I might as well take out my revolver and kill them here, for they'd be sure to be hit the moment they went outside. So I simply said, "Captain Tickler is signaling for stretcher-bearers". There were two stretcher-bearers there. One was Holt, a Rochdale boy who had been a corporal, but he had lost his stripe through some misconduct. The other was called Renshaw. As soon as the words were out of my mouth Holt said, "Well, I'm ready to go". And Renshaw said, "Yes, well, I'll go too".

Holt went first. He crawled through the door and we pushed the stretcher after him. He stood up and got hold of the stretcher and put it on his shoulder, and just at that very moment there was a burst of machine-gun fire that knocked the stretcher right off his back and on to the ground. He simply bent down, picked it up, put it back on his shoulders and off they both went. I like to think that the Germans saw the stretcher and knew what they were about.⁶⁸

August 1918 marked the turning point in the First World War. A massive allied offensive mounted on 21 August saw the Germans pushed back to their Hindenburg Line. William Hughes was part of this operation. Paul Nash, the renowned artist whose works focussed on this part of the war, painted the surreal and too real nightmare that the cratered and lit landscape became as the dogs of war were unleashed in earnest. Gas, machine guns and heavy artillery exacted dreadful carnage as the Hindenburg Line was breached. William Hughes earned his citation during this period:

For conspicuous courage and great leadership during the period of 21st August to 8th November, 1918. In September, 1918, at Ypres, during very heavy shellfire he had three men of his platoon wounded; he took each man on his back in turn and carried him to the aid post, although exposed to heavy shell fire throughout each journey.⁶⁹

Walter Farrar served in the Great War, but, unlike his brother-in-law, William Hughes, Walter first went to France and Flanders. He saw action in the Somme, in the war of attrition that ground on through 1915 and 1916. It claimed some 420,000 British lives, 200,000 French lives and 450,000 German lives.⁷⁰ Walter Farrar was in the High Wood, Delville Wood and Happy Valley sector. The Historical Information Officer of the

⁶⁷ J.C.Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914-1918*, op.cit., Vol.1, p.78.

⁶⁸ L.McDonald, *They Called It Passchendaele*, Penguin, London, 1978, p.163.

⁶⁹ *Supplement to the London Gazette*, 11 March 1920, p.3056, entry for 241024, Sjt. W.Hughes, 1/5th Bn., Lan.Fus., T.F. (Hebden Bridge).

⁷⁰ A.Horne, *Death of a Generation*, Macdonald Library of the 20th Century, London, 1970, p.136.

Western Front Association, Cambridge, gives a neat summation of the Battle of High Wood:

The fighting for High Wood ... started in July 1916 ... and the wood was captured by 47th London Division in mid-September 1916. During those two months, a number of units from all over Britain were involved in the fighting there, including 19th Western Division (a “Kitchener” formation) of 111 Corps and 5th and 7th Divisions (both Regular Army), 33rd Division (another “Kitchener” formation) and 51st Highland Division (like 47th London, a pre-war Territorial division), all of XV Corps, during the fighting from 20th to 25th July 1916. Two of the units in 19th Division were the 7th Bn East Lancs and 7th Bn South Lancs, and these seem the most likely in which Walter Farrar may have served, given that he probably enlisted at Hebden Bridge.⁷¹

Robert Graves was in the same sector. His recollection shows the futility that troops felt during the war of attrition, irrespective of the imminence of victory, which was, as it turned out, seized in the week after Graves wrote the following:

Next evening, July 19th (1916), we were relieved and told that we would be attacking High Wood, which could be seen a thousand yards away to the right at the top of a slope. High Wood, which the French called “Raven Wood”, formed part of the main German battle-line that ran along the ridge, with Delville Wood not far off on the German left. Two British brigades had already attempted it; in both cases a counter-attack drove them out again. The Royal Welch were now reduced by casualties to about four hundred strong ... I took command of “B” company ...

We were sitting on the ground, protected by a road-bank; a battery of French 75's began firing rapid over our heads from about twenty yards away. There was an even greater concentration of guns in Happy Valley now. We could barely hear the colonel's words, but understood that if we did get orders to reinforce, we were to shake out in artillery formation; once in the wood, we were to hang on like death. Then he said goodbye and good luck, and we rejoined our companies.⁷²

Soldiers were being thrown into the battle with little warning or organised support. This harrying warfare worked on the enemy, but also on the British, for it used up lives. Graves was seriously wounded and one-third of his battalion was lost before their stint of battle had begun.⁷³

Images and memories contained in Hughes' "Under High Wood" section of "Walt" are substantiated by military history. In the poem, Hughes' ironic use of "the happy valley" refers to a war setting, as this account of the road through Happy Valley and on to High Wood indicates:

We went up to a place and, believe it or not, they called it Happy Valley! On the way up there was a trench at right angles to where we was, and it was full of dead Germans, just standing there where they'd been shot. You could see their heads and shoulders, just stood up there where they'd been firing from. They hadn't fallen down and they'd gone as black as pitch.⁷⁴

In "Walt", the uncle "frowned uphill towards the skyline tree-fringe" of High Wood, from much the same vantage point described by Graves in the extract from his

⁷¹ A letter to me from Ronald Clifton dated 26 June 1995.

⁷² R. Graves, *Goodbye To All That*, 2nd edn., Cassell & Company, London, 1958, pp.190-2.

⁷³ *ibid*, p.193.

⁷⁴ L. McDonald, *Somme*, Penguin, London, 1983, p.141.

autobiographical account. Nephew and uncle “stood in the young March corn”, in a field described through war diary accounts:

When at last the cavalry were sent in, pennants fluttering across the ripening corn, to take the wood with the battle-weary 7th division, nine hours had been lost.⁷⁵

Another account of the same cavalry action vividly recreates the scene:

It was an incredible sight, an unbelievable sight, they galloped up with their lances and pennants flying, up the slope to High Wood and straight into it. Of course they were falling all the way because the infantry were attacking on the other side of the valley furthest away from us, and the cavalry were attacking very near to where we were. So the German machine-guns were going for the infantry and the shells were falling all over the place. I’ve never seen anything like it! They simply galloped on through all that and horses and men were dropping on the ground, with no hope against the machine-guns, because the Germans up on the ridge were firing down into the valley where the soldiers were. It was an absolute rout. A magnificent sight. Tragic.⁷⁶

The speaker of “Under High Wood”, obviously based on Hughes because of the connection of personal details running throughout “Walt”, is “the age he’d (Walter Farrar) been” when the war raged. Hughes’ uncle, born in 1894, was in his early twenties. Lucas Myers recalled for Anne Stevenson something that aligns with the poetic chronology:

⁷⁵ A.Horne, *Death of a Generation*, op.cit., p.85.

⁷⁶ L.McDonald, *Somme*, op.cit., pp.137-8.

Ted had been to the Continent several times, once on a wine tour with his Uncle Walt, a small manufacturer, and most recently on his honeymoon ...⁷⁷

“My Uncle’s Wound”⁷⁸ corroborates the suggested chronology of Hughes’ trip with his uncle. This poem was published in 1961, and mentions many details that are later present in “Walt”. In “My Uncle’s Wound”, the “grass is in its fortieth generation” (after his uncle’s war service), and a nephew and his uncle walk about in a “March washing wind” amidst “pale watercolour wheat”. Extra details of the scene, which are not repeated in “Walt”, specify the location as the approach to High Wood, for elements of Hughes’ “My Uncle’s Wound” match the eye-witness accounts that appear on the last couple of pages.

While the personal influence of the First World War may be gauged through simply reading the poems that Hughes writes about it, the impact of that war upon the Calder requires some elaboration. In those days the community included many small communities and adjoining valleys and dales, all knowing each other via the family and war service links that softened their fierce and distrustful insularity only slightly. Indeed, the savage parochialism that characterised the south Pennines during these times was straight out of Brontë:

You were either a Top Ender or a Bottom Ender at Pudsey, and in the Pennine valleys, where in any case nicknames were necessary to distinguish the ramifications of the indigenous families, you might be a Slowiter or a Marsdener in the Colne valley. Everybody knew everybody in their own little orbit, and others were outsiders. At the beginning of this century in remote places such as Heptonstall they threw sods at strangers shouting “Scutch up rotten pockets”, a demand for pennies; and signaled

⁷⁷ A. Stevenson, *Bitter Fame, A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Penguin, London, 1989, p.316.

⁷⁸ T. Hughes, *Poetry at the Mermaid*, Poetry Book Society, Weerisham Press, London, 1961, pp.41-3.

their arrival by knocking from house to house on the backs
of fireplaces.⁷⁹

Both sides of Hughes' family lived within shouting distance of Heptonstall. William Hughes was recruited from Hebden Bridge, five hundred feet or more straight down from the ancient weaving village. The total of soldiers killed in the First World War was astronomical for those times, with 13,642 casualties officially listed for the Lancashire Fusiliers alone.⁸⁰ This regiment drew on the valleys of the neighbouring counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Many Calder valley men, William Hughes, Walter Farrar and Billy Holt among them, "took the King's shilling" and were mobilised from regimental headquarters at Bury, Lancashire. Other regiments drawing on men from the same pan-county area of the south Pennines were the Yorkshire and the West Yorkshire regiments, the West Riding regiment and the King's Own (Yorkshire Light Infantry) regiment, and the York and Lancaster regiment.

Most of the villages and towns of the region put up Rolls of Honour and cenotaphs to commemorate the terrible sacrifice that the Great War had asked of them. In Hughes' birthplace, Mytholmroyd, the Memorial Gardens was a civic works project to the memory of the local fallen. Its war memorial was unveiled at a ceremony held 2 July 1922.⁸¹ In short story and verse, Hughes remembers the Memorial Gardens. In "Sunday", from *Wodwo*, it is recollected with impatience, for it is a circuitous passage keeping young Michael from the drama of Billy Red and his rat catching:

He turned into the Memorial Gardens, past prams,
rockeries, forbidden grass, trees with labels, and over the
ornamental canal bridge to the bowling greens that lay on
the level between canal and river. (*Wo*, p.58)

"Rhododendrons" (*RE*, p.87) recollects the Memorial Gardens as "the graveyard park", and also epitomises the losses suffered in the valley though the line "Cenotaphs and

⁷⁹ M.Hartley & J.Ingilby, *Life and Tradition in West Yorkshire*, J.M.Dent & Sons, London, 1976, p.92.

⁸⁰ J.Latter, *The History of the Lancashire Fusiliers, 1914-1918*, op.cit., Vol.2, p.462.

⁸¹ M.Darke, *Mytholmroyd Heritage Walk*, Waddingtons, Todmorden, Lancashire, 1987, p.14.

moor-silence!” Throughout the Calder valley, travelers may see that “the gravestones and cenotaphs of the Lancashire Fusiliers dot the hillsides”.⁸²

Glyn Hughes, poet and author living in Sowerby Bridge, eight miles eastward from Mytholmroyd and Hebden Bridge, has written an historical novel about the impact of the Great War on the region. His protagonist, a drag artist given over to compulsive diary entries, touches the “smoking blood” that Ted Hughes’ “Six Young Men” unearths from its sepia photograph:

The next Lancashire village I reached no one cared who I was. I met the postman who had delivered telegrams, having to go from home to home with his black-bordered messages. He was weeping in the public house. All the young men in the village, belonging to one battalion, had been slaughtered with one burst of machine-gun fire. All gone, within an hour, somewhere.⁸³

The death of young men in war is always tragic, but the effect that Glyn Hughes describes - the loss of all the young men of the village - is numbing. In 1847 the ecclesiastical district population for Mytholmroyd (which included surrounding hamlets and villages) was 3,400.⁸⁴ Losses must have come like a thunderclap to these places.

Such losses stayed with Hughes. They account for “the woe-dark under my mother’s eyes” that he includes in “Out”. “She grieved for her girlhood and the fallen”, he writes in “Leaf Mould” from Wolfwatching. The impact of technological warfare on battle strategies that were ancient - trench warfare and sieging - was the curse that befell soldiers in the first world war. Massive death tolls occurred, sometimes in mere minutes, and home communities were left in appalled astonishment. Killing power is a media event in our world of today, but to the generation of the Great War, and to their children, the mounting death toll seemed an apocalyptic sign. Hughes writes personally of these rites of passage that ended, forever, any careless attitudes to war. The presence of World

⁸² L. Scigaj, Form and Imagination: The Poetry of Ted Hughes, Iowa U.P., Iowa City, 1986, p.235.

⁸³ G.Hughes, The Antique Collector, Simon & Schuster, London, 1990, p.253.

⁸⁴ M.Darke, Mytholmroyd Heritage Walk, op.cit.,p.7.

War One is pervasive in Ted Hughes' poetry, from the time of his early writing to his contemporary works.

"Six Young Men" (THR, pp.54-5) opens with a remark that looks quickly back at its title, then fixedly into the future of the poem: "The celluloid of a photograph holds them well, - / Six young men, familiar to their friends". The foreshadowing of "holds them well" indicates the blurring which takes place as the poet manipulates his own focus upon the photograph in order to bring the deaths of the six young men to life. Death is mentioned casually as the speaker picks up the photograph and begins to describe its image. While this is happening, a fundamental irony cannot escape notice:

Four decades that have faded and ochre-tinged

This photograph have not wrinkled the faces or the hands.

The "permanent youth" of the six young men is the feature of the photograph that the speaker finds most fascinating. Their appearance and their existence are stopped four decades in the past. Details of the observed photograph become more intimate, effectively transposing a celluloid existence into a more human dimension. Aspects of appearance, such as the "cocked hats (that) are not now fashionable" and the engaging snippet that reveals the six "trimmed for a Sunday jaunt", build human interest. This connection strengthens with the more personal details related by the speaker, and because of the tragedy which is an integral part of the photograph:

... One imparts an intimate smile,

One chews a grass, one lowers his eyes, bashful,

One is ridiculous with cocky pride -

Six months after this picture they were all dead.

This represents a dramatic clash of the youthful play of the young men with the annihilation of each. The backdrop of the photograph, the natural beauty of its location, strikes a chord with the speaker:

... I know

That bilberried bank, that thick tree, that black wall,

Which are there yet and not changed. From where these sit

You hear the water of seven streams fall

To the roarer in the bottom, and through all

The leafy valley a rumouring of air go.
Pictured here, their expressions listen yet,
And still that valley has not changed its sound
Though their faces are four decades under the ground.

The continuity and seeming permanence of Nature form a tension with the human presence in the same photograph. Nature lasts, while human life is curtailed by the complexities of human existence. The direst calamity of war reaches out to devour the vitality of six young lives and to bury “their faces ... four decades under the ground”. The continuance of the natural scenery found in the photograph is partly treated as a metaphor of loss in “Six Young Men”. “You hear the water of seven streams fall/ To the roarer at the bottom, and through all/ The leafy valley a rumouring of air go” recalls the fate of the six photographed youths and the impact of their fate upon the living, memories of them persisting as “a rumouring of air” after their “fall/ To the roarer at the bottom”.

Heightened by the friendship and playfulness that are met with death, the mid-poem war setting contrasts grimly with the peacetime photograph. The speaker testifies to the unforgiving and impersonal nature of the conduct of war:

The rest, nobody knows what they came to,
But come to the worst they must have done, and held it
Closer than their hope; all were killed.

In the penultimate stanza, the “locket of a smile” seen in the photograph is also the grimace of the skull, a “smile/ Forty years rotting into soil”. “Such contradictory permanent horrors” are the focus of the final stanza of “Six Young Men”. Imagination shifts the “six celluloid smiles” to a dimension where their presence is as “vivid as their smoking blood”, for they are the “undead spokesmen” for those who fell in the First World War. The focus shifts from the photograph to an uneasy longshot of trauma and residual destructive energy.

Hughes does not permit the personal dimension of “Six Young Men”, the actual cherished family photograph and its personal significance, to emerge overtly or confessionally. Pamela Law heard him talk about the shot taken in the “happy valley” of Crimsworth Dean:

In his recent reading at the Adelaide Arts Festival [March 1976] Hughes spoke about this poem. The photograph was taken in the valley below Hughes' childhood home, the young men were his father's friends, who joined up together, were killed together. His father alone survived. The photograph was part of family legend, much talked about...⁸⁵

Pronominal use is a significant factor in Hughes' poetry. The first person occurs only in the second stanza of the poem in "I know/ That bilberried bank", which is further distinguished from the rest of the poem by its evocative cadence, hinging on "and through all/ The leafy valley a rumouring of air go". Away from this more personal tone, the poem moves towards its more generalised and universalised conclusion through use of the impersonal pronoun "one". The use of "one" generalises and universalises by bringing the reader into the poem and powerfully applying its account of death to their own situation as a living being:

Such contradictory permanent horrors here
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out
One's own body from its instant and its heat..

In "Bayonet Charge" (THR, p.51), a brief action from the First World War is a metaphor for existence. The remote, supercharged universe that features in The Hawk in the Rain is present in all elements of the scene. An impersonal voice dominates "Bayonet Charge", more than in "Six Young Men". The "cold clockwork of the stars" and the "blue crackling air" represent the dynamic and threatening operation of massive powers beyond human knowledge and reasoning. A fragment of the First World War is caught up in this vortex, too, a soldier "running/ Like a man who has jumped up in the dark and runs/ Listening between his footfalls for the reason". As in the short story "Harvesting" (Wo, pp.91-2), where Grooby enters the body of a hare and experiences its fate at the

⁸⁵ P.Law, "Poetry as Ritual: Ted Hughes", Sydney Studies in English, Vol.2, 1976-7, G.A.Wilkes & A.P.Riemer (eds), Wentworth Press, Sydney, 1977, p76.

jaws of pursuing dogs, the anonymous soldier glimpses the probable result of his bayonet charge:

... Then the shot-slashed furrows

Threw up a yellow hare that rolled like a flame
And crawled in a threshing circle, its mouth wide
Open silent, its eyes standing out.

“Bayonet Charge” presents a stark, tightly structured scene that focuses upon “terror’s touchy dynamite”. In the context of The Hawk in the Rain, human fear and retreat from the crashing forces of the universe are “terror’s touchy dynamite”. “Six Young Men” presents a similar scenario with its emphasis on “smoking blood” and “permanent horrors” that “might well dement”.

“Flanders, 1960”⁸⁶ associates poppies in a Flanders field with the first world war carnage that lies under the very soil in which these Remembrance Day symbols grow. Hughes is dealing with a paradox that commands his attention in “Six Young Men”, with its photograph of “contradictory permanent horrors”, or in “Mayday on Holderness”(L, pp.11-12) with its coexisting cycles of birth and death. The poem is an uneasy epitaph, one without a sense of finality:

Dead eyeballs blurred by hard rain.
Mouths that grin into mud and
Puddles unwinding heavy crimson.

They hear nothing of peace.
They remain locked in their problem.
The young clover cannot distract them.

Personification of the poppies renders them as corpses. The final line alone suggests their identity. The poem is a metaphor of the war, with the poppies being focussed on its subterranean mass graves, bowed with “Dead eyeballs”, bowed by “hard rain”, over the

⁸⁶ T.Hughes, “Flanders, 1960”, Observer, 16 April 1961, p.31.

memory of great bloodshed. Puddles, which reflect the brilliant red of poppies, are coloured by the bloodiness of remembrance.

An uncollected poem, “My Uncle’s Wound”,⁸⁷ revisits the fields of Normandy. The memory prompting this particular poem is obviously reshaped in “Walt” twenty-eight years later. Meanwhile, “My Uncle’s Wound” is a poem of its time, which is signified by its ending:

But I know memory
As I know the blood-crammed dried out rabbit-coloured
Crumbs of soil that thicken this earth.
Or the blinding of the sun, or the green wheat blades

Sucking the crumbled soil
Into their glistenings.

These lines embrace the exhilarating primacy of being, and move apart from the uncle. However, repeated use of the personal pronouns “I” and “my”, and the autobiographical basis of the text, are factors that make “My Uncle’s Wound” a more directly personal poem than the others we have looked at so far.

The bloodiness of remembrance captured succinctly in “Flanders, 1960” is rendered much more personally in “Out” (*Wo*, pp.155-7), particularly in its final section called “Remembrance Day”. Its title signifies the Armistice that ended the First World War on 11 November 1918, and its central image is the poppy:

The poppy is a wound, the poppy is the mouth
Of the grave, maybe of the womb searching -

A canvas-beauty puppet on a wire
Today whoring everywhere. It is years since I wore one.

There is an emotional involvement in the conceptual distinction made by the couplets. The first relates to the integument of feeling and thought that formed “Flanders, 1960”, consisting of a horrified respect for the symbolism and its paradoxical brute reality.

However, the next stanza is dismissive of the consumerism and artificial life of the same symbol. There is bitterness, too, about its devaluation. "Today whoring everywhere" conveys this stridently. "It is years since I wore one" represents a firm personal decision not to sponsor a cosmetic ceremony that commemorates an event which is part of the speaker's own history and being.

"Remembrance Day", despite this beginning, proceeds in an attempt to exorcise the meaning that the First World War has for the speaker. Recollections of "shrapnel that shattered my father's paybook" and "the woe-dark under my mother's eye" are directly and personally expressed. These memories of war are ingrained into family life and, hence, into the psyche of the speaker, who confesses that they

Gripped me, and all his dead

Gripped him to a time

He no more than they could outgrow, but, cast into one,

like iron,

Hung deeper than refreshing of ploughs...

The essential paradox of the father's miraculous survival, in the eyes of the son, and the father's stopped existence, his belonging to the underworld of his comrades in arms, possesses a solidity that is "cast into one,/ like iron".

The title of the poem of which "Remembrance Day" is the final section is significant. "Out" voices Hughes' intention to push out into the open the memories and experience of himself and his parents, particularly his father. The close of "Remembrance Day" is, in line with this intention, an attempt at exorcising the demons of memory about his father's war:

So goodbye to that bloody-minded flower.

You dead bury your dead.

Goodbye to the cenotaphs on my mother's breasts.

Goodbye to the remaindered charms of my father's

⁸⁷ T.Hughes, *Poetry at the Mermaid*, op.cit., pp.41-3.

survival.

Let England close. Let the green sea-anemone close.

The war is not exorcised from Hughes' consciousness. By relating England and the anemone, Hughes emphasises the fatal attractiveness present in both the human and natural worlds. The anemone is superficially charming, but its charm is a lure into danger. It lures the unwary, grips them, paralyses them with its venomous nematodes, and melts them in its final embrace. Wartime England, for King and Country, was a socio-political construct mimicking the anemone. The poet remains "gripped" by the memories of war and the possibility of its reoccurrence.

It is the beginning of "Out", "The Dream Time", which explains the unsuccessful exorcism of the First World War. It also accounts for a successful "outing" of the meaning it holds for Hughes. Note the emotional milieu, Hughes' personal involvement in the ramifications of his subject, which colours "The Dream Time":

My father sat in his chair recovering
 From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,
 Body buffeted wordless, estranged by long soaking
 In the colours of mutilation.

His outer perforations

Were valiantly healed, but he and the hearth-fire, its
blood-flicker

On biscuit-bowl and piano and table-leg,
 Moved into strong and stronger possession
 Of minute after minute, as the clock's tiny cog
 Laboured and on the thread of his listening
 Dragged him bodily from under
 The mortised four-year strata of dead Englishmen
 He belonged with.

This initial setting in "Out" is a child's-eye view, which focuses on table-leg and other aspects of the home accessible to one who is "small and four". However, an adult's cognisance is brought to bear on the remembered setting. The child of the nineteen-

thirties and the adult of three decades later meet as the father's "luckless double,/ His memory's buried, immovable anchor".

The lasting impact of such memories upon the speaker is epitomised by the moody environment created at the end of "The Dream Time":

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.

Inside the home is the war which "gripped" the father and son. Outside there is the rain, which further shuts them in, sealing them in a psychodrama that is the legacy of war - the miracle of survival begrudgingly given and received. The trauma of the war continues in the nineteen-thirties setting. Ultimately, in "Out", Hughes does push out into the open strong, personal memories that have universal meaning. However, the residual destructive power of the First World War is not exorcised.

The confessional elements of "Out" are continued in later poems, and, though it is another ten years before Hughes again turns to the subject of his father's war, his writings then further substantiate the fact that "Out" did not provide the conclusive exorcism of the influence of the First World War. "He Hears Lithe Trees and Last Leaves Swatting the Glass" (Q, #16) is the bridging poem between "Out" and a succession of others that turn again to the subject of the First World War.

"He Hears Lithe Trees ... " has an eerie connection with elements of the scene described in "Slump Sundays" (Wg, p.4). The "lithe trees and last leaves swatting the glass" are the "girlish birches (which) waved at the window" in the more recent but identical setting of The Beacon, the house of Hughes' parents at Heptonstall Slack. Furthermore, the "Golden-haired" of "He Hears Lithe Trees and Last Leaves Swatting the Glass" identifies William Hughes as he is described in "Dust As We Are" (Wg, pp.10-1) with "his wavy, golden hair", when the poet was a child and his father was in his prime.

"He Hears Lithe Trees ... " takes up the father's situation as an old man gazing into the hearth-fire "through the grille of age". His ambivalent attitude to the Great War is expressed with an earthy poignancy:

Remorseful for what nobody any longer suffers
Nostalgic for what he would not give twopence to see back
Hopeful for what he will not miss when it fails ...

The old man mourns the fact that nobody thinks of those times any more, except the survivors like himself, yet he would not wish those days upon anyone. The old soldier's nostalgia is contrasted with a memory that ends the poem, of William Hughes,

Who lay a night and a day and a night and a day
Golden-haired, while his friend beside him
Attending a small hole in his brow
Ripened black.

The conclusion of "He Hears Lithe Trees ..." supplements the detail already passed on to us about the father's war experience in "Out". However, the father's advanced age, together with his memories of war from a world the present has forgotten, help melt the distance that the poet kept from his subject in "Out", particularly in its final section, "Remembrance Day". In retrospect, largely because of the Wolfwatching poems about war that reveal so much, "He Hears Lithe Leaves ..." might be viewed as the most personal of Hughes' earlier poems about the First World War and his father. It seems to be a simple poem where the poet's sympathy for his father is quietly spoken.

"Dust As We Are" (Wg, pp.10-1) substantiates an assertion made in the introduction to this chapter pertaining to the imaginative trauma that Hughes' childhood experience of his elders' war later brought into his poems. The poem begins with an extended reiteration of the opening section of "Out", "The Dream Time":

My post-war father was so silent
He seemed to be listening. I eavesdropped
On the hot line. His lonely sittings
Mangled me, in secret - like TV
Watched too long, my nerves lasered.

The oppressive silence of the father is again echoed in the covert suffering and guilt experienced by the speaker. The words "hot line" and "nerves lasered" disturb the weighty stillness and thick silence of the scene, and their anachronistic modernity in the

remembered nineteen-thirties setting indicates the hidden elements of the scene in “Dust As We Are”.

At work here is Hughes’ interpretation of psychological factors present in the described situation. His focus is the enforced introspection that an inability to communicate brings about. The boy, in attempting to share his father’s agony, falls victim to the memories of war that his father is compelled to relive. The son, embracing the dangerous and the mysterious, hopes to help the father, but his empathy takes him down towards his father’s underworld.

The boy enters the memories of his father, alerting us to the fact that “Dust As We Are” is a painful introspective journey:

Then an after image of the incessant
Mowing passage of machine-gun effects,
What it filled a trench with.

Immersed in the scene, the boy describes the carnage of the trenches as if he himself was bearing witness. An adult voice then succeeds to that of the child, freeing the text of the poem from the pall of its underworld setting:

And his laugh
(How had that survived - so nearly intact?)
Twitched the curtain never quite deftly enough
Over the hospital wards
Crowded with his (photographed) shock-eyed pals.

The speaker, through a photograph, knows the father’s “shock-eyed pals”, which is the situation in the earlier “Six Young Men”. This particular hospital photograph is described in detail in Plath’s short story entitled “All The Dead Dears” (JP, p.184).

Its opening comment is built upon by the second stanza of “Dust As We Are”, for it leaves behind guilt and fearful fascination. “I was his supplementary convalescent” is a progression from the guilty psychodrama behind the earlier “I eavesdropped/ On the hot line”. The poem from this point strives for universality, to express the dire truths about the waging of war in the twentieth century. The speaker articulates the horrors alive beneath the father’s silence, while also revealing the disfigurement felt in himself - an inherited deformity, a pathetic curse that is both loathsome and pitiable.

We read that the father “took up his pre-war *joie de vivre*”, but are privy to the fact that such “displays of muscular definition/ Were a bleached montage”. The precision behind the choice of contrasting the “muscular definition” of the father, his apparent certainty in his force and wholeness, with the undeniable loss of faith and belief he had suffered gives rise to the “bleached montage” image. A montage is a selected and reassembled sequence of filmed action, and “bleached” denotes a caustic blanching. A “bleached montage” conveys the subtly altered, mutated life that survived the war, and, eerily, the association of film points inexorably back to “(photographed) shock-eyed pals” who also came back from the trenches.

Predatory memories that stalk the father are imaged as “lit landscapes” and “Swampquakes of the slime of puddled soldiers”. They draw him into his waking nightmare underworld during his “lonely sittings”. “Naked men”, who “Slithered staring where their mothers and sisters/ Would never have to meet their eyes”, are the father’s hidden world of thorns. Imagery of cleansing, whiteness, innocence, fragility and worship are now the successors of the sufferings dealt with in “Dust As We Are”. The combination of these gentler strands of imagery lulls the reader into a cathartic state, but the conclusion to the poem forces an encounter with the menacing presence that has skulked behind the family portrait of a father, his son and the First World War.

“He had been heavily killed. But we had revived him” is welded to “There he sat, killed but alive - so long/ As we were very careful”, and it is this admixture of the idea of the miraculous with its questioning and doubt that helps to form the mystery with which “Dust As We Are” concludes. The images of “very white - marble white”, “we had revived him”, “he taught us silence like prayer”, “fragility of skull” and “mother’s milk” mesh to establish the father’s miraculous return to peacetime life. At the same time, these images indicate his ethereal presence - he is “marble white”, solid and cleansed but likened to the material the graveyard mason works with, and his “fragility of skull” possesses a haunting innocence which belies what he has survived.

A memory the speaker has of combing his father’s hair, fresh from being washed, ushers an intimacy into the poem which epitomises his empathetic suffering as his father’s “supplementary convalescent”. This brief episode becomes the crucible for the poem’s universality. The recollected intimacy sees the speaker vacillate between love and

acceptance, and fear and recoil. “After mother’s milk”, he realises, the other food for the soul might well be the “soap-smell spectre/ Of the massacre of innocents”:

So the soul grew.

A strange thing, with rickets - a hyena.

No singing - that kind of laughter.

The soul, that “strange thing with rickets”, is linked to the hyena, which, in its turn is traditionally linked to scavenging and to the grave, its peculiar “laughter” echoing through the vast dry lands. Humanity is the “Dust As We Are” of the poem’s title, in the biblical explanation of our coming into life and our leaving of it. In between these mysterious extremes, we are dust blown by the winds of historical accident, such as the First World War, and we are only ever partially redeemed from an association with enormous crimes committed essentially in innocence.

“Dust As We Are” is, of course, a specific reference to the poetry of Wordsworth. The title is a quotation from Book 1, “Childhood and School-Time”, of Wordsworth’s 1850 Prelude, in which the pains and regrets of youth are reconciled within the mature person:

Dust as we are, the immortal Spirit grows
Like harmony in music; there is a dark
Inscrutable workmanship that reconciles
Discordant elements, makes them cling together
In one society. How strange that all
The terrors, pains, and early miseries,
Regrets, vexations, lassitudes interfused
Within my mind, should e’er have borne a part,
And that a needful part, in making up
The calm existence that is mine when I
Am worthy of myself! Praise to the end! ⁸⁸

⁸⁸ W. Wordsworth, The Prelude, A Parallel Text, J.C. Maxwell (ed.), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1971, (1850), Book 1, pp. 53-4, ll. 340-350.

Hughes' ironic allusiveness is evident in his speaker's acceptance that Wordsworth's discordant elements might cling together in one society, yet this has no bearing on belief in the chance of individual happiness in an ordered universe. Furthermore, Hughes' allusion is to the first great autobiographical poem in the language, the work of a north-country poet, and one in which the poet seeks to re-define his creativity in terms of parental archetypes and his native region. Clearly, Hughes' allusive tribute arises because of these similarities.

"For the Duration" (Wg, pp.22-3) is a companion of "Dust As We Are", for it also treats the subject of the First World War by featuring the poet's father. Its opening lines tell of a boy's "strange fear" when talk of war started up, like "a creeping barrage", in his father's presence. In this poem, as with the situation in "Dust As We Are", the boy thinks of himself as his father's "supplementary convalescent". "Jig and jag", he had "fitted most of it together". "Jig" suggests surprising discoveries that thrill rather than shock their discoverer, while "jag" connotes those discoveries painfully glimpsed. Both sorts lodge themselves into the order of a perceived pattern, as in a jigsaw, that seems to have "fitted most of it (the father's war experience) together" from the child's point of view.

Both pride and relief are present at the start of the next stanza: "Our treasure, your D.C.M." stresses the father's survival, hence, his family life contrasts markedly with the bleak theatre of war and an award received in recognition of service. The rendered citation for the father's commendation humanises its remoter setting. However, the speaker's focus on the realms of good fortune and the miraculous is most significant:

Carrying in the wounded
Collapsing with exhaustion. And as you collapsed
A shell-burst
Just in front of you lifting you upright
For the last somnambulist yards
Before you fell under your load into the trench.
The shell, some other time, that buried itself
Between your feet as you walked
And thoughtfully failed to go off.
The shrapnel hole, over your heart - how it spun you.

The blue scar of the bullet at your ankle
From a traversing machine-gun that tripped you
As you cleared the parapet.

The shell that “thoughtfully failed to go off” epitomises the good fortune attending the father and making possible the continuance of life through procreation. The reference to the “shrapnel hole, over your heart” is a concrete image of fortuitous survival. This image, of William Hughes’ shattered paybook, is repeated. In Hughes’ “Out”, the “shrapnel that shattered my father’s paybook” is personally emblematic of the more diffuse “charms of my father’s/ Survival”. Dennis Walder writes up a part of Alan Bold’s notes about his visit to William Hughes at his Heptonstall Slack home in 1974:

He [William Hughes] began by shaking his head and saying “it were a rough do” and went on to produce his Smallbook which had been so packed with Yorkshire mementos that it had stopped a piece of shrapnel.⁸⁹

This was the same paybook “providentially in his breast pocket” in Plath’s “All The Dead Dears” (JP, p.164).

“For the Duration” now begins to elaborate on the “strange fear” the speaker experienced as a child when “the war-talk, / Like a creeping barrage”, approached the father:

Meanwhile

The horrors were doled out, everybody
Had his appalling tale.
But what alarmed me most
Was your silence. Your refusal to tell.
I had to learn from others
What you survived and what you did.

The feelings of the child are conveyed through suggestions of panic, exasperation and peevishness before a transition to the vantage point of age occurs:

Maybe you didn’t want to frighten me.

Now it's too late.
Now I'd ask you shamelessly.
But then I felt ashamed.

The speaker then asks, "What was my shame? Why couldn't I have borne/ To hear you telling what you underwent?" The shameful awareness of the father's vulnerability, awareness of horrors too painful to describe, further emphasise the child's empathy and the father's suffering all those years ago. Once more the speaker is taken back down the corridor of memories to childhood and into the room where the "war-talk", with which the poem opened, was still going on:

After some uncle's
Virtuoso tale of survival
That made me marvel and laugh -
I looked at your face, your cigarette
Like a dial-finger. And my mind
Stopped with numbness.

The contrast between an uncle's eloquence and the silence of the father is heightened by the reactions of the boy, whose "numbness" is the equivalent of his father's paralysing fear of the onset of memories too painful for him to speak about.

Out of his father's "night-dreams" of war, the adult is able to wrest more meaning than the child could:

Your day-silence was the coma
Out of which your night-dreams rose shouting.
I could hear you from my bedroom -
The whole hopelessness still going on,
No man's land still crying and burning
Inside our house, and you climbing again
Out of the trench, and wading back into the glare

As if you might still not manage to reach us

⁸⁹ D. Walder, Ted Hughes, Open University Press, Milton Keynes, 1987, p.31.

And carry us to safety.

“For the Duration” concludes with gratitude and relief as the speaker solemnly celebrates the continuance of life, made possible by his father’s return from war to raise a family, to “carry us to safety”. The shell that landed in the ground between the father’s legs and “thoughtfully failed to go off” is related to the concern expressed at the close. The final couplet conveys the determination and desperation that offer an optimistic view of life going on, and the lit figure of the father is symbolic of procreation and continuance. This symbolism directly opposes the residual destructive energies of war, which tended to dominate in earlier poems, from “Six Young Men” to “Out”.

“Under High Wood”, the first section of “Walt” (Wg, pp.37-41), based on the poet’s uncle, Walter Farrar, opens with “some uncle’s/ Virtuoso tale of survival” of war. His First World War memory of a battle in a French field begins the poem:

Going up for the assault that morning
They passed the enclosure of prisoners.
“A big German stood at the wire”, he said,
“A big German, and he caught my eye.
And he cursed me. I felt his eye curse me”.

Halfway up the field, the bullet
Hit him in the groin. He rolled
Into a shell-hole. The sun rose and burned.
A sniper clipped his forehead. He wormed
Deeper down. Bullet after bullet
Dug at the crater rim, searching for him.
Another clipped him. Then the sniper stopped.

In keeping with the emphasis of other Wolfwatching poems about the war, the idea of miraculous survival is present as the focus of “Under High Wood”. Running parallel to it is the idea of the curse, of the big German prisoner’s “evil eye”. This forms a tension between the uncle’s good fortune, his survival, and his later life, which was dogged by misfortune, as stated in the next lines of “Under High Wood”:

I knew the knot of scar on his temple.

We stood in the young March corn
Of a perfect field. His fortune made.
His life's hope over. Me beside him
Just the age he'd been when that German
Took aim with his eye and hit him so hard
It brought him and his wife down together,
With all his children one after the other.

Moving the prisoner and sniper together in the working out of the curse suggests that the uncle's groin wound carried over, fatefully and symbolically, to the misfortunes of his post-war life. Paradisal elements of the scene - in peacetime the two men stand "in the young March corn/ Of a perfect field" - are challenged by memories of war and by its invading destructive energies. The curse of war plagues the uncle, his "life's hope over". His survival has cost him dearly. Standing amongst the scene of a long ago battle, the uncle struggles to articulate what he senses to have been lost:

A misty rain prickled and hazed.
"Here", he hazarded. "Somewhere just about here.
This is where he stopped me. I got this far".

He frowned uphill towards the skyline tree-fringe
As through binoculars
Towards all that was left.

The scudding showers become a metaphor for the struggle that the uncle is involved in as he tries to resurrect a time that is vanished. There is a deepening irony as the "Under High Wood" section of "Walt" ends. The uncle's search for explanations from the past is fruitless, but his effort accentuates the many intangible permutations that have been his life's war legacy. Finally, it is a compassionate view of the uncle that we are left with: a survivor, but a victim, too.

Creation of powerful poems on war from the personal meaning it holds for Hughes is continued in "The Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers" (*NSP*, pp.290-1). Imagery of water runs through the poem, mirroring the fluid connection of the different

time frames it contains, and reminiscent of the naturalistically expressed reverence that typifies many of Hughes' River poems.

Sons of the Gallipoli veteran watch him "caper across the yard cobbles" in the rain, like a great wader, a water bird. Connections, of a father's two sons, of two wars, become metonymic. The water ridden upon by "warships fluttering bunting" channels into a "funeral procession, the broadening wake/ That follows a ship under power":

His sons don't know why they laughed, watching him

through the window

Remembering it, remembering their laughter

They only want to weep

As after the huge wars

Senseless huge wars

Huge senseless weeping.

The contrast of the metonymy of image, with the comical figure of the capering father, and with the sons' retrospective grief, is instrumental in forming the pathos of this poem. It draws together, lyrically and eloquently, a range of subjective and historical time frames, the sum expressing that the age of innocence is fled.

It is apparent that Hughes' poems about the First World War are, as time passes, increasingly rooted in biography. The poet's father is the focus of the poems, and it is to his father's war that Hughes constantly turns. In the words of "Slump Sundays" (Wg, p.4), the thematic thrust of Hughes' war poetry is towards a "returning from no man's land". These personal poems make universal comment in which the significance and intimacy of autobiographical detail becomes the launching point for strongly realised poems.

His involvement in the personal material of the poems produces a form of concentration allowing a fluid movement of thoughts from the personal to the universal sphere. The poet seems to remain lightly and constantly focussed upon the personal core

of a poem while his thoughts ripple outwards and away from these origins. Hughes described this process thirty years ago:

I fished in still water with a float. As you know, all a fisherman does is stare at his float for hours on end ...

All the little niggling impulses, that are normally distracting your mind, dissolve. They have to dissolve if you are to go on fishing ...

So you see, fishing with a float is a sort of mental exercise in concentration on a small point, while at the same time letting your imagination work freely to collect everything that might concern that still point. (PM, pp.60-1)

Hughes seems to have taken his own advice about thinking and writing on board and applied it to his own personal poems. It is my belief that “that still point” is the core and inspiration of Hughes’ personal poetry, particularly in the dramatic and traumatic instance of poems written about his father’s war. The poems themselves say this is so.
