TED HUGHES:

From Cambridge to Collected

Edited by

Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts
& Terry Gifford

Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected

Also by Terry Gifford

TED HUGHES

RECONNECTING WITH JOHN MUIR

PASTORAL

GREEN VOICES: Understanding Contemporary Nature Poetry

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO TED HUGHES (*ed.*)

Also by Neil Roberts

TED HUGHES: A Literary Life

TED HUGHES: A Critical Study (*ed. with Terry Gifford*)

TED HUGHES: New Selected Poems

A LUCID DREAMER: The Life of Peter Redgrove

A COMPANION TO TWENTIETH-CENTURY POETRY (*ed.*)

Also by Mark Wormald

THE PICKWICK PAPERS (*ed.*)

Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected

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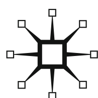

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To Daniel Huws

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Carrie Smith is a PhD researcher at the University of Exeter. Her thesis explores the compositional process in the manuscript drafts of Ted Hughes. She has published articles on Hughes' audio recordings and work with Leonard Baskin. She is on the editorial board of *The Ted Hughes Society Journal* and co-editor of the collection *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive: Reclamation and Representation* (2013).

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List of Abbreviations

BW	*Blood Wedding* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996)
CP	*Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003)
G	*Gaudete* (London: Faber & Faber, 1977)
LTH	*Letters of Ted Hughes* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007)
MD	*Moortown Diary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989)
PC	Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, *Poet and Critic* (London: The British Library, 2012)
PM	*Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989)
SGCB	*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
ST	*Selected Translations*, ed. Daniel Weissbort (London: Faber & Faber, 2006)
TO	*Tales from Ovid* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997)
UNS	*Under the North Star* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981)
WP	*Winter Pollen* (London: Faber & Faber, 1994)
WT	*What is the Truth?* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984)

Introduction

Terry Gifford

Our understanding of the work of Ted Hughes has reached an interesting stage. After the pioneering sweeps through the work to explicate Hughes' remarkably consistent but creatively evolving vision, first begun by Keith Sagar in 1972,[1] revisionist attention is now being given in more depth to the questions, paradoxes and riddles inherent in Hughes' vision(s) and the subtleties of their expression. Consideration of any small mysterious corner of Hughes' work, perhaps only lightly touched upon by previous critics, can quickly take the reader on a lightning journey to the charged centre of his concerns. And this works both ways. If the *Collected Poems* is the core (and perhaps the single most important book of poetry for our own century that was written in the last), the journey to any neglected part of the periphery of his work is but a hummingbird's wingbeat.

In the middle of a notebook flowing with first drafts of new *Crow* poems, Hughes turned a page and started writing down in prose his thoughts about the healing function of poetry, first for the poet himself, and then for his readers through the delivery of a shamanic imaginative journey.[2] Unpublished, unfinished, unresolved in some sentences, these five and half pages of handwritten notes end with an admission of their being 'very simplified, not too well organised, repetitive', but also with a sense that this account of shamanism 'advances more strongly what Eliade teaches in his more exhaustive account[3] [...] which is still waiting for somebody to develop at length with all its immence [*sic*] implications'. These notes were never published by Hughes and are signed at the end with 'David Farrar'.[4] They remained in the notebook, perhaps having played their part in the process of producing the *Crow* poems. Yet, apart from their obvious significance for *Crow*'s shamanic journey and its final healing insights in its published form, these hurriedly written

working notes arrive at one sentence that strikes at the core of all Hughes' writing:

> The poetry of the mind which is healing itself is a visionary account of events, the shamanic adventure, ultimately an account of paradise and order in both worlds, a reconciliation of an archaic near-reptile nervous system, totally exposed to spirit life and the magnetic field of earth with all its riddles.[5]

One might feel that 'an account of paradise' is, indeed, too glibly simplified until one gets to the difficult reconciliations needed for 'both worlds' and for exposure to riddles. 'Adventure' covers a host of setbacks, suffering, challenges and trials. 'Exposure' to spirit life is apparently as potentially threatening as it is exhilarating. How is our primitive nervous system to be reconciled to 'the magnetic field of earth'? And here, in an abandoned, 'simplified', apparently peripheral piece of writing, Hughes is evoking, as he always is in his core work, 'earth with all its riddles'.

So *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, which takes its title and its genesis from a conference at Pembroke College, Cambridge in September 2010, engages with some of the questions, contradictions and riddles in the subsequent magnetic work of a former Pembroke student who exposed his imagination to the 'spirit life and the magnetic field of earth'. Perhaps the first riddle to be confronted here is that Cambridge seemed to have killed Hughes' poetic muse, but was the making of him as a poet. In his chapter examining some of the myths about Hughes at Cambridge, Neil Roberts reveals that Hughes lacked confidence in the quality of his student poetry and avoided being known as a poet. However, the famous dream of the burnt fox that interrupted the writing of Hughes' weekly critical essay with the words 'Stop this – you are destroying us' (*WP* 9), demonstrated Hughes' separation from the earth and 'spirit life', and a switch in his studies subsequently led to Hughes gaining the anthropologist's understanding of the shamanic function of art: the poet healing himself. Edward Hadley's chapter here directly addresses the surprisingly overlooked detail of Hughes' writing about illness and healing, evidencing Hughes' tactful and moving achievement in which the dignity of agency is subtly bestowed upon the sufferer. On the other hand, Lynda Bundtzen argues that late in his life Hughes struggled to heal himself successfully through the poems of *Capriccio*. Challenging previous readings of this collection, Bundtzen indentifies a 'traumatic repetition' of

mythic narratives that fatalistically trap Hughes in riddles of his own mythologizing.

Of course, in addition to significant references to Hughes' major works, this book explores neglected aspects of Hughes' major themes such as the role of animals, Christianity, fishing and farming in his work. Laura Webb suggests that much of Hughes' early interest in the spirit lives of animals is actually connected to his preoccupation with the survivalist qualities evidenced in the First World War and the survivalist linguistic strategies of the Eastern European poets. 'Art operating as medicine', in Hughes' words, is one outcome explored by Webb's enquiry. Indeed, Hughes' belief that poetry has become the secular healing substitute for organized religion was one reason Hughes gave to decline a debate with the Anglican Church in his letter to Bishop Ross Hook. David Troupes takes this as his starting point in an attempt to clarify Hughes' relationship with Christianity, arguing that Hughes' shamanism paradoxically colludes with the Christian tradition by appropriating its symbolic structures. It is well known that a religious practice of body and spirit with rejuvenating powers for Hughes was his deep commitment to the piscatorial art. Mark Wormald is the first practitioner of this art to research the fishing poems using the newly available fishing diaries and journals in the British Library. A new aspect to Hughes' personality emerges from Wormald's interviews and his informed readings of the poetry and the prose: playful, as with fellow conspirators, mischievous even, teasing and testing friends, generous with information, lost for words at times, and bonding with his son in a way that, like all of the above, is written deeply into the poems. The other non-verbal engagement with 'the magnetic field of earth' that ran through Hughes' life in different ways was farming. David Whitley begins his chapter on 'Ted Hughes and Farming' by quoting the contemporary American georgic poet Wendell Berry on farming as 'a practice of religion, a rite. By farming we enact our fundamental connection with energy and matter.' Contrasting *Moortown Diary* with the children's book *What is the Truth?*, Whitley's deft discussion of the texts demonstrates the poet posing questions through a variety of voices that demand judgements on behalf of both adult and child readers. Giving wild and domestic animals agency, for example, requires a repositioning of animals by the reader in relation to their mythic archetypes. In these books, Whitley argues in his final paradox, 'The farm becomes a space where animals can work inside humans with renewed energies.'

It seems remarkable that to date there have been no chapter-length studies of Hughes' debt to three poets whose work fascinated him

throughout much of his life: Emily Dickinson, Seamus Heaney and Federico García Lorca. The detailed scholarship of our three contributors on these poets produces some revealing insights and an unpublished poem. Gillian Groszewski weaves Hughes' admiration for the enigmatic speech of Emily Dickinson around his relationship with Plath right up to and including *Birthday Letters*. Following the twisting riddles of intertextuality Groszewski even, at one point, shows Hughes to be correcting Plath's misremembering of Dickinson. Seamus Heaney has been eloquently generous in acknowledging his debt to Hughes, but Henry Hart asks what it is that separates the two poetic sensibilities. By declining to rigorously critique the forces of Puritanism and rationalism, Hart argues, Heaney 'attempts to yoke the virtues of asceticism and rationality together with the virtues of sensuality and intuition'. Lorca, on the other hand, makes no such reconciliations. Yvonne Reddick charts Hughes' passion for the work of Lorca from his first readings with a dictionary in Benidorm in 1956 to his 1996 translation of *Blood Wedding*. Along the way Reddick unearths an unfinished draft of a poem in the style of Lorca, probably from the late 1950s/early 1960s, that is published here for the first time.

Reddick suggests that Lorca gave Hughes an ability to tune into the 'inner music' of poetry at its most magnetic. Three chapters of this book deal with hitherto neglected poetic means of Hughes' exploration and expression of 'the magnetic field of earth' in his poetry: the 'inner music' of his poetic rhythms, his use of the vacana form and his richly powerful speaking voice. David Sergeant, in a brilliantly detailed chapter on Hughes' inner music, revises the popular view that Hughes' verse is alliterative in its rhythmic structure by demonstrating that larger blocks of verse form Hughes' rhythmic units in which unstressed syllables play a crucial part. Furthermore, Sergeant asks what all this means for a critical reading of the poetry and goes on to answer this question with contrasting examples. Ann Skea has researched Hughes' use of the Southern Indian poetic form of the vacana, a complete record of which exists in a single notebook. These poems constitute direct addresses to a goddess who represents the source of creation and are best known to readers of Hughes as the selection used as the Epilogue poems of *Gaudete*. Skea shows how juggling the demands of farming and writing whilst having accepted the shamanic challenge to pursue this visionary journey towards intimate knowledge of the goddess of creation, produce the frustrations and elations of the vacanas, which are actually an experiment in a restricted scale and mode that shadows the major poetic works. Skea's account makes more accessible the strange voice and riddling tone of these enigmatic poems.

Perhaps one of the most electrifying readings ever heard from the voice of Hughes was that of a tape played at his memorial service in Westminster Abbey. The mature Hughes voice and the words of Shakespeare combined to catch the audience by surprise. Of course, this was one of an epic series of recordings made by Hughes in the last years of his life. Like everything he did, Hughes had evolved a carefully thought-out approach to reading poetry that is explained for the first time here by Carrie Smith. Again, Smith's research elucidates important examples to convey something of the healing effect of a nervous system exposed to spirit life embodied in a voice that appears to be speaking directly from 'the magnetic field of earth with all its riddles'.

Seamus Heaney had kindly agreed to read at our conference at Pembroke College, but was prevented from doing so by illness at the last minute, so Simon Armitage generously offered to take the field as a West Yorkshire super-sub, at which news the organizers 'bicycled in air'. It is even rumoured that one of us 'flew horizontal' like the goalie in the poem 'Football at Slack'. So it is fitting that this volume is begun and ended by unpublished essays by two poets who have each spoken much about the influence upon them of Ted Hughes' friendship and work. Simon Armitage develops a theory that he calls 'The Ascent of Ted Hughes' as he reads poems that literally arise out of the Calder Valley 'to stand respectfully,' as he quotes Hughes saying, 'hat in hand, before this Creation, exceedingly alert for a new word'. And to conclude this book Seamus Heaney has offered us a moving meditation upon 'Suffering and Decision', Hughes' own words for what makes poetry distinctive. Heaney's magisterial essay makes the strongest claim for the healing potential of Hughes' poetry by possessing what Heaney calls 'an inner ethic of endurance'.

Notes

1. Keith Sagar (1972), *Ted Hughes* (London: Longman for the British Council).
2. Emory MSS 644, Box 57, Folder 9, manuscript notebook, p. 81.
3. Hughes had reviewed Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism* in 1964: *WP* 56–9.
4. Farrar was Hughes' mother's family name and David Farrar was the name of his cousin.
5. Emory MSS 644, Box 57, Folder 9, p. 83.

1
The Ascent of Ted Hughes: Conquering the Calder Valley

Simon Armitage

Those not familiar with the biographical details could be forgiven for assuming that Ted Hughes was something of a stick in the mud.[1] This is because of Hughes' enduring connection with the Calder Valley, a deeply scored river system running between the Pennine watershed to the west and Halifax to the east. Hughes was born in that valley in 1930, in the small town of Mytholmroyd, and for the rest of his life continued to refer to the area in his poems and in his prose writing, both obliquely and directly. His *Remains of Elmet*, written in response to Fay Godwin's black-and-white photographs of the locality, confirmed Hughes' faithful relationship with the upper Calder through powerful and dramatic evocations of the landscape, and the book is nothing like the extra-curricular or coffee-table project it might have been in the hands of a less committed writer. In fact, *Remains of Elmet* is, in my view, not only the definitive poetic guide to the environs of Hughes' homelands, but his single most important publication, a kind of concordance to the whole of his work, the poems within it serving as manifestos or blueprints for his later work and philosophical concerns.

And yet Ted Hughes left Mytholmroyd when he was a boy. In fact, some commentators make him as young as seven when the family packed their bags and in the local vernacular 'flitted' to Mexborough in South Yorkshire, a far less romantic part of the county. It would be easier to associate a writer such as Lawrence with the pit-heads and goods trains that probably characterized Mexborough in the thirties and forties, or Auden with his predilection for industrial landscapes. Nevertheless, in the outlying fields, Hughes still managed to serve out his apprenticeship as a 'nature poet'. After South Yorkshire he went to Cambridge, then to London, then to Devon. That arcing journey from the terraced north to the thatched south-west was by no means a seamless one,

and was punctuated with diversions both in this country and abroad. It is also true that Hughes' parents returned to the Calder Valley and that Hughes made regular return trips, at one point purchasing Lumb Bank, the farmhouse we now know as the Ted Hughes Arvon Centre for creative writing. But as far as the National Census is concerned, Ted Hughes was an occupant of that particular postcode for little more than half-a-dozen years at the very beginning of his life, after which he was a visitor. Why is it, then, that place names such as Hebden Bridge and Heptonstall are so strongly connected to Hughes, both the man and the work? And more curiously, how could those childhood memories leave such a lasting impression on the imagination, to the point where Hughes was still writing about his Pennine background 60 years later and from 300 miles away?

For those uncertain of the cartography, Halifax is a former textile town famous for its building society, or rather its demutualized bank. Like many towns of comparable size and latitude, its civic buildings speak of an illustrious past, and its ailing non-league football team tells of a less confident present. The A646 out of Halifax skirts along the south-facing slope of the Calder Valley, passing through towns such as Sowerby Bridge and the fabulously named Luddendenfoot, and within a few miles has entered Hughes Country. I use that expression not quite in the way that Howarth, a few miles to the north, is referred to as Brontë Country, although this handful of former mill-towns and the hills which overshadow them should be the first stop for any Hughes enthusiast – tourist or scholar – because even though Hughes was only a temporary resident, the anthropology, religion, natural history and geography of the area provided him with not just a setting, but a model for nearly all of his future work. This continuing ability to draw from and poeticize his upbringing says a great deal about the extent to which Hughes, as a child, was tuned in to his surroundings. Perhaps the boyish wonder evident in some of his writing is part of the reason his poems have been so popular and successful among generations of schoolchildren. The poems in *Remains of Elmet* also confirm the depth of his memory – the extent of his recall when burrowing into the past – although not all of what he has said about the Calder Valley can be taken as fact. That isn't to accuse him of falsifying the past; his portrayal of that part of the world is always graphic and never without significance, but his role as poet should not be confused with that of the fastidious chronicler or the scrupulous local historian. And as well as responding to his environment, Hughes demonstrated an equal capacity for imposing his views upon it too, moulding and

mythologizing what lay in front of him to suit his needs. It worked both ways.

So it was with a certain amount of 'finger-in-the-wind' imaginative liberty that Hughes defined Elmet as the limits of an Old Celtic Kingdom, whose bolt-holes and smoke-holes took in the foothills of the lower Pennines and the steep-sided, wooded valleys of what was then known as the West Riding of Yorkshire. What is completely convincing, however, is Hughes' more personalized account of the region as he understood it in a 1980 radio talk, one with which any member of the indigenous population could only agree.[2] Hughes developed a fascinating portrait of Elmet in which members of the local community were, he said, an 'essentially geological and meteorological phenomenon', suggesting that all aspects of society and personality in that part of the world could be attributed to rocks and rain. 'This helps to explain their obsessive concern through the ages with chills, bronchitis, pneumonia, rheumatism; with hot food and as much of it as can be had, and with wrapping up well.' Certainly this tallies with my experience of West Yorkshire. More than half a century after Hughes left the area a fair proportion of the conversation still revolves around homespun remedies for coughs and colds and typically takes place in a shop-doorway while sheltering from the 'nithering wind'. His description of the upper Calder as 'a naturally evolved local organism, like a giant protozoa', might seem at first like Hughesian hyperbole, but the implication – that the area exhibits a peculiar form of self-sufficiency – still feels very true, especially in the case of Hebden Bridge, a town which attracts a great many epithets, some of them contradictory, not all of them complimentary. In his talk on 'Elmet', Hughes said that Hebden Bridge had been referred to as 'Cradle of the Industrial Revolution in Textiles and Cradle of the Chartist Movement, and even, according to some, the Cradle of the Splitting of the Atom'. He also pointed out that 'in the mid-sixties Hebden Bridge was declared the hippie capital of the United Kingdom', and its reputation for independence, for example through its well publicized and active resistance to 'chain' retail outlets, remains to this day.

But more than anything, Hebden Bridge is the archetypal Calder Valley town, by which I mean it is a settlement located deep in the water-cut ravine, whose outlying houses cling precariously to the valley sides and whose remote farmhouses on the moorland above risk obliteration by the elements. And it is here, within the cross-section, across the strata of the valley, that I think a theory can be formulated that goes some way to explaining Hughes' lasting preoccupation with his early life. The poetry of Ted Hughes is the poetry of conflict. Whether

writing about animal, vegetable or mineral, rival and opposing energies are always felt to be at work in a Hughes poem. Very often such conflict produces dramatic tension, as if Hughes is utilizing a technique we might more readily associate with theatre. A crass simplification would be to say that characters, objects and even concepts in a Hughes poem are sometimes cast in 'good' or 'bad' roles, then pitted against each other in a way that suggests a possible 'winner' or 'loser'. The *Crow* poems are the most obvious example, but even in a short, ostensibly pastoral piece like 'Snowdrop' we find that small, delicate flower to be in a siege situation, holding out against the deadly grip of winter. In 'Pike', far from being under threat from the line and the hook, the fish appears locked in mortal combat with nothing less than the whole of evolution. And the poem 'Thistles', from its rustic opening of farmers and cows, develops into a full-blooded metaphor for war. Everywhere in Hughes we are witnesses to this struggle between natural adversaries. The survivors in his poems have succeeded against all the odds, against everything the opposition could throw at them. But what constitutes victory, and what reward does triumph bring?

As a boy, said Hughes, 'all my more exciting notions gravitated upwards'. Standing outside 1 Aspinall Street, the house where he was born, it is not difficult to understand why. On one side of the valley stand the sentinels of blackened buildings and dark ridges. On the other looms Scout Rock, the blank quarry face that blots out all but the highest movements of the sun. Along the corridor of the valley, traffic rumbles through at a rate that has only increased through the years, despite the opening of the M62 between Leeds and Manchester. In these circumstances, the valley becomes a kind of trap, a narrow funnel of darkness and fumes. In his memory, and with the poet cranking up the rhetoric, it then becomes a gorge, ditch, a trough, a pit and ultimately (and perhaps inevitably) a trench. It is a place to be avoided or escaped, and the only escape route is up. Above the confines of the valley lie illumination and reprieve – a fleeting but nonetheless worthwhile sense of enlightenment and hope. And Hughes' means of escape is not crampons or ladders or ropes, but language. Words. No. 1 Aspinall Street is now owned and run by the Elmet Trust and is available for hire as self-contained tourist accommodation. Should they wish to, visitors can sleep in what was Hughes' attic bedroom, poke their heads through the hatch and look out onto a bird's-eye world of rooftops, moorland and sky.

Let's start at the very bottom, though. Not just at ground level but in a channel cut from the earth which disappears into a subterranean

shaft passing beneath the hill. The Rochdale canal is quite literally a stone's throw from Hughes' birthplace, a largely ignored stretch of mainly stagnant water running parallel to the river and the road. Since becoming obsolete as transport routes, which they have been for over a hundred years now, the canals in the industrial north have suffered a variety of fates. At best they are venues for half-hearted leisure activities such as walking the dog. At worst they are dead-waters, repositories of discarded shopping trolleys, disused bikes and domestic waste. The canal at Mytholmroyd in the smog-bound thirties would have been no aquarium, and yet it conceived in Hughes a life-long passion for fishing, and provided him with a rare glimpse of that most precious of fish – the trout.

The poem 'The Long Tunnel Ceiling' could be read as a simple celebration of nature, which on one, perfectly satisfying level, it is. But it is in relation to the topographical structure of Hughes' writing that I prefer to consider it. We begin with the Moderna Blanket factory and lorries from Bradford, icons and images of industrial hell situated in the valley bottom. The tunnel itself has become a grim, chthonic world, Hades perhaps, no longer a simple underground passage, but a place of stalactites (a cave) and cell-windows (a prison). Yet it his here, in this netherworld, that Hughes receives a sign. And without doubt it is a sign intended for his eyes by some higher power, 'A seed / Of the wild god now flowering for me', as he puts it (*CP* 479). And what is the trout a sign of? Of effort, of struggle, of the life-long journey upstream, driven on by some primitive subconscious ambition. The elements have conspired against it, a cloudburst flushing it from its hillside stream to leave it languishing in the lower, man-made reaches of the world, 'Between the tyres, under the tortured axles'. But here in this hell-on-earth it is an omen of higher thoughts and aspirations. It is a pointer towards a worldly heaven. A signpost, almost, showing not only the direction of travel that Hughes must take, but a glimpse of the destination that awaits him. Hughes shares with us the sudden, almost miraculous moment when this mystical, sacred being breaks the glazed surface of the canal and launches itself into the air. It is a manifestation of the innate desire to rise, expressed here as a burst of energy and a raw physical urge. In one moment, the fish is transmuted from a 'brick' to an 'ingot'. Alchemy has taken place. It flashes with the colour of the sun, as if some kindred fire within it compels the trout to thrust itself towards the supreme, life-giving light.

If the stony outcrop of Scout Rock was an obstruction to Hughes' view, there was another impediment to his vision much closer to home,

a man-made obstacle situated only a few yards from the kitchen window, in the form of a chapel by the name of Mount Zion. In his poem of the same title, Hughes evokes the idea of a 'deadfall', a very crude and honestly named animal trap. When a stick is disturbed, a heavy but delicately balanced stone tips forward and flattens whichever animal has dislodged it, often a fox, perhaps a sinner on this occasion, or anyone who might attempt to sneak past the black wall of the church. Once again, we find ourselves near the very bottom of the slope, looking upwards, but what obscures our view this time, barricading us against attainment, is religion itself. Orthodox religion that is, in the shape of buildings, dogma, conformity and a rather scary-sounding congregation. The church-goers seem to have little to do with spiritual fulfilment of any kind, which once again is elsewhere, above and beyond, and this less than flattering recollection of the parish worthies would have succeeded as a poem in its own right. But Hughes has another move to make. He introduces a cricket, at work in the distance and the dark. I don't think he intends the cricket as a literal threat, slowly demolishing the church, and in some respects the insect is almost comical, chirring away in the mortar between the dark stones. Nor do I read it as a biblical portent; a plague of locusts might have contributed to the destruction of Old Testament Egypt but it is hard to imagine the humble cricket undermining the foundations of a fairly robust religious doctrine. Instead, what begins as a kind of music emanating from this near-invisible creature becomes in Hughes' night-time imagination a sort of relentless gnawing – a growing, persistent doubt. The church is a physical manifestation of man's desire to impose order on the world, and the sound of the cricket is the heretical erosion of that order. To stand on Aspinall Street today is to see that impatient land-developers have stripped the crickets of their demolition franchise; Mount Zion has been razed to the ground and replaced by a less intimidating three-storey block of flats. Along the valley, dozens of other Methodist chapels still stand obstinate and foursquare against the horizon. But eternity is a long time. Oblivion has a patient determination, and gravity – its most patient foot-soldier – shows no signs of abating. For the purpose of my theory, the sound of the cricket is also a wake-up call to Hughes, 'smothered' in his bed at the bottom of the hill, alerting him to the war of attrition being played out directly above his head. That word 'smothered' is so tactically deployed, suggesting an element of malice (as in suffocation), but also containing the spelling and sound of 'mothered'. Hughes in bed is cosseted, cut-off, almost forcibly removed from the natural world outside. But the sound of the cricket still percolates through the darkness, inflaming

his imagination. It makes us rethink an earlier passage in the poem, his account of his introduction to or initiation into the Methodist Church, which he likens to the slaughter of a lamb. We reread it now as a dream or nightmare, and for the superstitious Hughes, such waking-visions were always loaded with significance and could never be taken lightly or ignored. Returning as far as the opening lines, it is interesting to compare Hughes' frustratingly occluded view of the night-sky with that of his young daughter in the poem 'Full Moon and Little Frieda'. His eye-line is blocked by a building, a church even, but in rural North Devon Frieda comes face to face with the moon. She is captivated, and in turn empowered by language.

Climbing the hill brings us to various staging posts along the way, staging posts in the form of poems, but the next stopping off point on this particular attempt on the summit is 'Heptonstall Old Church'. From the east, Heptonstall has to be approached by means of a turning-circle, meaning that vehicles must overshoot the junction by a few hundred yards, then swing around 180 degrees before attempting the gradient. It's as if visitors are being given the opportunity of changing their minds, or at least collecting their thoughts before proceeding. A narrow, Hovis-esque cobbled street runs through the village itself, and on the left-hand side stands the ruin of the old church, looking exactly as Hughes describes it. The newer church next door is less interesting, except for the fact that Sylvia Plath is buried in the graveyard across the lane. For students of poetry at Lumb Bank, about a mile away on the same contour, the grave has become a necessary pilgrimage site as well as the setting for a thousand well-intentioned elegies. But all that is another story. What fascinates about the poem 'Heptonstall Old Church' is the image of the building as that most symbolic and unconstrained of all the animals – a bird. To the climber, to the person struggling towards the peak, the bird represents the kind of soaring freedom that can only be dreamed of. To the bird, height is nothing to fear, and the idea of falling, and therefore failing, is anathema. This particular bird, returning to planet Earth carrying some visionary gemstone in its song, implants the same vision in the head of man. It is almost a creation myth, but as with most of those stories, something goes wrong. Man, it seems, just isn't up to the job. After this tantalizing vision of not just altitude but outer space – heaven, quite possibly – the dream fades. The vision dies. There can only be momentary snatches of paradise. After that, blackness. Like the trout fighting its way upstream for one epiphanic moment of procreation, so humanity stumbles towards the light for a split-second of ... what? Love? Beauty? Knowledge? A glimpse of the meaning of

life? Then the light goes out. It is a bleak poem, redeemed only by a parallel reading which sees the death of the bird as the death of a more orthodox form of faith. The original Heptonstall church is medieval, built in the thirteenth century. As with 'Mount Zion' the poem could be taken as a despairing comment on the nature of latter-day worship, particularly the poker-faced austerity of Wesleyan Methodism which took hold so powerfully in the West Riding, transforming its attitudes and its architecture. In that scenario there is hope, it is simply that we have become estranged from it, or forgotten what form it took.

However, with hope comes no guarantee of success. In fact, man often seems doomed in Hughes' work, even if he does enjoy a certain amount of pleasure along the way, as with the poem 'Football at Slack'. Is this a case of the indomitable human spirit rising above the elemental forces of destruction? Or is it a case of the band playing on as the *Titanic* enters the abyss? A bit of both, I'd suggest, but for me, the quality of the writing and even the humour is enough to tip this poem in the direction of optimism, as if language and wit were key weapons in the battle against failure. Here we are, closer now to the top of the hill. The wind is so powerful it seems incomprehensible that a man could stand up in it, let alone take part in a game involving the precise control of a spherical, pneumatic object. But even though the world is sinking, and the rain is a steel press, and the words 'depression' and 'holocaust' are rising towards us from the bottom of the poem, the playfulness of the imagery reads like a justification of their actions. And even if these men are engaged in what some might think of as a particular futile activity (unlike his father Hughes had no interest in football apart from as a metaphor for war, as his limited edition poem 'Football' makes clear)[3] they are enacting some fundamental need to perform, to take part, to exist. Those taking part appear blissfully ignorant of the atrocities going on on all sides. And I don't get the impression that Hughes is being judgemental or disrespectful about their lack of concern. Perhaps there is even a trace of envy, like Keats' feelings for the nightingale, envious of its state of unconscious grace. Or like Shelley's feelings towards the skylark, and like Wordsworth's feelings towards the same bird.

But what comes up must come down, which might well constitute a very glib summary of the ideology expressed in the poem 'When Men Got to the Summit'. Two of Fay Godwin's black-and-white photographs accompany this piece in *Remains of Elmet*. The first shows a derelict terrace in Heptonstall which goes by the name of Churchyard Bottom. The second, the one to which the poem is more particularly addressed, is a bleak depiction of failed, human endeavour. On the summit of a craggy