

‘Healing and Sweetening’: Ted Hughes and the Regeneration of Elmet

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Ted Hughes was born and spent his early years in Mytholmroyd, a small town in the upper valley of the River Calder in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Once, this valley had been part of the Celtic kingdom of Elmet. Its rugged terrain and harsh climate had made it a haven for outlaws and brigands but small communities of people settled there, rearing sheep on the bleak moorlands which were rich in grass, peat and water, but of little use for growing crops. A cottage industry of shearing, spinning and weaving the wool grew up and, by the 12th century, the nearby town of Halifax had become the centre of a thriving wood-trade which underpinned 90% of British overseas trade.

The self-sufficient, resilient, inventive and determined character of the people was shaped by this history, and by the harsh geology and the climate of the area. Other factors, too, were important to their sense of independence, such as the Danelaw which had been established by 9th century Norse invaders who came to control the Northern part of England from their centre in York. Under Danelaw, 30-50% of the population of this area had legal status as free men within the local lord’s jurisdiction.

“The longships got this far / And anchored in nose and chin”, Hughes wrote in his poetic sequence, *Remains of Elmet*, and, poking gentle fun at his fellow Yorkshiremen, he noted their characteristic wariness of strangers and their “far veiled gaze of quietly homicidal appraisal” (90). The well-known 19th century novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, travelling in that area, wrote of “the peculiar force of character which the Yorkshiremen display” and, less fondly, of their “surly independence”. She also experienced their honest, plain-speaking way

of expressing themselves: “dwellers among them must be prepared for certain uncomplimentary, though most likely true, observations, pithily expressed” (*The Life of Charlotte Bronte* Vol.1 Ch.2).

All of this was important in the growth of the region and it contributed to the way in which the Industrial Revolution expanded rapidly in this area. In the 1800s, new mechanical inventions made the production of woolen cloth quicker and easier and, with its plentiful supply of water for driving the newly-invented machinery, its coal supplies, and its sturdy hard-working and inventive people, this area became known as the cradle of the Industrial Revolution .

Quarries, canals, railways, reservoirs, weirs, ponds and mills were built, desecrating the natural environment. Increasingly, cottage-industries were taken over by industrial-scale production and the people began to spend their lives working in the quarries and the mills. Working conditions were bad and often dangerous, wages were poor, poverty became endemic, and pollution was wide-spread. By the 20th century, the wool trade in the area had been badly affected by overseas imports, and the industry was almost dead.

“First Mill”, Hughes wrote as he charted the arc of change in the poems of *Remains of Elmet*, “and steep cobbles / Then cenotaphs. // First football pitches, crown greens / Then the bottomless wound of the railway station / That bled this valley to death” (34).

Women who had spun and woven cloth in their homes while their men tended the sheep, and sheep-farmers whose “lives went into the enclosures / like manure” (33), began to slave away in the huge stone mills; steam and smoke from coal fires and furnaces polluted the air; machine oils and the dyes and chemicals used to treat wool polluted the waters; and the land

“...fell asleep

*Under migraine of headscarves and clatter
Of clog-irons and looms
And gutter-water and clog-irons
And clog-irons and biblical texts” (20).*

In notes prefacing the second edition of the book (published as *Elmet*) Hughes described other factors, too, which contributed to the death of this region. In the 18th century, the down-to-earth character of the people predisposed them to plain, strict religions like the Methodism brought to this area by Charles Wesley. What Wesley saw as a “barbarous people” when he first preached to them, became his “most fanatic enthusiasts”. Chapels were built, and “the men who built chapels were the same who were building the mills”. However,

when the local regimes ...of Industry and Religion started to collapse in the 1930s, this architecture emerged into spectacular desolation – a grim sort of beauty. Ruin followed swiftly, as the mills began to close, the chapels to empty, and the high farms under the moor-edge, along the spring line, were one by one abandoned. (10)

The two World Wars also contributed to this ruin and desolation.

Hughes’ family, his parents and his grandparents, and the people who lived all around them, lived through these changes. On his father’s side, the family had worked in the wool trade as weavers, carders and dyers. “The Dyer’s vat pickled to ninety. Or killed quickly”: his grandfather, “Crag Jack”, who had been a fustian dyer, lived to be 80 (‘Familiar’ *THCP* 691). His mother’s brothers, Walter and Thomas, became mill owners but Walter was badly wounded during World War I (‘Walt’ *THCP* 770-3.); and his father was one of only seventeen men from his Army Company to survive the WWI Gallipoli landings.

...the cataclysms had happened – to the population in the First World War (where a single bad ten minutes in no man’s land would wipe out [the men of] a street or even

a village), to the industry (the shift to the east in textile manufacture), and to the Methodism (the new age). (Elmet 11).

In the poems in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes vividly demonstrates this change from the region's early prosperity based on wool to the collapse of Industry and Religion which began in the 1930s. He also sees the way that nature survives and, as he did throughout his career, he uses his poetry to channel the powers of the natural energies towards healing and renewal.

There is an alchemical and semi-religious aspect to the poems in *Remains of Elmet*, where Hughes describes the imprisonment of the creative energies of nature in matter (in the soil, in the buildings and in the people) and seeks to release it, just as the alchemist seeks to release the spiritual gold from the base matter of the human being. He first learned about alchemy through his early enthusiasm for work of the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats . In an interview with Ekbert Fass in 1970 he said:

*Yeats spellbound me for about six years. I got to know him not so much through his verse as through his other interests, folklore, and magic in particular. Then that strange atmosphere laid hold of me. I fancy if there is a jury of critics sitting over what I write...then Yeats is the judge. There are all sorts of things I could well do but because of him and principles I absorbed from him I cannot. (Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* 22)*

However, Hughes also read widely in Renaissance and early English alchemical texts, where the fundamental unity of all things and the transmutability of matter is the underlying principle. In these texts the alchemical process is often described in poems full of vivid imagery and rich, archaic symbols, one of the most important of which is the Uroborus, the tail-eating dragon which represents the timeless continuity of creation, destruction and re-creation in Nature.

“The rhythms and cycles of Nature contain the code and root of our handiwork”. So wrote the Alchemist, Janus Lacinius Therapus, The Calabrian, in 1546 (as qtd. in Grossinger 69), and Nature, always, was of particular importance in Hughes’ work, not just as a subject but, more importantly, as the source of cyclical change and renewal.

Alchemy, itself, can be understood on several levels. There is a concrete surface level derived from its association in ancient Egypt with the crafts of dyeing, metallurgy, brewing and perfume making. Over the centuries the technical skills involved in these arts were refined and condensed, forming the basis of a body of knowledge from which grew the science of Chemistry. Along the way, the magical, spiritual and imaginative aspects, which were once an essential part of these ancient crafts, came to be regarded as subjective, irrational and ‘unscientific’ and, consequently, unimportant. Allied to this view of Alchemy as a body of technological knowledge, is its reputation for embodying a secret method of turning base material into gold. Those who have pursued this secret have found the alchemical texts incomplete, contradictory and confusing, being couched, as they are, in language full of metaphor and symbolism; but avarice and dreams of power have spurred them on, and magic and superstition have accompanied them. It is this level of Alchemy which has fostered allegations of witchcraft and occult power and which has brought the art into disrepute.

For Hughes, and for many of the Renaissance alchemists, Alchemy was an esoteric mystical doctrine in which the practical techniques of the alchemical art are an allegory for spiritual transubstantiation. At this level alchemy is the means by which the Divine creative spirit (the ‘gold’ of the Soul) is gradually freed from the chaos of the human body (the ‘Raw Stuff’) so that a state of enlightenment and wholeness may be achieved. Hughes, however, saw the desecration of Nature wrought by human agency and began to use alchemy as a healing art in

a broader, ecological way. Poetry as he once said, is meant to be magical: it is “one way of making things happen the way you want them to happen” (*The Critical Forum*).



Before the stones of the ruined mills “can flower again”, he writes in his Elmet sequence, “They must fall into the only future, the earth” (14). Where, once, “lifelines poured into wage-packets”, “Five hundred sunbeams” now fall “on the horns of the flowers” (79). And the wild rock “in its “homeland” “among its pious offspring of root and leaf”, becomes the cantor, leading the healing choir in the faith of Mother Nature, and singing for “its ancestors” – the rock which had been “cut” and “carted” and “fixed in its new place” until it “forgot its wild roots”(44). Meanwhile

*...the nettle venom into place
Like a cynical old woman in the food-queue.
The bramble grabs for the air
Like a baby burrowing into the breast.
And the sycamore, cut through the neck,
Grows five or six heads...(14).*

Heather “thickens a nectar / Keen as adder venom” (48); willow-herb’s “vandal plumes” sprout in ruined buildings (79); and “Curlews in April / hang their harps over the misty valley” (28).

In opening poem of the Elmet sequence, using rhythms and sounds which capture the wildness of nature as it is commonly experienced on the moors, Hughes invokes the elemental energies of “the Mothers” (10). These “Mothers” were the earliest Celtic-British personification of the powers of the Great Mother Goddess, Nature. She is “the Mourning Mother / who eats her children”, in whose “faith” the rock sings (44). In the old British Kingdom of Elmet, the Celtic ‘Mothers’ (the three goddesses of birth, fertility and death) held sway, and ancient standing stones and rocky outcrops, like the Bridestones of Hughes’ poem of that name, still testify to the worship of Brig (Brigid), who was the mother goddess of the Brigantian people of Elmet. “The wedding stones”, he calls them: “Scorched-looking, unhewn – a hill-top chapel / Earth’s heart-bone laid bare” (64).

Hughes’ “mothers” are also the alchemical Mothers: Earth, Air, Fire and Water. In the first published Elmet sequence, where the poems were accompanied by photographs, Hughes and the photographer, Fay Godwin capture the interaction of light and matter, both physically in the words and photographs, and metaphorically in the effects which these accomplish. “Light falls through itself”, literally in Godwin’s black-and-white photograph of a few snow-covered blades of grass, and metaphorically in Hughes’ poem where it “Falls naked / Into poverty grass, poverty stone, / Poverty thin water”. Yet, in a barren windblown landscape, it creeps there, shivering and crying like a newborn child (113). Alchemically, these “These grasses of light”, the “stones of darkness”, and the “Water of light and darkness” with which both artists worked, were not simply “words in any phrase”, as Hughes puts it (17), or the interplay of light and shadow fixed in a photographic image, they are the mother elements from which our world is formed and on which our survival depends. And they are the elements which, in this book, attempt to accomplish the regeneration of the land and free the spirits of its people.

Everywhere in *Remains of Elmet*, especially in the two editions which include Godwin's photographs, the land and the skies, the wind and the rain, work together with the light from the sun's fires to heal the wounds created by human endeavours in this "cradle-grave" (10). The land exists under "a trance of light" (20). The moors "Are a stage for the performance of heaven". Above them "the witch-brew boiling in the sky-vat / spins electric terrors / In the eyes of sheep" (19) and "the world rolls in rain / Like a stone inside surf" (95). "Winds from fiery holes in heaven" make the players on a hillside village football field seem to bounce, like their blown ball:

*But the wingers leapt, they bicycled in air
And the goalie flew horizontal*

*And once again a golden holocaust
Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them* (68).

The theme of the "Mothers" is reinforced by Hughes' dedication of this book to his own mother, Edith Farrar, and by the prefatory poem in which his mother lives on briefly for him through her brother. The dreams, aspirations, achievements and failures of the Calder Valley people which make up this book are their memories, precious "Archaeology of the mouth", which Hughes tries to record before the "frayed, fraying hair-fineness" of the thread linking his spirit to theirs is finally broken (7).

As with the singing rock, the spiritual element in *Remains of Elmet* is linked everywhere with music. It is there in the yarning of the old people, who are "attuned to each other, like the string of a harp" (89); in the "lark-song just out of hearing" (10), in the "wobbling water-call" of the curlews (28) and the "soft-cries" of the birds, and in the drumming of the "witchdoctor" snipe "Drawing the new / needle of moon/ down // Gently// Into its eggs" (66). Most poignantly it is there in the "mad singing in the hills" (20) which became submerged by

the slavery of Industry and Religion and War: and in the song of a cricket which “rigged up its music” in the wall of the Wesleyan chapel – an uncontrolled fragment of natural energy which the elders furiously try to silence, “Riving at the religious framework / With screwdrivers and chisels” (82). Above all, it is there in the poetic music which Hughes makes as he draws for us this realistic, and paradigmatic, picture of human strengths and human weaknesses.

Hughes first consistent use of alchemy in his poetry was in *Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama*¹. There, he followed the alchemical procedure closely as a framework for the poems. In *Remains of Elmet*, which was published one year after *Cave Birds*, he abandoned any formal alchemical structure and used alchemy more fluently, relying on the magical powers of the poetry and the photographs to stir the imagination, and embedding the creative and healing energies of Nature in the poems. The alchemy of *Cave Birds* focused on an individual who was also an Everyman figure. It was intended to awaken us to our blindness to the desecration of Nature visible all around us and to the way our imagination, instincts and feelings have been eroded by the Socratic emphasis on rational, provable, ‘facts’ – in education and in everyday life. *Remains of Elmet* focuses on a society and an environment where this blindness has been disastrous to the people and to the land; and the poetic sequence, *River*, which was published in 1983 again used the alchemy of nature, in poetry, and photography, as a means of imaginatively healing the polluted waterways of England².

In 1958, Hughes was already aware of the work of biologist and conservationist, Rachel Carson, and wrote to Aurelia Plath, Sylvia’s mother, that he and Sylvia were reading her books about life in the sea, “which are wonderful...I started one yesterday and couldn’t put it down till I had finished it. (*Letters* p.127)”. As regular readers of *The New Yorker*, he and Sylvia also read Carson’s *Silent Spring*, when it was serialised there 1962, and, later, he

wrote that “to most of the world it came as an absolute shock”, but he despaired that “the colossal mass of evidence simply has not been marshalled and sent to the one front that counts: The ear of the public” (‘The Environmental Revolution’, *Your Environment*, Vol. I, No.3)³ .

As a fisherman - and a farmer, too – he saw the damage that chemical pollution brought to the land, the rivers, and the animals which lived there. He adopted organic farming, sat on influential committees, and wrote letters to politicians and to the newspapers. In 1957, he wrote to *The Times* about (amongst other things) the exploitation of fishing areas (3 Dec. 1957); and in a letter to environmental campaigner and farmer, Mark Purdey, he wrote about finding a book “called *The Poisoned Womb*: “Very detailed account of the effect of agricultural/industrial toxins on the reproductive system. Horrifying.”. He also wrote to *The Times* after they had published an optimistic article about farmed otters being returned to English waterways, “pointing out that East Anglian otters were declining for a very good reason” - that being the continued use of deadly organochlorine toxins, which destroyed their immune systems (Hughes, *Letters* 7 Feb. 1987 p. 534).

In 1969, Hughes and Daniel Weissbort were instrumental in helping their friend David Ross to found *Your Environment*, a quarterly magazine which called itself “Britain’s First Environmental Magazine” (British Library, Dewey 301.305). Hughes and Weissbort helped edit the first two issues, then became “Advising and Contributing Editors” until Autumn 1972, when the prominent physicist and environmentalist, Walter C. Patterson, took over as sole Editor. For the third issue (Volume I, No.3, Summer 1970), Hughes contributed an essay on Max Nicholson’s *The Environmental Revolution*. The subject matter of *Your Environment* was “conservation, pollution, population pressure and containment”, and the stated object was “to help improve the way we all live”. Continuing topics in the magazine, which ran for

three-and-a-half years, were household issues such as non-returnable bottles, toxic detergents, packaging, and garden chemicals, a ‘Whitehall Diary’ recording environmental issues discussed in parliament, the water supply, defoliants; transport, and science news. Daniel Weissbort remembered that the magazine was “a money loser”, but that it was “very much part of the ethos of the time” (Skea, conversation with Weissbort).

Hughes did a great deal of practical work to help raise awareness of issues like river pollution. Some of his ecological activities were recorded in ‘Portrait of a poet as eco warrior’ by Ed Douglas ([The Observer](#), Sunday, November 4, 2007). In 1987, *The Times* published ‘First Things First’, an “ecological dialogue” (THCP 730), and in a letter to Michael Hamburger he discussed this and aired his views on politics and pollution (*Letters* 12 Sept. 1987).

Being a poet who believed in the power of the imagination to change things, Hughes was also instrumental in the founding of the Sacred Earth Drama Trust. The Trust was initiated after a conference organized in Assisi in 1986 by HRH The Duke of Edinburgh to “*encourage people of all ages to become involved in environmental thinking and practice by first involving the creative spirit*”. *Sacred Earth Dramas* (Faber, London, 1993), with an introduction by Ted Hughes, is a collection of winning plays written by children from around the world, who responded to a competition suggested by Hughes and sponsored by the World Wide Fund for Nature and the Arts for Nature in 1990. The plays imaginatively and vividly re-tell mythological and religious stories from many different societies, but with particular relevance to the natural world. The genesis of the whole idea is described in Ted Hughes’s letter to Matthew Evans (*Letters*, Feb. 7, 1990), and is discussed more fully in my own paper ‘Ted Hughes, Ecology and the Arts’ (Skea, in *Global Perspectives...*, Maiti and Chakraborty, pp.71-82).

Hughes' poem 'The Black Rhino' (*THCP* 763, and Note p.1296) was written to help raise funds to save the Black Rhinoceros and was published in the *Daily Telegraph* (24 October 1987). In 1991, 'Lobby From Under the Carpet' (*THCP* 837) was published in *Save the Earth* (ed. J. Porritt, Turner, Sept. 1991) a companion book for a broadcast associated with the 1992 U.N. Earth Summit in Brazil, where worldwide environmental policies were discussed. The poem was also published in *The Times* (9 April 1992). Then, in 1992, Hughes provided an introduction to a book of photographs, *Your World* (HarperCollins, 1992) the profits of which went to the United Nations Environment Programme. At the same time he contributed an article to *The Observer Magazine* (Nov. 29, 1992) to accompany some of the photographs from the book.

The Iron Man, and *The Iron Woman*, which Hughes wrote for children, describe a desecrated, polluted land and provide a wonderfully imaginative mythic solution to the problem. *The Iron Man* was made into a musical by Peter Townshend, and in 1999 it was released by Warner Bros. as an animated film under the title 'The Iron Giant'. It is still read, and loved, by young children English homes and schools.

It is clear that Hughes worked hard raise awareness of ecological issues, but *Cave Birds*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River* are unique in that he created poetic narratives which were strongly influenced by alchemy, and also by his belief that narrative poetry, as he told Ekbert Faas, was a record of a shamanic journey, which involved "a visit to the spirit world...to bring back something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs" (Faas p.206). *Remains of Elmet*, uniquely until *Birthdays Letters*, deals with Hughes own personal experiences and feelings. It seeks to heal the land and the people of the society in which he grew up, and to release the spirits of those he loved. It contains

poems, too, which suggests that it was during those early years that Hughes received the call to be a shamanic poet.

In *Remains of Elmet*, two poems in particular suggest this, 'The Long Tunnel Ceiling' (76-7) and 'Tick Tock Tick Toc' (120). For Hughes, as for the creature in his early poem 'Wodwo' (*THCP* 183), it was the attraction of water which drew him into the other-world of the imagination and the subconscious energies – the water which in Hughes' home valley was present as the polluted Calder and the stagnant "*gleam-ponderous*", serpentine Canal (76) . The traditional world-wide mythological and folkloric association of rivers and serpents with natural life-forces and with the spirit world makes these polluted waters of the Calder Valley potently symbolic.

Hughes' use of this symbolism is characteristically founded in an imaginative evocation of reality. As a child, Hughes' imagination drew him, like Alice, through the "heavy mirror" (76) of the water's surface into the "Drowning Black" (74) underworld of the canal close to his home. There he fished with a home-made net made from "a mesh of kitchen curtains" (*The Canal's Drowning Black*' 74). And there, Nature's life-energies flourish as they have since life began: "Loach. Torpid, ginger-bearded, secretive / Prehistory of the canal's masonry / with little cupid mouths"..., like "wild leopards - among bleached-depth fungus" (74) - in "their Paradise and mine". Meanwhile:

*Lorries from Rochdale, baled plump and towering
With worsted and cottons, over my head met
Lorries from Bradford, and fought past each other
Making that cave of air and water tremble – (74)*

Underlying this vivid childhood scene, the suggestion of temptation in Paradise and the subsequent fall from innocence is very strong. The boy teeters on the slippery edge of the

canal, fascinated by his own god-like power to make the fishy anemone-beards flower with the stamp of his foot. He is fascinated too, by the eyes which make him the centre of attention by watching his every move; and by the conflict between his knowledge and his imagination, which makes the sinuous creatures in the black depths below him seem “Five inches huge!”. Eventually, overcome by his desires, he succumbs to temptation and uses his superior power and knowledge to coax these primitive creatures into his home-made net, and, so, into his world. There is, however, no sense of sin involved. The child’s actions are linked in the poem’s imagery with the naive, mischievous tricks of the Chinese Monkey-god, and the death of the fish serves to demonstrate to him the enormous difficulty of trying to move between the two worlds. These fish, too, with their “little cupid mouths”, are emissaries of the Mother Goddess, sent, like Cupid himself, to teach the child the power of desire, the foolishness of pride, and the need for patience and control. The final ritual of tossing the “pouting, failed, paled new moons” of the loach “one by one / Back into their Paradise and mine” (74), suggests Hughes’ acknowledgment of the Goddess’s power and his wry acceptance of this lesson.

Whatever Hughes learned from this childhood experience, his belief that fish and their watery world connected him directly with the realm of Nature, and with his own subconscious energies, remained very strong. And, just as the cupid-lipped loach in ‘The Canal’s Drowning Black’ aroused his desire, so the first large trout that he ever saw had special meaning for him. ‘The Long Tunnel Ceiling’ (76-7) describes this first encounter; and, introducing the poem in a BBC Home Service, Schools broadcast (June 16, 1965), Hughes spoke of the trout as “the authentic aboriginal in that polluted valley” of the Calder, and “the holiest creature out there in its free unspoiled sacred world”. Explaining these views, he said:

“I was too young to capture small ones in hillside streams so trout came to have magical meaning for me which I never managed to get over.”

Consequently, the trout which leapt so suddenly into his dark “cavern of air and water” under the busy canal bridge seemed god-like and sacred - “An ingot! / Holy of holies! A treasure!” ... a “seed / Of the wild god now flowering for me”.

Erupting from the black mirror-world into Hughes’ noisy place under the bridge, this great trout briefly shattered the interface between Hughes’ real and imaginary worlds, just as it broke the circle made by the bridge arch and its reflection. The poem’s imagery captures the cataclysmic breaking and re-making of Hughes’ trembling tunnel; and the strange confusions which occur with reflections, so that the canal waters appear “cradled” in the imaged ceiling and a rising trout appears as a falling brick. It captures, too, the careless beauty of the great fish, a “free lord” of these two worlds; and the shock, amazement and awe of the boy, whose imagination is fired with visions of the trout’s moorland home and the “shake-up of heaven and the hills” which has brought this “tigerish, dark, breathing lily” to him.

Ultimately, in the poem, the trout becomes a symbol of Nature’s universal energies, which Hughes sees waiting, almost hidden, “between the tyres, under the tortured axles” of the industrial world of Elmet, to redress the disturbed natural balance; a warning of the power which the “wild god” has, to bring the structures of this world crashing down like a collapsing bridge; an intimation of the coming apocalypse which the boy thought “at last ... had started”. Above all, for Hughes, the trout represents a creature which has the ability to move at will between worlds and, like a shaman’s animal guides, to take him imaginatively with it. His apprehension that this ‘holiest’ of the creatures of Nature’s unspoiled, ‘sacred’

world appeared especially for him, reinforces this and indicates, also, the source of Hughes' belief that he had a special role to play in society.

'Tick Tock Tick Tock' (120), is the second poem to suggest Hughes' awareness that he was intended to play a special role in the regeneration of Elmet. In it, he refers to *Peter Pan*, a story by J.M. Barrie which was familiar to most children of Hughes' generation and was made popular through a tradition of Christmas performances. Peter Pan is a little boy who never grows up. He lives on an island in a place called Neverland, together with other abandoned children, but they are constantly threatened by pirates whose leader is tracked by a crocodile who has swallowed an alarm clock. So, the ticking of the clock is a warning that danger is near. In 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' (ROE.120), Hughes looked back on his earlier life from the standpoint of the mature poet and saw himself as the crocodile in Peter Pan – a primitive creature, embodying the natural energies, and carrying the message of time and of danger.

In Hughes' poem, it is the people of Elmet who, like children, are blind to the damage happening all around them. The ticking of the clock moves relentlessly through the poem like the crocodile, portending danger and disaster, but "Everlasting play" pervades the Calder Valley, making it, like Peter Pan's Neverland, a place where it is always "Summer Summer / Summer Summer", and no-one ever grows up. In a childhood re-enactment of the story, "Somebody else played Peter Pan", Hughes wrote. "I swallowed an alarm clock / And over the school playground's macadam / Crawled from prehistory towards them". 'Macadam' was the term used to describe a commonly used surfacing tar, but literally 'Mac' in some English dialects means 'son of', and Adam, of course, was our Biblical progenitor. So, the school playground is linked with the innocence of the first Creation, the "school" becomes the school of life and the playground is part of the Calder Valley itself, in which the primitive energies have existed "from prehistory".

Set against the relentless passage of time, the poems in *Remains of Elmet* have shown, already, a world of human error and foolishness: the unenlightened world of the ‘imbecile innocent’ (to borrow an apt phrase from *Cave Birds* (THCP 423), which “incinerates itself happily / From a hundred mill chimneys” (120). Unlike those who “acted” Peter Pan (the word suggests the falsity of their role), Hughes, because of the different perspectives his closeness to Nature offered him, saw in retrospect, another reality. He was unable to change the course of events, but in *Remains of Elmet* he imaginatively recreates the land and its people; and works, with Nature, to heal the wounds. So, the damaged and scarred land which, in one of the first poems in the book, lies desolate and ‘Open to Huge Light’(17) becomes, ‘In April’ (114), towards the end of the book, “A soft animal of peace” which “now lies openly sunning / Huge bones and space-weathered hide // Healing and sweetening”.

Because *Remains of Elmet* is such a personal sequence of poems, Hughes also used his poetry to heal the spirits of the people, especially those of his own family. The book opens with the dedication: “Poems in Memory of Edith Farrar” (6), who was Hughes mother⁴, and the prefatory poem (7) describes his elderly uncle, who is so like his mother that he has “my Mother’s face” and “hands, a little plumper, trembling more”. This elderly uncle, with his mother’s memory “still intact, still good / Under his baldness”, is “Keeping their last eighty years alive and attached to me, / Keeping their strange depths, alive and attached to me”. He has, Hughes wrote, “brought me my last inheritance / Archaeology of the mouth” but “on such a frayed, fraying hair-fineness- // Any moment now, a last kick / And the dark river will fold it away”.

It is through his own mother, and through the alchemical ‘mothers’ of Nature with which Hughes works in the poems, that the first and the last poem of *Remains of Elmet* are linked.

The final poem in the book 'The Angel' (124) describes a dream rather like the one which Hughes told Faas he had "until a few years ago, dreamt at regular intervals since childhood". Faas relates Hughes' poetic interpretations of this recurrent dream to his awareness of the desecration and rejection of 'Mother Nature', and he sees Hughes' poetry as his constant and "deliberate efforts to retrieve her desecrated remnants" (Faas 121-2). 'The Angel', however, refers specifically to deceased members his own family, although in the ambiguity of his lines, the dream 'Mother', to whom he calls out in the poem, could equally be his own mother, Edith Farrar Hughes, or Mother Nature.

'The Angel' recounts the same dream that Hughes had described in an earlier poem, 'Ballad From a Fairy Tale' (*THCP* 171-2). In both poems, he describes a vision of a disastrous, fiery event, like "a moon disintegrating" over "Black Halifax". The swan/angel which emerges from the resulting phosphorescent crater lights the moors as it passes low over them towards him and then disappears "towards the West". It is a "ghostly" and "brilliant" vision, but Hughes' "mother's answer", when he cries out to her for an explanation, turns "the beauty suddenly to horror" and defines the angel for him as an "omen" – a prophetic vision of dark and dreadful future events.

So, horror, beauty and energy are combined in one powerful symbol. The detail which links Hughes' vision with everyday life, however, and which gave his mother's words "doubled" significance, is his second sighting of the angel's puzzling halo. This "enigmatic square of satin", which ripples in the wind of the angel's flight, he saw again years later in a square of satin in Sylvia Plath's coffin, where he "reached out and touched it"⁵.

The location of the vision in the area around Hughes' old home, his reference to members of his family, and his reluctance to spell out the associated words and events, all suggest its

great personal significance. When he re-wrote the poem for *Remains of Elmet*, his mother had died and his ‘mother’s’ words were now under his feet, “Joined with earth and engraved in rock”; and Sylvia, too, is buried in the hilltop graveyard in Heptonstall Cemetery.

Mother Nature’s words are, metaphorically, “engraved in rock” everywhere in Elmet, and this is reflected in the poems and the photographs, but there are actual words engraved in rock at this place where Hughes’ wife and his mother are buried. Only metaphorically are his mother’s words ‘under his feet’, for on Edith Farrar’s upright tombstone there are only the names and dates of family members. On that of Sylvia Plath, however, is carved:

Even amidst Fierce Flames
The Golden Lotus can be planted

Such words assert, even in Sylvia’s death, the survival of the female life-principle of re-creation and generation which the lotus represents. They can be found in a poem by the Ming Dynasty poet, Wu Ch’eng-en, which is clearly about alchemy and regeneration, (*The Adventures of Monkey* translated by Arthur Waley, Ch.2)⁶. And, whether or not these are the words to which Hughes refers in ‘The Angel’, this final poem in *Remains of Elmet* brings together the human mothers and the Mother Goddess, whose triple aspects of Bride, Mother and Layer-out Hughes has elsewhere described as the different faces of the Angel of Death, who is also the Angel of Life (Faas 166–7). The mothers and the angel, therefore, are symbolically linked by the powerful life/death force of which they are the instruments.

Significantly, in ‘Heptonstall Cemetery’ (122), the poem that immediately precedes ‘The Angel’, Hughes names the family dead who are buried in Heptonstall cemetery and at the same time, he resurrects them. In the cauldron of the elements, where the wind “slams across tops” and “spray cuts upwards”, Man and Nature are united and “all the horizons lift

wings”, becoming a “A family of dark swans” which go “beating low through storm-silver / Towards the Atlantic. The Atlantic is west of the Calder Valley, so these swans fly towards the Western Paradise which is also the Celtic Otherworld.

Hughes’ swans, unlike the pure white swans of Aphrodite and Apollo, are “dark”, and it is appropriate that the newborn, newly fledged, souls should resemble cygnets. Most importantly, however, as birds of the Sun God and the Goddess, they are symbols of unity which heal the divisions between Heaven and Earth, Man and Nature, the corporeal and the spiritual. So, harmony is restored and a new beginning can be made.

‘The Angel’, however, serves as a coda to the Elmet poems and, by its similarity with other apocalyptic visions, like those in ‘*The Revelation*’ in the Bible, it extends the scope of its prophecy to encompass society as a whole. In *Remains of Elmet* Hughes’ warnings are repeated strongly and he uses this poetic and photographic re-creation of the fate of the Calder Valley not only as an example, but also as a powerful imaginative tool with which to stimulate us to awareness. Our errors which, like those of the people of Elmet, are of arrogance and blindness, of “braggart-browed complacency” (‘Egghead’ *THCP*.33), and of refusal and suppression of the natural energies, will, with the inevitability with which the ticking clock of Peter Pan’s crocodile marks the approach of danger, lead us to disaster.

Hughes’ prophecies of disaster, however, are not untempered with hope. In his role of poet/shaman/chemist, he not only poetically transforms the death of the Calder Valley and its people into a natural and spiritual re-birth, he also brings to us transforming imaginative energies which open our senses to the world around us and alert us to our own responsibility in maintaining the delicate but essential balance of Nature.

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¹ The alchemy in the poems of *Cave Birds* is discussed in detail in Skea, Ann, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, University of New England Press, 1994. Now also available as an e-book at <https://ann.skea.com/PQIndex.html>.

² The alchemy of *River* is embedded in the poems, which follow the annual cycle of Nature, and focus, in particular, on the life of the Salmon, a sacred animal to the Celts, but now a species seriously endangered by pollution. The poems of this sequence are sequence is explored in detail in Skea, Ann, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*.

³ Hughes' review of Max Nicholson's book is reprinted in Scammell William (ed.), *Winter Pollen*, Faber, 1994, pp.128-135.

⁴ In the second edition, *Elmet*, Hughes added his father, William Hughes, to the dedication (5) and the prefatory poem became the first poem in this book, titled 'The Dark River' (13).

⁵ Hughes acknowledged this in a letter to me (3 Nov. 1984), and his sister, Olwyn Hughes, confirmed that this square of white satin was part of the furnishings of Sylvia Plath's coffin.

⁶ These lines can be found in a poem by Wu Ch'eng which is clearly about alchemy and regeneration, (*The Adventures of Monkey* translated by Arthur Waley, the publication details of my copy of this book are in Chinese and there are no page numbers):

*The Patriarch Subodhi then recited:
 To spare and tend the vital powers, this and nothing else
 Is sum and total of all magic, secret and profane.
 All is comprised in these three, Spirit, Breath and Soul;
 Guard them closely, screen them well; let there be no leak.
 Store them within the frame.
 That is all that can be learnt, and all that can be taught.
 I would have you mark the tortoise and the snake locked in tight embrace.
 Locked in tight embrace, the vital powers are strong;
 Even in the midst of fierce flames the Golden Lotus may be planted,
 The Five Elements compounded and transposed, and put to new use.
 When that is done, be which you please, Buddha or Immortal.*