

Agdistis: Sun Gods and the Ravaging of the Great Earth Mother.

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Among the unpublished manuscripts in the British Library's Ted Hughes archive, are drafts and notes for a sequence of poems based on the myth of Agdistis¹. A late note written by Hughes about this work indicates that it was intended to be the textual part of a limited edition book produced in collaboration with the Australian artist Arthur Boyd, and that the reason why this scheme collapsed is unknown. He added that he hoped to work the drafts up 'into an interesting series, some day'.

This paper, then, is about some fragments of poetry and a collaborative project which never went ahead. These fragments, however, fit well into the theme of healing the Great Earth Mother, and the imagery in them parallels some of the sexual excesses of *Gaudete*, which Hughes was probably re-writing at the same time.

Arthur Boyd lived and worked in London from 1958-197, and his work was exhibited in London in a very successful exhibition of Australian art curated by the Zwemmer Galleries in 1960. It was subsequently exhibited at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1961, and at the Tate Gallery in 1962. He also designed the set and costumes for a performance of Stravinsky's burlesque/opera/ballet, *Renard* (the fox), which was performed at the Edinburgh Festival in 1961, then at the Sadlers Wells theatre; and for Robert Helpman's ballet, *Elektra*, which was performed at The Royal Opera House in 1963. He collaborated with the poet, Peter Porter, on several books.

Between the spring of 1960 and August 1961 the Hughes family (Ted, Sylvia and little Frieda) lived at 3 Chalcot Square, close to Primrose Hill. Al Alvarez, the prominent poetry critic who had published and written about their poems, became friendly with them and visited them there, and he and Ted would sometimes meet for a beer and walk their children together on Hampstead Heath². Their friendship continued after the Hugheses moved to Devon.

By October 1961, Alvarez was renting a house in Well Walk, Hampstead, close to one temporarily being rented by Arthur Boyd. Both then moved to adjacent houses in nearby Flask Walk (this is the address Sylvia had for Alvarez in her address book)³, and Boyd set up a studio and pottery kiln in his back garden and began to experiment with etching and dry-point prints. There were complaints from the neighbours about smoke from Boyd's pottery kiln, and his etching methods were often crude and experimental: his early etchings were inscribed with a sharpened steel ring-sizer and a Stanley knife blade⁴, and excess nitric acid poured onto the plates often destroyed them. Many of Boyd's etchings, however, are very fine and he drew inspiration from the Bible, from mythology, and, according to some critics, from the deepest parts of his subconscious. Bernard Smith, in his introduction to an Australia Post booklet, *Australians on Arthur Boyd* ⁴, wrote that 'Boyd sees life as an endless

¹ British Library: Add MS 889/10/1.

² Alvarez, A. *A Savage God, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1972. pp. 9-10*

³ My thanks to Peter Steinberg for this information.

⁴ Boyd claimed that this gave him 'a very strong, heavy line' and 'a certain freedom...guided in a way by the knife'. Bungey, Darleen, *Arthur Boyd: A Life*, Allen & Unwin, 2008. p.595.

movement between the material and the spiritual....In this course he belongs to a mystical tradition of thought which reaches back to the Jewish cabbala and beyond that to the most ancient East'⁵.

Boyd seems to have shared many of Hughes' own interests, and some of the 'nude and beast' prints he produced in the 1960s strongly suggest the earth goddess of Agdistis, especially 'Nude in a Cornfield' (1962)⁶.

Ted Hughes was frequently in London at that time and it seems very likely that he met Arthur Boyd, but unlikely that their projected collaboration on Agdistis began then.

There is no artwork or reference to Agdistis or to any collaboration with Hughes in Boyd's archive at his old Australian home, Bundanon; nor is there anything in any of the major art galleries or archives in Australia or in the UK. Boyd's daughter, who was a child when the Boyds lived in London, remembers only that Hughes once lived nearby, although she thinks it was in the same street⁷. Carol Hughes suggests that the collaboration may have been discussed sometime in the 70s, and she remembers driving around Devon with Boyd in either late 1971 or 1972 and his comment about the 'big sky' in the west country resembling that in Australia⁸. There may have been some mention of the project in Hughes's diaries but many diary pages are missing from the manuscripts in the British Library archive, so at present we have only a few pages consisting of a brief outline of the story of Agdistis and the rites associated with the cult of Attis; some much amended fragments of poetry about parts of the myth; and Hughes' note about the proposed collaboration with Boyd and his reason for keeping these pages

So, what is the story of Agdistis? And how might it be relevant to Hughes' published work?

In the second century AD, the Greek geographer, Pausanias, travelled widely and recording the landscapes, architecture and history of the Greek territories, as well as the myths, legends and religions which shaped the different societies living there. He writes of Agdistis as a mythic being connected with the Phrygian worship of Attis, and the story he tells differs only in very minor details to that outlined by Hughes⁹.

Zeus intended to rape the Phrygian mother goddess, Cybele, as she slept on a rock. Cybele, 'The Mountain Mother' and goddess of fertility, was able to repel him and his seed fell on the earth, which then bore 'a superhuman being which was at once man and woman, and was called Agdistis'. Agdistis was anarchic and savage and the gods could not control him. They arranged for Hermes to get him drunk and to tie his male genitals to a tree root, so that when he awoke and jumped up he tore them off.

Where they fell to the ground: 'There grew up from it an almond-tree with its fruit ripe, and a daughter of the river Sangarius, they say, took of the fruit and laid it in her bosom, when it at once disappeared, but she was with child.'

⁵ 'The critic, James Gleeson, would describe these drawings as 'the scoria of [Boyd's] subconscious': Quoted in Bungey, D. *Arthur Boyd: A Life*, p. 458.

Bernard Smith, 'Introduction', *Australians on Arthur Boyd*, edited by Lisa Bowman, Australian Post, Melbourne, 1998, pp.2-3,

⁶ Arthur Boyd 'Nude in a Cornfield': <https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/DA43.1963/> (accessed July 2022)

⁷ E-mail: Librarian, Art Gallery of New South Wales to AS quoting information provided by Boyd's daughter, Polly. 17/7/2020

⁸ Letter: Carol Hughes to AS, 14/4/2020. Permission to use this has been granted.

⁹ The quotations used here are from *Pausanias: Description of Greeks with English translation*, trans, W.H.S.Jones and H.A Ormrod, Harvard University Press, London, Heineman Ltd. 1918. Book 7.17.9 – 12. Accessed from <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0160:book=7:chapter=17&highlight=agdistis> (June 2022)

So, Attis was born. Nana, his mother, was obliged to expose him on the mountainside but he was 'tended by a he-goat' and, eventually, adopted by a poor family. 'As he grew up his beauty was more than human', and Agdistis / Cybele fell in love with him. In one version of the story, Cybele imposed a vow of chastity on him and taught him to hunt. So, when he became an adult and 'his relatives sent him to Pessinus, that he might wed the king's daughter', Cybele was furious. As the marriage-song was being sung, Agdistis/Cybele appeared and in a fit of jealousy disrupted the wedding, dancing and playing a flute and driving Attis, the bride, and her father, into a fit of frenzied delirium. Attis 'cut off his genitals, as also did he who was giving him his daughter in marriage', and the prospective bride cut off her breasts. 'But Agdistis repented of what he had done to Attis, and persuaded Zeus to grant that the body of Attis should neither rot at all nor decay'.

Attis was known in Phrygia as the god of vegetation, son/husband of Cybele, who, like her, could wield power over the fruits of the earth. His cult of death and rebirth spread to Rome in 204 BC, where his festival began on 22 March. Hughes' outline of the seven days of the Attis Festival is the same as that given by J.G. Fraser in *The Golden Bough*¹⁰:

On the first day, the trunk of a pine tree was carried to the sanctuary of Cybele, with an image of Attis tied to its trunk 'swathed like a corpse' and hung with violets (which were said to have sprung from his blood). Day two was given up to the blowing of trumpets. On day three – the 'Day of Blood' – the high priest 'drew blood from his arms' and 'wild barbaric music of clashing cymbals and drums' drove others into a frenzy in which they, too, mutilated themselves. Their blood and body parts were offered on the altar of Attis to speed his resurrection. That night 'a light shone in the darkness, the tomb was opened: the god had risen from the dead'; and on the fourth day ('the vernal equinox') the celebration of this resurrection – the Festival of Joy (*Hilaria*) - began and 'a universal licence prevailed'. Accompanying these celebrations, were secret ceremonies in which devotees descended into a pit, a garlanded bull was driven over a grating above and killed, and the person below was 'baptised' in blood and gore, emerging 'as one who has been born again to eternal life'.

Pausanias and many others who have written about the cult of Attis, have linked him to the nature gods of other cults, such as Dionysus and, especially, Mithras¹¹. Like Mithras, Attis's virgin birth could be said to have been brought about *solo aestus libidinis* (by the sole heat of the libido)¹². Both Attis and Mithras were born from the Earth, and images of both show them emerging from the 'Generative Rock'. Both were nature gods, responsible for healing the earth and renewing the Earth's fertility; both wore the Phrygian cap and tunic; and the rites of both involved the sacrifice of a bull and a baptism in the blood for the initiates.

¹⁰ J.G.Fraser, *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan, 1974. pp. 457-65

¹¹ Pausanias shows how the names of the gods and goddesses changed in different regions while the Mysteries of their cults were closely linked. J.G Fraser in *The Golden Bough* and Joseph Campbell, in *The Masks of God*, do the same, as does Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*.

¹² Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology*, Penguin, 1980, pp. 261.



The cults of both Attis and Mithras show clear resemblances to the experiences of the Reverend Lumb in Hughes's *Gaudete*. Lumb's drama, as Hughes told Keith Sagar, is 'a story about English Maytime, about the doom and horror and otherworldliness of sexual life, a little bit'. He also told Sagar that when in 1971 he returned to work on the *Gaudete* film scenario he had completed in 1964¹³, he began 'to redream it in various forms' and in that way he had got 'the bull-killing, consecration of the non-man' etc.¹⁴. It seems very likely that this was when he also began to write about Agdistis.

As Keith Sagar pointed out in his detailed discussion of *Gaudete*, the terrifying events experienced by Lumb in the Prologue are the same as those undergone by initiates in the cults of Attis and Mithras. Not only did these rites record and re-enact the sacred life-renewing deeds of Attis and Mithras, they seem also, at least in Mithraism, to have been a ritual of self-purification for the participants: 'A bath of blood of a dying bull was the standard rite for washing away of sins and purification of the body'¹⁵.

The cult of Mithras eventually became the chief religion in the Roman Empire. Its rituals, especially the bull-slaying, became symbolic rather real, but it lasted many centuries to become, as Joseph Campbell writes, 'the most formidable rival of Christianity, both in Asia and in Europe, reaching as far north as Scotland'. Campbell goes on to describe the seven degrees of initiation, in which the neophyte began as 'Raven', passed through stages representing each of the seven planetary spheres 'through which the soul descended at birth', becoming 'Hidden Master', 'Soldier', 'Lion', 'Persian', 'Runner of the Sun' and, finally, 'Father', at which point the soul should have risen beyond human limitations to its original 'unqualified state'¹⁶.

Hughes, too, in the more detailed of two separate groups of notes on Mithras, lists these seven degrees of initiation as 'Crow', 'Man of the Secret (cryphius)', 'Soldier', 'Lion', 'Persian', 'Courier of the Sun', 'Father'¹⁷. He describes the Raven/Crow as 'his messenger, as sun god', who flies to Mithras from the sun commanding him to kill the bull; and he notes that in the temple ceremonies 'only the Raven grade wore masks'.

¹³ Hughes' film scenario was sent to Swedish film director Vilgot Sjöman, who returned it as unsuitable for him. See Christopher Reid's Footnote to Hughes' letter to Siv Arb, 10 Feb. 1964. Reid, C. *Letters of Ted Hughes*, Faber, 2007, p. 231.

¹⁴ Hughes to Sagar, *LTH*.383.

¹⁵ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, CUP, 1978, p. 193

¹⁶ Joseph Campbell p.255-6.

¹⁷ Add Ms 88918/11/4 and a briefer note in Add Ms 988918/11/3. Some unrelated notes for proposed projects in Add Ms 988918/11/3 are on the verso of a play script dated 1963.

In a Mithraic temple which was discovered in Ostia Antica, just outside Rome, these seven degrees of initiation are illustrated in mosaics on the central aisle, which leads up an altar that is set slightly to one side so that it is not visible from the entrance of the temple. Perhaps of particular interest to Hughes would have been the image representing the first stage, which depicts a raven or crow (the black bird of death), a cup, and the caduceus of the god Mercury, (the messenger of the gods and the psychopomp who will conduct the soul to the world of the spirit): thus linking death and the preparation for the journey of the soul, and connecting the human initiate with the divine.



Mithraic temples were usually underground or in caves or grottos, and Hughes notes that they had to be near running water and the bull-killing had to take place in the cave. He also notes that the rites were ‘immersed in astrological theory’. In many of the temples that have been excavated signs of the Zodiac are common; images of rituals in which celebrants wore masks representing animals of the Zodiac have also been found, and there are numerous images of Mithras slaying the primeval bull, with the Raven between the sun or sky and Mithras’s shoulder¹⁸.

At the time when the foundations of Zodiac iconography were laid, the constellation that was given the sign of Taurus, the Bull, stood at the spring equinox, marking the end of winter and the beginning

¹⁸ The Raven is particularly prominent in a 4th century marble Tauroctony, reputed to be from Sidon in Lebanon, and now in the Louvre.: <https://tertullian.org/rpearse/mithras/display.php?page=cimrm75>

of spring. The bull in many mythologies is an animal of the Goddess and a symbol of fertility: it is also linked with nature gods like Dionysus and Adonis. Killing the primeval bull ensured that the Earth goddess's fertile powers would be restored, and, in the iconography of the Mithraic temple, the sacred and life-renewing symbolism of Mithras's action is frequently indicated by the bull's blood or its tail having become ears of wheat.

This symbolism, as Hughes notes, was very like the killing of the bull, Goshwan (the primordial beast), in the Zoroastrian religion from which Mithraism possibly derived, Goshwan, was 'related to Ahura Mazda - killed by Ahriman – and from his side came Gayomart, first man', the progenitor of all mankind: from Goshwan's tail 'came useful plants and trees; from his blood wine; from his head beasts'. In both religions the killing of the bull restored life and fertility to the earth.

In *Gaudete*, the Reverend Lumb's adventures begin when he is, as Hughes says in his 'Argument', 'carried away to the other world by elemental spirits' to perform a task 'in their world'¹⁹. In 'firelit, domed, underground darkness', he is brought to a sick woman 'tangled in the skins of wolves'. Her face and body seem half-animal'; her upper lip 'dark and clean as a dark flower'. He is told he must heal this woman who seems to be 'alive and dead'. His task, like that of the bull-slayer of Mithraism and Zoroastrianism, is to restore life, but when he protests that 'he is not a doctor. He can only pray', his initiation ordeal begins²⁰.

This initiation entails Lumb being tied to a lopped tree, flogged until he loses consciousness, re-awakening as his own doppelganger, then, in a slaughterhouse, being confronted by 'A colossal white bull.../ Like the ceremonial image of a god' which he must shoot. 'spreadeagled beneath it', he is drenched in its blood and guts, and with that of other cattle. Finally, he manages to escape, climbing up stone steps 'into daylight'. When next we meet him it is Springtime in an English village and he is creating havoc by practicing his ministry of love.

Clearly, as Sagar says, it is not necessary to know the myths on which Hughes drew in order to understand and respond to *Gaudete*: 'any such connections the reader can make are a bonus; the poetry would do its essential work in any case'²¹. The myths Hughes chose, however, were myths which deal with the essential healing of the Earth, a subject which was always important to him; and the final poems in *Gaudete*, delivered to the original Reverend Lumb one morning in May by two young girls, are very different to the poetry and mood of the rest of the book. They are hymns to 'a nameless female deity' who 'is an apple' and who '... rides the heavens / On a great white bull'²². She is Hughes's Earth goddess and, as he says in the *Gaudete* 'Argument', after the death of the changeling Lumb, 'It may be that the original Lumb has done the work they [the elemental spirits who first abducted him] wanted him to do, and so the changeling's time is up'.

NOTE:

Ted Hughes completed his study at Cambridge University in June 1954, after which he drifted between Cambridge and London. By January 1955, when Lucas Myers first met him, he was living in London at 18 Rugby Street, but spending as much time as possible in Cambridge at the university library and with his friends at the Anchor pub there.

¹⁹ Hughes, *Gaudete*, Faber, 1977, p.9-19

²⁰ *Gaudete* 'Prologue', pp.11-20

²¹ Keith Sagar, p193

²² *Gaudete*, p.14.

On the 18th September 1954, a head of Mithras was uncovered during the excavation of one of the many WWII bomb-sites close to St Paul's Cathedral in the City of London. The discovery made front-page news, featured in cinema newsreels, and created huge public interest. It was estimated that up to 30,000 visitors a day queued up to view the excavation site over a two week period. Given Hughes's interest in mythology, and his recently completed studies in Archaeology and Anthropology, this discovery would surely have caught his attention.

As excavation continued, the remains of a temple of Mithras – a Mithraeum – were revealed and it was debated in parliament what should happen to the ruin. It was decided to dismantle it and rebuild it close to its original site and this was done in the early 1960s.

This temple, which had originally been built in a cave-like space underground, has now been reconstructed beneath the Bloomberg European headquarters building, on its original site, at 12 Walbrook Street. As part of the reconstruction, an audio-visual 'experience' has been created, so that visitors can feel part of a Mithraic ritual. A huge number of Roman remains were discovered in the process of excavation and rebuilding, including hundreds of fragments of Roman writing tablets (many detailing commercial activities) one of which has the first known reference of Londinia. These discoveries, and others related to the Mithraic cult, together with information about Mithraism, are also on display²³.

²³ Information about the London Mithraeum, can be found at <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/> and there are several short, interesting and informative videos about the find, the reconstruction and the myth, at <https://www.londonmithraeum.com/about/>