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David Charles Heldsinger

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**CONNECTING INWARDLY TO BEETHOVEN: TED  
HUGHES AND THE ROLE OF THE ARTIST AS QUEST  
HERO**

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**This Masters by Research (English Literature) was written by David Charles Heldsinger for the School of Arts and Sciences of the University of Notre Dame (Fremantle) and submitted in the year 2013.**

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## ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes served as English Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998. In an insightful interview in 1970, Hughes said he connected 'inwardly'<sup>1</sup> to William Blake and Ludwig van Beethoven and that if he 'could dig to the bottom' of his 'strata, maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces'.<sup>2</sup> Blake and Beethoven lived and worked at a pivotal moment in history as the Romantic Movement emerged in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. This Movement has had a significant and long lasting effect on art, culture, philosophy and politics. Shortly before his death, Hughes reiterated that Beethoven's 'music dominated' his life and 'preoccupied' him 'at some level'.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, both Beethoven and Hughes believed that, as artists, they had to embark on the hero's journey for the sake of their art. In 1812, Beethoven wrote in his personal diary (*Tagebuch*) the following words: 'Submission, deepest submission to your fate [...] Do everything that still has to be done to arrange what is necessary for the long journey [...] for you there is no longer any happiness except within yourself, in your art.'<sup>4</sup> In similar Romantic vein, Hughes wrote in 1964 that 'once you have been chosen by the spirits [...] there is no other life for you, you must shamanize or die'.<sup>5</sup>

This research analyses the artistic role of Hughes as quest hero and explores the 'deepest traces' of Beethoven in the poet's work. While there is clear evidence that Hughes, throughout his prolific work, provides specific references to Beethoven, very little is known about the artistic confluences between the British poet and the German composer. What emerges is evidence of fascinating parallels and strong correlations between these two artists notwithstanding that they lived and worked in separate countries and during entirely different historical periods. This thesis shows that both Hughes and Beethoven shared the same Romantic belief in the power of the visionary imagination, the importance of understanding Nature, man's place in it and the mystical powers in the universe; they were also both drawn to the same mythological figures.

Through an analysis of carefully selected works by Hughes, this research will identify the traces of Beethoven in Hughes's work, examine the forces of Romanticism at work on both Beethoven and Hughes and consider Hughes's search for a powerful visionary imagination to get (as T. S. Eliot described) 'beyond poetry as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music'.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, Santa Barbara, 1980, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 202.

<sup>3</sup> *Letters of Ted Hughes*, selected and edited by Christopher Reid, Faber and Faber, London, 2007, p. 722.

<sup>4</sup> Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, Harvard University Press, London England, 1997 p. 246.

<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen Occasional Prose*, Faber and Faber, edited by William Scammell, London, 1994, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Stearns Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England* (Charles Eliot Norton Lectures 1932-1933).

I, David Charles Heldsinger, certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. Furthermore, to the best of my knowledge, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

David Charles Heldsinger

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## INTRODUCTION

During his lifetime, Ted Hughes published a substantial volume of poems, prose, articles, plays as well as children's literature. He received much acclaim and was the recipient of numerous awards. He also served as English Poet Laureate from 1984 until his death in 1998. In ancient Greece, the laurel was regarded as sacred to the god Apollo and used as a crown to honour poets and heroes. It has been said that Hughes has 'an extraordinarily subtle mind and one of total independence'.<sup>7</sup> In a revealing interview with Ekbert Faas in 1970, Hughes said he connected 'inwardly'<sup>8</sup> to William Blake and Ludwig van Beethoven and that if he could dig to the bottom of his 'strata, maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces'.<sup>9</sup> Blake and Beethoven were born thirteen years apart (1757 and 1770, respectively) and both died in 1827. Blake's life and experiences clearly intersected with Beethoven's in that they both lived and worked as artists during the historical period known as the Romantic Movement which emerged in England and continental Europe in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and lasted deep into the 19<sup>th</sup> century and, in some respects, well beyond it. Blake was a leading Romantic poet, philosopher, painter and engraver. Beethoven is today regarded as one of the greatest musical composers of all time. Hughes's fascination for Beethoven is evident throughout his life. For example, at the beginning of his poetic career in 1961 during a BBC interview of him and his then wife, Sylvia Plath, Hughes said that Beethoven had more influence on him than any other single artist in any medium and that the composer and his music influenced his imagination and the coherence of his poetic imagination. In 1998, 37 years later and shortly before his death, Hughes reiterated that Beethoven's 'music dominated' his 'life' and 'preoccupied' him 'at some level'.<sup>10</sup>

The image of the artist cast as a hero/heroine who must make personal sacrifices and undergo a journey of discovery for the sake of his/her art is a fundamental trope of Romanticism. Significantly, both Beethoven and Hughes believed that, as artists, they had to make sacrifices and undertake the archetypal hero's journey for the sake of their art. For both artists, personal development can only be accomplished through suffering. In 1812, Beethoven wrote in his personal diary (*Tagebuch*): 'Submission, deepest submission to your fate [...] Do everything that still has to be done to arrange what is necessary for the long journey [...] for you there is no longer any happiness except within yourself, in your art.'<sup>11</sup> The German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche said that Beethoven's 'gaze has become strong enough to make out the bottom of the dark well of being and

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<sup>7</sup> John Bayley, Times Literary Supplement as quoted on the back cover page of Hughes, *Winter Pollen*.

<sup>8</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 202.

<sup>9</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 202.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 722.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, p. 246.

[...] the distant constellations of future civilisations'.<sup>12</sup> In a letter to Countess Erdödy in 1816, Beethoven wrote:

During the last six weeks my health has been very shaky, so that I often think of death, but without fear [...] I perceive from your last letter to me that you, my dear friend, have also been a great sufferer. It is the fate of mortals, but *even here one's power should become manifest, i.e., to endure unconsciously and to feel one's nothingness, and so attain to that perfection*, of which the Almighty through such means will deem us worthy.<sup>13</sup>

In similar Romantic vein, Hughes wrote in 1964 that as a poet 'once you have been chosen by the spirits [...] there is no other life for you, you must shamanize or die'.<sup>14</sup> In an article in 1962, Hughes said that 'The poet's only hope is to be infinitely sensitive to what his gift is'.<sup>15</sup> In the poem 'Flounders', from his final volume of poems *Birthday Letters* (1998), Hughes described the fate shared by him and Sylvia Plath in the following manner:

It was a visit from the goddess, the beauty  
Who was Poetry's sister – she had come  
To tell poetry she was spoiling us.  
Poetry listened, maybe, but we heard nothing  
And poetry did not tell us. And we  
Only did what poetry told us to do.

It has been said that 'Hughes as mythic poet, wrote to liberate and heal - the soul, the body, the mind, the community and the world. It would be the shaman and his mythic quest that served as the primary paradigm and sacred script for the poet as healer and liberator'.<sup>16</sup>

The central focus of this research is to analyse the artistic role of Hughes as a quest hero and explore the 'deepest traces' of Beethoven in Hughes's work. While Hughes provides the reader with specific references and allusions to Beethoven and his music, very little is known about the artistic confluences and parallels that exist between the British poet and the German composer. Through an analysis of carefully selected works by Hughes, this research will examine the forces of Romanticism

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<sup>12</sup> *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Volume VI: Human All Too Human*, Part 1, translated by Helen Zimmern, New York, 1964, I, p. 265.

<sup>13</sup> *Beethoven's Letters*, translated by John South Shedlock, Dover Publications, New York, 1972, pp. 193-4. The italics are the author's.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 58.

<sup>15</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 1.

<sup>16</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, edited by Terry Gifford, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, p. 68.



at work on both Beethoven and Hughes and consider Hughes's search for a powerful visionary imagination to get (as T. S. Eliot said of his own artistic purpose) 'beyond poetry as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get beyond music'.<sup>17</sup>

The thesis comprises five chapters. The first chapter begins by identifying the specific references and allusions to Beethoven and his music in Hughes's *oeuvre* and providing comments on those references and allusions. This provides a platform for the remainder of the thesis to locate and analyze the 'deepest traces' of Beethoven and his music in their application to Hughes. In the first chapter, a select number of poems are closely examined because of their references and allusions to Beethoven. The focus of the second chapter is on some of the identifiable Romantic links common to Hughes and Beethoven. This chapter starts with an examination of the historical period known as the Romantic Movement and then considers the importance of the Romantic imagination at work in Beethoven and Hughes. This chapter also considers the differences that exist between the German composer and the British poet in relation to their notions of Romanticism. In the third chapter, the focus shifts to the heightened interest in Nature shared by Beethoven and Hughes with a specific emphasis on two components of Romanticism: trees and wind (breath). Chapter three also considers the specific historical differences between the two artists. The fourth chapter contains an examination of two specific myths that were the focus of interest for Beethoven and Hughes - Isis and Prometheus - and how these myths were understood and adapted by both artists. Finally, in chapter five, the philosophical concepts of 'Being' and 'Becoming' are examined in order to show the strong correlations that emerge between Hughes and Beethoven in relation to their own personal development as artists undertaking the hero's journey. As influential artists, Hughes and Beethoven understood that personal sacrifices and suffering are necessary requirements for the development of the artist. One of Hughes's central thematic concerns as reflected in many of his poems is that poetry is an interminable 'war between vitality and death'.<sup>18</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to demonstrate the strong parallels that exist between Beethoven and Hughes and the significant confluences that emerge between them in their journeys as artists. The thesis will show that both artists believed in the power of the visionary imagination; they were drawn to similar myths and there are strong correlations between them that cross a historical bridge of more than 150 years. Hughes was deeply influenced by Carl Gustav Jung and it is Jung's theories that provide a useful paradigm for illuminating these striking parallels. In a letter to Faas in 1977, Hughes said that he 'met Jung early' and although he read all of his translated volumes, he avoided 'knowing them too well' as this freed him 'to use them all the more'.<sup>19</sup> Jung was 'steeped

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<sup>17</sup> Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*.

<sup>18</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 197.

<sup>19</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 37.

in the symbolism of complex mystical traditions such as Gnosticism, Alchemy, Kabala and Buddhism, all fields Hughes was soon to explore and exploit [...] Jung provided Hughes with a model of the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious'.<sup>20</sup> Of particular interest to Hughes was Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious' representing that racial memory prevalent in everyone which contains the storehouse of symbols, archetypes and myths. Hughes 'knew from the very beginning that the vast array of myths, symbols and magical arts that he absorbed from his anthropological sources [...] would define his work.'<sup>21</sup> Based on Jung's approach, it is fair to say that Beethoven and Hughes have

plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and suffering, but where all men are caught in common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole.<sup>22</sup>

Many Romantic artists were seen to have some form of neurosis, which provided the creative spark for their imagination. This neurosis, for example, is reflected in the work of Keats in poems such as *La Belle Dame sans Merci* which means the 'The lovely but merciless lady' ('With anguish most and fever dew') and the Odes including *Ode to Melancholy* and *Ode to a Nightingale* ('My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains/My sense'). During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, a preoccupation with the Romantic artist developed as someone suffering from a psychic or spiritual wound, which is often reflected in the writings of Jung and the work of artists such as Yeats and Hughes.

The theoretical framework for the thesis is one that is essentially historical and aesthetic-contextual because the artists lived and worked in completely different eras, at distinct historical times and used different art forms. Hughes began his career after the horrors of both World Wars and Modernism itself was a cultural and historical reaction to Romanticism and the age of Enlightenment. It is apparent that Hughes's approach and interest in Romanticism is one that is deeply affected by his own historical context moulded by specific historical events. However, it is significant that Hughes clearly identifies two key Romantic artists, Blake and Beethoven, who lived and worked during the Romantic Period as the key protagonists who had the most significant influence upon him. The Romantic Movement brought about a radical shift in aesthetics in England and continental Europe (particularly Germany) and the effect of the Romantic Movement continues

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<sup>20</sup> Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, Fastprint Publishing, Peterborough, 2009, p. 36.

<sup>21</sup> *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, ed. by Gifford, p. 68.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 105. The various connections that link Hughes to Jung are explored in greater detail in chapter four of the thesis.

to reverberate even now in our contemporary society. It has been said that 'some of Jung's most important sources are to be found in the Romantics'.<sup>23</sup> It is this aesthetic shift to which Hughes is drawn albeit in the shadow of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the social and philosophical detritus caused by both World Wars. Hughes's world view is, therefore, inherently different from Beethoven's and yet the connective fibre that joins these two artists across 150 years remains the forces at work in Romanticism.

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<sup>23</sup> Jurkevich, Gayana 'Unamuno's Intrahistoria and Jung's Collective Unconscious: Parallels, Convergences, and Common Sources' in *Comparative Literature*, Vol 43, No. 1 (Winter, 1991), pp. 43 - 59 at p. 46.

## CHAPTER ONE: CONNECTING INWARDLY

In an interview in 1970, Ekbert Faas asked Ted Hughes about the main poets who had influenced his work including Gerald Manley Hopkins, John Donne, Dylan Thomas, D. H. Lawrence, William Blake and W. B. Yeats. Hughes's initial response, while somewhat evasive, was that 'Well, in the way of influences I imagine everything goes into the stew'<sup>24</sup>. In that same interview, Hughes said 'there are influences that show and deep influences that maybe are not so visible. It's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered'.<sup>25</sup> Intriguingly, Hughes added that 'this whole business of influences is mysterious. Sometimes it's just a few words that open up a whole prospect. They may occur anywhere. Then again the influences that really count are most likely not literary at all'.<sup>26</sup> These comments by Hughes, while apparently obscure are actually quite revealing. In that interview, the poet declares (twice) that the 'whole business of influence is mysterious' and also makes it clear that some influences are 'deep' and 'not literary at all'.

Hughes shows his hand when he says, in that same interview with Faas, that he connected 'inwardly' to William Blake and Ludwig van Beethoven and that if he 'could dig to the bottom' of his 'strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces'.<sup>27</sup> From Hughes's own personal correspondence, it is clear he was drawn to Beethoven as a young school student while under the influence of John Fisher, his English Teacher at Mexborough Grammar School in South Yorkshire.<sup>28</sup> There are a number of explicit references and other allusions to Beethoven (and his compositions) in Hughes's poems, a play (*The Wound*), Hughes's letters,<sup>29</sup> a BBC interview of Hughes and Sylvia Plath in 1961, Plath's journals<sup>30</sup> and a recent memoir written by Hughes's older brother<sup>31</sup>. As a student at Pembroke College in Cambridge University, in the early 1950s, Hughes kept a copy of Beethoven's death mask on his desk.<sup>32</sup> Quite fittingly, at Hughes's memorial service in 1999, the renowned pianist Alfred Brendel played the Adagio from Beethoven's Sonata No. 17 in D Minor (Opus 31).<sup>33</sup>

This first chapter comprises an analysis of those direct references and allusions that Hughes provides to Beethoven and his music with (a) close consideration of a selection of Hughes's letters,

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<sup>24</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 203.

<sup>26</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 203.

<sup>27</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 202.

<sup>28</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, pp. 436 and 671.

<sup>29</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, pp. 14-16, 50-51, 92, 314, 436 and 671.

<sup>30</sup> *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Karen V. Kukil, Anchor Books, New York, 2000, pp. 191, 417, 420, 411 and 467.

<sup>31</sup> Gerald Hughes, *Ted and I A Brother's Memoir*, The Robson Press, London, 2012, pp. 54-55, 71, 139-140 and 209-210.

<sup>32</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, pp. 14 and 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes' Memorial Service. A personal record of the memorial service held in Westminster Abbey on 13 May, 1999* at <http://ann.skea.com/>.

plays and prose and (b) textual analysis of the following poems of Hughes: 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1', 'Ludwig's Death Mask', 'Grosse Fuge', 'Opus 131', 'The Lodger' and 'Blood and Innocence'. This exploration of Hughes's letters, prose, play and poetry provides the foundation for a more detailed examination of Hughes's belief in the role of the poet as a visionary, which is to live 'for poetry, with single-mindedness' and 'to serve as a revivifying conduit of the great mythologies'.<sup>34</sup>

Great works of art have the capacity to transcend the inherent limitations of their own historical setting and resonate through the ages. Notwithstanding the different historical contexts in which Beethoven and Hughes lived and worked, distinct pointers to Beethoven abound in Hughes's work. The scholar William Kinderman has said of Beethoven that 'No composer occupies a more central position in musical life'<sup>35</sup> and added that:

More than any previous composer Beethoven contributed to a reversal of the perceived relation between artist and society: instead of supplying commodities for use, like a skilled tradesman, the successful artist could now be regarded as an original genius in the Kantian sense, revealing an unsuspected higher order in nature, and giving voice thereby to the unconditioned, or even paradoxically to the infinite or the inexpressible.<sup>36</sup>

Jung believed that art 'is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms the age is most lacking'.<sup>37</sup> In 1957, while describing his own creative process of writing poetry, Hughes explained that he used 'the method of a musical composer':

In each poem, besides the principal subject [...] there is what is not so easy to talk about, even generally, but which is the living and individual element in every poet's work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto that battleground of the first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented - the poem is finished [...] what is unique and precious in it is its heart, that inner figure of stresses [...]<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Dianne Middlebrook, *Her Husband, Hughes and Plath: A Marriage*, Little, Brown, London, 2003, p. 271.

<sup>35</sup> William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, Oxford University Press, 2ed, 2009, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 5.

<sup>37</sup> Jung, *The Spirit in Man*, p. 82.

<sup>38</sup> 'Ted Hughes Writes', *Poetry Book Society Bulletin*, 15 (September 1957).

Hughes's comments - in his 1970 interview by Faas - that Blake and Beethoven are the artists with the 'deepest traces' at the 'bottom' of his 'strata' reflect Hughes's deep understanding of, and fascination for, Romanticism. In particular, it is the concept of a visionary imagination - arguably, the most important ingredient of Romanticism - that operates to connect Blake, Beethoven and Hughes. Classicism and Romanticism are generally regarded as 'an indivisible phase in music'<sup>39</sup> and Beethoven was trained in the Classical tradition. However, most scholars accept that Beethoven's ultimate legacy is intimately part of the Romantic Movement, which swept through Europe during his lifetime and came to dominate the thinking of his age. The ideas spawned by Romanticism have influenced the politics, art, culture and philosophy of subsequent decades including our own contemporary society. For instance, the resurgence of the Green movement and its philosophical ideas, including living with and protecting Nature, are distinctly Neo-Romantic.

Blake, of course, was an *agent provocateur* of the Romantic Movement and renowned not only for his poetry but also his philosophy, engravings and paintings. Blake was the quintessential Romantic visionary artist whose artistic *raison d'être* was to lead the reader into a process of perpetual discovery akin to the journey of the archetypal hero. For Blake, salvation required a lifetime's journey, as he describes in the address to 'the Christians' in *Jerusalem*:

I give you the end of a golden string,  
Only wind it into a ball:  
It will lead you to Heaven's gate,  
Built in Jerusalem's wall.<sup>40</sup>

Hughes's own poetry reflects his fascination for the search towards 'perpetual discovery'. Hughes's artistic *modus operandi* has been described 'as a search for a visionary imagination - that telos of the Romantic quest most powerfully personified in Blake's Universal Men'.<sup>41</sup> While scholars have considered and documented the influence of Blake on Hughes,<sup>42</sup> the influence of Beethoven on Hughes has not yet been explored.

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<sup>39</sup> Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven Music, Thought, Imagination*, University of California Press, 2003, p. 31.

<sup>40</sup> William Blake from the book 'Jerusalem' in Blake *The Complete Illuminated Books*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2009 edition, p. 471.

<sup>41</sup> Alexander Davis, *Romanticism, Existentialism, Patriarchy: Hughes and the Visionary Imagination from The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, edited by Keith Sagar, Palgrave, St. Martin's Press, 1994, p. 70.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, the many books and articles by Keith Sagar, a leading scholar on Hughes.

Hughes's pre-occupation with Beethoven commenced early on in his life and continued until his death. An early reference to Beethoven by Hughes<sup>43</sup> appears in a letter from the poet to his sister, Olwyn Hughes, in the spring of 1952, when Hughes was only twenty-two years old. In the Michaelmas term of 1951, Hughes had taken up his place at Pembroke College in Cambridge University. During his second term at Pembroke, he wrote to Olwyn and commented on the prized death mask of Beethoven that he kept above his desk:

While I think – all the superficial people think the Beethoven is grotesque – all the real ones rave after a while. I have it stuck in the frame of Gerald's picture along with Napoleon, Keats and the astrological maps for August & February.<sup>44</sup>

In that same letter, Hughes also tells his older sister about a Beethoven concert he had recently attended:

This is Sunday night. This afternoon I went to a Beethoven concert, by Adrian Boult and his Boys<sup>45</sup> [the London Philharmonic Orchestra]. Played Leonora I, and 8<sup>th</sup>, and Eroica. Leonora I and 8<sup>th</sup> were fine, but suffered wherever grip and momentum and furor<sup>46</sup> were required, - they got through because of their music, but the Eroica, which is a Creative act to hear, was just bled white, - all the fiddlers ticking like a field of mere grasshoppers, or conjurers' assistants, while Boult's hands fluttered in the void like Shelley's for effect.<sup>47</sup>

There is an uncanny echo of Hughes's description of the violinists as 'fiddlers ticking like a field of mere grasshoppers' in his poem 'Opus 131' from *Capriccio*<sup>48</sup>. In that poem, Hughes describes the violinists as 'Dark insects' who have:

Fought with their instruments  
Scampering through your open body  
As if you had already left it. Beethoven  
Had broken down.

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<sup>43</sup> There may well be earlier references of which the author is unaware.

<sup>44</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> The reference to '*Adrian Boult and his Boys*' is to the conductor Adrian Boult and the London Philharmonic Orchestra.

<sup>46</sup> The author has retained the exact text from Hughes's *Letters*, which reflects Hughes's own particular grammatical style and spelling.

<sup>47</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> This poem is the subject of a close reading later on in this chapter.

In other words, Hughes intuitively Beethoven in negative terms when the music is not performed properly (as in the case of the London Philharmonic Orchestra) or if it cannot be heard at all (as in the poem, when 'Beethoven/Had broken down').

The sound of poetry was also critical to Hughes as he believed that poetry had to be read aloud. In a letter to Plath dated 1 October 1956, he says:

And Eliot says that the best thing a poet can do is read aloud poetry as much as he can. This should be sound. Silent reading only employs the parts of the brain that are used in vision. Not all the brain. This means that a silent reader's literary sense becomes detached from the motor parts and the audio parts of the brain which are used in reading aloud – tongue and ear. This means that only one third of the mental components are present in their writing or in their understanding of reading – one third emotional charge.<sup>49</sup>

Hughes then draws a parallel with Beethoven and in that same letter says that:

Beethoven composed singing and roaring and walking very fast and so did Dostoevsky – not singing but vociferating. So read aloud a lot, and read aloud poetry as you walk to and fro in your room timing the metre to your steps.<sup>50</sup>

In a letter to his daughter, Frieda Hughes, in 1977, Hughes says:

Practise<sup>51</sup> reading aloud. Take a Carver story and read it - quietly to yourself, but aloud - as if to a listener. Read every sentence as a separate musical speech unit. Nothing will teach you more thoroughly to recognise sharp writing. Clean effective sentences.<sup>52</sup>

In another letter to Frieda Hughes dated 17 May 1978, Hughes reiterates the importance of reading aloud when he says:

T.S. Eliot said to me "There's only one way a poet can develop his actual writing - apart from self-criticism & continual practice. And that is by reading other poetry aloud - and it doesn't matter whether he understands it or not (i.e. even if it's in another language). What matters above all, is educating the ear. What matters, is to connect your own voice with an infinite range of verbal

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<sup>49</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 50.

<sup>50</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 51.

<sup>51</sup> Note that the underlining here is taken directly from the text in Hughes's *Letters*.

<sup>52</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 390.



cadences & sequences-and only endless actual experience of your ear can store all that in your nervous system. The rest can be left to your life & your character."<sup>53</sup>

Prior to the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain*, some of Hughes's earlier poems are collected under the rubric 'Early Poems And Juvenilia',<sup>54</sup> covering the period 1946-1957. One of these early poems in this period is titled 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1' and subtitled 'Two Finger Arrangement'.<sup>55</sup>

*Pastoral Symphony No. 1*

*Two Finger Arrangement*

Far thunder of the coming sun; ablaze  
At horizon that wild green rush bursts with the dawn;  
Spring winds run in the valleys with the days,  
The choking claw-down grip from their hearts torn  
In a tossing flame of flowers their quick feet run;  
While the white blizzards shriek in the North heaven,  
In terror from the exulting season driven,  
Ride their gray clanging seas out of the sun;  
Polar eagle and owl scream, and retire  
In their wrecked storms nurtured, dreading the warm light;  
Dizzy with ecstasy for the warm light  
Birds dance from the soaring sun, nurtured in fire,  
Dazing the vales of the flowered time with songs:  
And shall the song and dance of the singers go?  
When from the sun's frenzy and cruel snow  
That nurtured them, hung murderous in the wind,  
The bearded ravens gather; sudden their throngs  
Flock, blotting day, and swirling darkly and roaring, fall,  
Bringing night.

Hughes uses both title and subtitle to evoke Beethoven's 6th Symphony, which is also known as the Pastoral Symphony. It appears as Hughes's first symphony ('No 1') and it is a two finger arrangement, suggesting a simple structure with crude and undeveloped content. However, in the

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<sup>53</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 393.

<sup>54</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, pp. 3-16.

<sup>55</sup> Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 8.

body of the poem, Hughes immediately draws the reader into a central thematic concern - that poetry is a 'war between vitality and death'.<sup>56</sup> In the opening line, the reader hears the power of the sun as the thunder heralds its arrival. Hughes's elemental forces take on the qualities of living animals: winds 'run' and blizzards 'shriek'. The 'hearts' of the Spring winds, once subject to the 'choking claw-down grip' of winter are violently released ('torn'). The blizzards are driven in terror from the forces of the dawn and the arrival of Spring, which Hughes closely associates with the power of the sun and the symbol of fire. It is 'ablaze'. Fire is a primordial element expressing good and evil. It symbolises creation, birth and original, divine light. It resonates in the myth of Prometheus.<sup>57</sup> But fire is also a destructive force when it rages out of control and consumes everything in its path.

This dual nature of fire expresses the principles of life, illumination and purification but also passion and destruction. T.S. Eliot uses this motif in the *Four Quartets* where he combines the fires of Pentecost with those of purgatory in this extract from 'Little Gidding':

the communication  
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the  
living.  
[...]  
The dove descending breaks the air  
With flame of incandescent terror  
Of which the tongues declare  
The one discharge from sin and error.  
The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre –  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love  
Love is the unfamiliar Name  
Behind the hands that wove  
The intolerable shirt of flame  
Which human power cannot remove.  
We only live, only suspire  
Consumed by either fire or fire.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 197.

<sup>57</sup> See chapter four for further details on the relationship of Hughes and Beethoven *apropos* the Prometheus myth.

<sup>58</sup> T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966.

The 'dove' referred to by Eliot is an ironic image of the Second World War German dive bomber (Stuka) coming out of the sky to drop its bomb represented as flames 'of incandescent terror'. In Hughes's poem, the light is warm and provides energy for the birds that are 'nurtured in fire' as they 'dance' and are 'dizzy with ecstasy'. The songs of the birds, energised by the fire of the sun, have the effect of 'dazing the vales'. However, at this juncture, Hughes introduces a sharp change in the form of a contrapuntal image by creating a deep sense of foreboding by posing the simple question; will the singing and dancing birds leave? This image of the departing birds is introduced to foreshadow the approach of impending and significant change from an original state of innocence. In so doing, the image is a clear allusion to the poem 'The Wild Swans at Coole' by W. B. Yeats:

### **The Wild Swans At Coole**

The trees are in their autumn beauty,  
The woodland paths are dry,  
Under the October twilight the water  
Mirrors a still sky;  
Upon the brimming water among the stones  
Are nine-and-fifty swans.

The nineteenth autumn has come upon me  
Since I first made my count;  
I saw, before I had well finished,  
All suddenly mount  
And scatter wheeling in great broken rings  
Upon their clamorous wings.

I have looked upon those brilliant creatures,  
And now my heart is sore.  
All's changed since I, hearing at twilight,  
The first time on this shore,  
The bell-beat of their wings above my head,  
Trode with a lighter tread.

Unwearied still, lover by lover,  
They paddle in the cold  
Companionable streams or climb the air;

Their hearts have not grown old;  
Passion or conquest, wander where they will,  
Attend upon them still.

But now they drift on the still water,  
Mysterious, beautiful;  
Among what rushes will they build,  
By what lake's edge or pool  
Delight men's eyes when I awake some day  
To find they have flown away?<sup>59</sup>

Sagar says that Hughes 'claimed to have learned by heart Yeats' complete poems'<sup>60</sup> and that 'Hughes found in Yeats the seeds of much of his own future work, and that he trod essentially the same path, from rejection of nature to worship of it'.<sup>61</sup>

In Hughes's poem, the line immediately after the question describes a gathering of 'bearded ravens', a dark and menacing image. However, ravens also represent a duality. They are known for their remarkable intelligence but they also feed on carrion and are considered to be harbingers of misfortune, illness and death. In the poem, the ravens' intent is evil as they are 'hung murderous in the wind'. The effect of this gathering of ravens in their 'throngs' is that they close out the daylight and usher in darkness ('night'). For Hughes, however, the sun - which is the genesis of the idyllic scene and nurtures the birds - is also the creator and nurturer of the ravens. In the first part of the poem, Hughes injects animal qualities in the elements (wind) and human qualities in the birds to create a sense of harmony and balance. The image of the ravens evokes the biblical allusion where Jesus implores his disciples not to worry and to 'Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them'.<sup>62</sup> In this context, while the ravens are neither farmers nor gatherers but rather scavengers, they are still part of God's creatures and the deity takes care of them. In addition, the ravens' dietary preference for carrion means that they are often seen flying over battlefields and gallows, loitering to feast on the dead. Hence, symbolically, ravens are linked closely with death. In the first part of this poem, Hughes strengthens the idyllic environment with his use of measured rhyme and alliteration ('flame of flowers' and 'while the white') in stark contrast to the latter verses in the poem in which the sense of dissonance and disharmony is amplified by the lack of rhythmic ending. The reference to 'bearded ravens' is also a

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<sup>59</sup> *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 5ed, edited by Ferguson, Salter and Stallworthy, Norton & Company, 2005, pp. 1192-3.

<sup>60</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, p. 34.

<sup>61</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, p. 36.

<sup>62</sup> Luke 12:24-34 from *King James's Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. Pearson Education Limited, UK, 2010.

reference to Odin, the god in Norse mythology who was accompanied by ravens and wolves. Hughes's pastoral setting - its idyllic nature represented by spring, the sun, light and fire - is blotted out by the ravens, the archetypal symbols of death and darkness, who turn the scene of light into a dark and eerie night. Likewise, for Beethoven, nature as the source of both idyllic settings and destructive forces is a central theme of his Pastoral Symphony, which is 'replete with pastoral signifiers'.<sup>63</sup> It contains imitations of natural sounds, shepherd calls, folk instruments and country dancers. Beethoven wrote that his Pastoral Symphony was 'more an expression of feeling than tone painting'.<sup>64</sup>

Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony broke from the standard symphonic form of the Classical period in that it has five and not four movements. There is also a distinctive programmatic approach to each movement which begins with an 'awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country' (first movement), then moves to a 'scene at the brook' (second movement) and then onto a 'happy gathering of country folk' (third movement). The first movement of the Pastoral Symphony depicts an 'awakening', a type of enlightenment brought about by the idyllic countryside. Hughes's poem echoes this awakening. He writes of 'the coming sun' which is 'ablaze'. In those first three movements, Beethoven's music (similar to Hughes's opening of his poem) creates a deep sense of harmony and balance, as the peasants sing and dance in the idyllic pastoral setting. This suggests a close connection and communion with nature depicted by her nurturing and maternal qualities. However, the images of a serene and tranquil environment are totally undermined by the fourth movement titled 'Thunderstorm; Storm'.

The introduction of the fourth movement allows Beethoven to interrupt 'the merry making of the peasants' with an abrupt and deceptive cadence, as the power and violence of the natural elements force their attention on all those present. The realistic effect of the 'storm', with its elemental forces of wind, rain, thunder and lightning, makes a dramatic impact. Hector Berlioz described this movement in the following way: 'it is no longer just a wind and rain storm: it is a frightful cataclysm, a universal deluge, the end of the world.'<sup>65</sup> Hence, this fourth movement opens the door to the dark and destructive side of nature, the opposite of its nurturing side. This is very close to Hughes's dark and menacing image of the ravens that gather and swirl 'darkly and roaring', 'blotting' out the day and who are 'hung murderous in the wind'. In the Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven seeks to achieve some redemption, a degree of synthesis in the form of closure by resurrecting the idyllic pastoral scene with his fifth movement titled 'Shepherd's Song; cheerful and

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<sup>63</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 75.

<sup>64</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 148. The German from which this is translated is: *mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei*.

<sup>65</sup> Hector Berlioz, *A travers chants*, Paris: Michel Levy Freres (Libraires Editeurs), 1862, Guichard, 1971, English translation, 1913-18, p. 45 as quoted in Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 147.

thankful feelings after the storm'. Beethoven carefully uses the fifth movement to restore the idyllic, pastoral setting. In the Pastoral Symphony, Beethoven focuses on nature's creative and redemptive qualities. There is a sense of hope and survival after the brutality of the storm.

In sharp contrast to Beethoven's Pastoral symphony, Hughes eschews redemption in his 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1'. The poem ends on a bleak and dark note. It is the deathly image of the ravens blotting out the daylight that dominates the final lines of the poem. The final two words of the poem 'Bringing night' herald a period of darkness and destruction arguably similar to the advent of the two world wars. The use of the word 'fall' in the penultimate line is suggestive of the fall of man as depicted in the Bible and expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. It is also strongly aligned with Blake's sense of the single vision (compared to Blake's fourfold vision) which is symptomatic of the fallen vision, described by Keith Sagar as 'fallen, that is, from an assumed original, primal, unified vision, symbolised by Eden'.<sup>66</sup>

Hughes, unlike Beethoven in his Pastoral Symphony, does not find any closure or synthesis after the storm. In contrast to Beethoven's redemptive ending, Hughes's conclusion to his 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1' is bleak, menacing and devoid of any redemption. The bearded ravens swirl 'darkly and roaring' and usher in the 'night'. Hughes's initial Pastoral setting is replaced with a grim battlefield. This one dimensional ending is arguably atypical of Hughes's artistic belief that the artist must pursue a greater vision. The true calling of a poet, according to Hughes, is to be a shaman who is summoned to embark on a sacred journey and who returns with a message of hope and renewal for the reader. According to Hughes:

One of the great problems that poetry works at is to renew life, renew the poet's own life, and, by implication, renew the life of the people, if they respond to the way he has done it for himself.<sup>67</sup>

To 'renew life' and connect with the reader (and listener) in a direct and visceral sense, Hughes (and Beethoven) make extensive use of metaphor, as illustrated by '*Grosse Fuge*'. Beethoven originally composed the *Grosse Fuge* (Great Fugue) as a final movement of his String Quartet Number 13 (Opus 130). A fugue is a musical composition in which one or more themes are repeated or imitated by successively entering voices and contrapuntally developed in a continuous interweaving of the voice parts. However, the *Grosse Fuge* was so demanding on Beethoven's contemporary performers and unpopular with audiences that his colleague, Karl Holz and publisher, Matthis Artaria, urged him to write a new finale for the String Quartet Number 13 and he reluctantly agreed to do this in late

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<sup>66</sup> *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, edited by Keith Sagar, The University of Georgia Press, Athens, Georgia, 1983, p. 285.

<sup>67</sup> Hughes in an interview with Amzed Hossein, 1989 as quoted in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, edited by Keith Sagar, Palgrave, St. Martin's Press, 1994.

1826. Two months after Beethoven's death in 1827, Artaria published the first edition of String Quartet Number 13 with the new, replacement finale and then later published *Grosse Fuge* as a standalone piece in its own right (which became Opus 133).

Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* is written as a multiple movement form contained within a single large movement. It opens with a series of unresolved fragments separated by long pauses. The *Grosse Fuge* places extreme technical demands on the performers and has an unrelenting introspective nature. Kinderman says that:

Several entries refer to the difficulty of the *Grosse Fuge*, and on one occasion, Schuppanzigh quipped that "Holz has fallen asleep, since the last movement has made him *kaput*."<sup>68</sup>

The *Grosse Fuge* has been described as 'the largest and most difficult of all of Beethoven's quartet movements.'<sup>69</sup> Many 19<sup>th</sup> century critics dismissed the work. However, Kinderman says that the *Grosse Fuge* 'shows us that more lurks behind the surface of things than might appear [...] the main sections of the Fuge unfold with a sense of progress from the obscure to the coherent'.<sup>70</sup> This sentiment is echoed by Maynard Solomon when he says that 'though the overture's primary image is of a chaoticized state of being, order will eventually emerge from the splintered chaos, the fragments coalescing into a gigantic three-part fugue, as a coherent universe is assembled from improbable ingredients. Thus, the Overtura is a return to beginnings, a representation of creation, of fracture and assembly, and thereby an emblem of art's supreme restorative power'.<sup>71</sup>

Hughes was familiar with Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*. In a letter dated 21 January 1957 to Aurelia and Warren Plath (Sylvia Plath's mother and brother), Hughes says, in response to a neighbour from America who Hughes was convinced would play jazz music, that:

we have our own weapons and shall not hesitate to attack. Our weapon is the *Grosse Fuge* [...] which, I know from experience, to someone who hasn't got to know it for the greatest work of art in existence sounds like an ear trumpet into the ninth circle of the cat's hell.<sup>72</sup>

In his poetic rendition of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge* (from *Earth-Numb*), Hughes uses the potent image of the tiger as a symbol of Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*. The tiger is the largest and fiercest of all predators and the mysterious creature in Blake's 'The Tyger' whose energy burns 'bright' and whose ferocity is uncontrollable. In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, the earth responds that the moon's rays

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<sup>68</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 337.

<sup>69</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 336.

<sup>70</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 340.

<sup>71</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven Music, Thought, Imagination*, p. 241.

<sup>72</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 92.

charm 'the tiger joy' that fills her. Hughes's poem begins with the image of the tiger awakening in its cave.

### *7 Grosse Fuge*

Rouses in its cave  
Under faint peaks of light

Flares abrupt at the sun's edge, dipping again  
This side of the disc  
Now coming low out of the glare

Coming under skylines  
Under seas, under liquid corn  
Snaking among poppies

Soft arrival pressing the roof of ghost  
Creaking of old foundations  
The ear cracking like a dry twig

Heavy craving weight  
Of eyes on your nape  
Unadjusted to world

Huge inching through hair, through veins  
Tightening stealth of blood  
Breath in the tunnel of spine

And the maneater  
Opens its mouth and the music  
Sinks its claw  
Into your skull, a single note

Picks you up by the small of the back, weightless  
Vaults into space, dangling your limbs

Devours you leisurely among litter of stars  
Digests you into its horrible joy



This is the tiger of heaven

Hoists people out of their clothes

Leaves its dark track across the octaves

The cave is a traditional symbol of Platonic epistemological darkness as well as artistic (and intellectual) depth. Byron says 'thoughts seek refuge in lonely caves' and Shelley refers to 'the dim caves of human thought'.<sup>73</sup> To Blake and Shelley, caves are dormant volcanoes. In Hughes's poem, the cave is a site of primitive origins and mystery representing the dark, inner recesses of Nature. This image is the subject of examination by Hughes in *Cave Birds*, which has been described as 'an apocalyptic world of evolutionary collapse in which the protagonist is put on trial by an assembly of birds'.<sup>74</sup>

Plath presents an interesting poetic counterpoint to Hughes's 'Gross Fugue' in her poem called 'Little Fugue', in which Plath seeks to open up a channel of communication with the dead, specifically her father, Otto, who died when Plath was eight years old. The central image in the poem is the yew tree, which Robert Graves describes as 'the death-tree in all European countries [...] In Ireland the yew was 'the coffin of the vine''.<sup>75</sup> Graves's book *The White Goddess* significantly influenced both Plath and Hughes. The book was given to Hughes by John Fisher as a school leaving gift and in 1967 Hughes wrote to Graves and said that he (Hughes) regarded the book 'as the chief holy book of my poetic conscience'.<sup>76</sup> This was because Hughes was deeply influenced by Graves and in particular, Graves's notion that the function of poetry is 'religious invocation of the Muse; its use is the experience of mixed exaltation and horror that her presence excites'<sup>77</sup> and his account of the source of poetic inspiration. In 1960, Graves wrote that:

True poetic practice implies a mind so miraculously attuned and illuminated that it can form words, by a chain of more-than-coincidences, into a living entity – a poem that goes about on its own (for centuries after the author's death, perhaps) affecting readers with its stored magic. Since the source of poetry's creative power is not scientific intelligence, but inspiration – however this may be explained by scientists – one may surely attribute inspiration to the Lunar Muse, the oldest and most convenient European term for this source? By ancient tradition, the White Goddess becomes one

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<sup>73</sup> Michael Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, 2ed, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, pp. 40-1.

<sup>74</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 141.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess*, edited by Grevel Lindop, Faber and Faber, London, 1997, p. 189.

<sup>76</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 273. The influence of Graves on Hughes is discussed in greater detail in chapter four of the thesis.

<sup>77</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 10.

with her human representative – a priestess, a prophetess, a queen-mother [...] A Muse-poet falls in love, absolutely, and his true love is for him the embodiment of the Muse.<sup>78</sup>

In her poem, Plath presents the 'Black yew' in contrast to the 'white cloud'. The poem comingles the yew tree with the colour black. Plath writes that 'The yew's black fingers wag'. She says 'I like black statements'. In the poem, a blind pianist is seated at Plath's table and Plath says:

He could hear Beethoven:

She writes that:

I envy the big noises  
The yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge.

In her poem, Plath conjures up the image of the black yew tree as a representation of her father:

Such a dark funnel, my father!  
  
I see your voice  
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,  
  
A yew hedge of orders,  
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.

While Hughes's poem uses the image of the tiger to develop Beethoven's composition, Plath's poem has a different focus: to explore the relationship with her dead father. In this respect, these two poems are quite different. The 'blind pianist' who sits at Plath's table may even be Hughes himself as he can hear Beethoven and Plath conjoins her image of the yew tree (her father) with that of the 'Grosse Fuge' (Hughes) and says she envies their 'big noises'. In this way, Plath suggests Hughes has replaced the role of her late father.

In *Cave Birds*, Hughes's central concerns are 'the insufficiency of humanitarianism when faced with life's basic cruelty, silence and acceptance as the only valid stance towards the world, and the ineluctable guilt of man'.<sup>79</sup> In Hughes's '*Grosse Fuge*', the music is represented as flares that 'abrupt' at the edge of the sun and come low out of the glare. It is all embracing, almost omniscient.

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<sup>78</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess*, p. 481.

<sup>79</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 141.

It comes under skylines, seas and liquid corn. The music contains occult and supernatural powers. Its soft arrival presses 'the roof of ghost' and its effect is to make 'old foundations' creak. The eyes of the tiger - the music - are out of this world. It belongs to another universe governed by different dimensions. The weight of the tiger's eyes can be felt on the nape of the neck, the part of the prey most vulnerable to attack. The music is presented as an invading force that works its way through the innermost parts of the listener: the hair, the veins, the blood and the spine. The effect of the tiger opening its mouth allows the music to sink 'its claw' into the listener's skull. The music even penetrates through bone, such is its power. The sublime energy of a single note lifts the listener by the small of the back and, weightless, throws the listener into space.

The music is not restricted by gravity. It has a devouring, animal quality, which is a direct allusion to the striking image of T.S Eliot's 'Christ the Tiger' in *Gerontion* where Eliot says 'The tiger springs in the new year. Us he devours'. To Hughes, the music contains a similar devouring quality as it 'digests you into its horrible joy' and devours the listener 'leisurely among the litter of stars'. The use of the oxymoron ('horrible joy') captures the essential duality of the music and represents Hughes's vision of Nature as a duality that possesses both creative and destructive energies. In 1959, Hughes had written to his sister, Olwyn, that 'an entire vision of life seems to have grown up' for him around the notion of God as the devourer-as the mouth & gut, which is brainless & the whole of evil'.<sup>80</sup>

The thematic core of this poem is that the music 'is the tiger of heaven' and in this regard Hughes draws on the rich imagery of Blake. Hughes said that:

Blake's great poem "Tyger! Tyger!" is an example of a symbol of this potentially dangerous type which arrives with its own control - it is yoked with the Lamb, and both draw the Creator [...] but the symbol itself is unqualified, it is an irruption, from the deeper resources, of enraged energy – energy that for some reason has become enraged.<sup>81</sup>

The music, in the form of the tiger, has enormous power over the listener who is lifted up effortlessly, violently undressed, devoured and digested. The listeners are stripped naked, returned to a state of primitive being as the music 'leaves its dark track across the octaves'. Hughes is suggesting here that this type of music (exemplified by Beethoven's *Grosse Fuge*) reflects elements of the sacred in the form of a primitive ancestral power ('Rouses in its cave'). According to Hughes, connecting with this power can lead to a form of integration with the 'tiger of heaven' and its 'horrible joy'.

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<sup>80</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 148.

<sup>81</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

However, invoking the 'elemental power circuit of the Universe'<sup>82</sup> is fraught with danger. Hughes says 'If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you.'<sup>83</sup> This capacity for destructive energy is powerfully captured in two of Hughes's poems, 'Opus 131' from *Capriccio* and 'The Lodger' from *Birthday Letters*. *Capriccio* is dedicated to Assia Wevill and Shura Wevill. In 1962, Hughes had left Plath for Assia Wevill and tragically, Assia took her own life and that of Shura in 1969. 'Opus 131' reflects on the doomed relationship of two lovers and is a poem about despair and desolation. The title of the poem is a direct reference to Beethoven's 'Opus 131', one of the composer's final string quartets. Beethoven's 'Opus 131' has been described as 'a tragic work'<sup>84</sup> and:

the most inward and searching of his late works while it is also, in content and form, the most innovative and most integrated of the late quartets. The whole work, but certainly its first and last movements, stands with Beethoven's explorations of dark emotions [...] as his final word on the ways in which the human soul, confronted by an implacable world, comes to terms with fate and mortality.<sup>85</sup>

These comments are an entirely apposite and accurate description of Hughes's poem, 'Opus 131'. The poem is a dark reflection on the poet and the poet's lover in their hotel room and begins on a positive, optimistic note.

### **Opus 131**

Opus 131 in C Sharp Minor  
Opened the great door  
In the air, and through it  
Flooded horror. The door in the hotel room  
And the curtain at the window and even  
The plain homely daylights blocking the window  
Were in the wrong dimension  
To shut it out. The counterpoint pinned back  
The flaps of the body. Naked, faceless,  
The heart panted there, like a foetus.  
Where was the lifeline music? What had happened

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<sup>82</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

<sup>83</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

<sup>84</sup> Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven, the Music and the Life*, W.W. Norton and Company, New York, 2003, p. 488.

<sup>85</sup> Lockwood, *Beethoven*, p. 488.

To consolidation, prayer, transcendence –  
To the selective disconnecting  
Of the pain centre? Dark insects  
Fought with their instruments  
Scampering through your open body  
As if you had already left it. Beethoven  
Had broken down. You strained listening  
Maybe for divorce to be resolved  
In the arithmetic of vibration  
To pure zero, for the wave-particles  
To pronounce of the unimportance  
Of the menopause. Beethoven  
Was trying to repair  
The huge constellations of his silence  
That flickered and glinted in the wind.  
But the notes, with their sharp faces,  
Were already carrying you off,  
Each with a different bit, into the corners  
Of the Universe.

The music opens the 'great door' in the air. This is the opening that would ordinarily connect the narrator to the source of the sacred. What floods through, however, is not transcendental but 'horror'. Immediately, the reader is forced to engage with a much greater force that is dark and destructive. The domestic items in the lovers' hotel room (the door, the curtains and the daylight blocking out the window) are hopeless and ineffective in keeping the 'horror' at bay. They are useless because they are 'in the wrong dimension' as if they are entirely out of place. The music takes the form of a pathologist. It pins back the flaps of the body (similar to an autopsy) to leave it naked and faceless, the heart panting like a foetus. The poet's anguished and desperate cry is captured in the following line: 'where was the lifeline music?' This is the music that, in the past, contained healing properties. It used to provide consolation, allowed for 'prayer, transcendence' and had the redemptive power to selectively disconnect 'the pain centre'. Now there is only pain and disharmony, which is reinforced by the musicians themselves, who appear as 'dark insects' fighting with their instruments and scampering through the lifeless body of the poet's lover. Much earlier, in a letter in 1952, Hughes had described the violinists performing Beethoven's 3<sup>rd</sup> Symphony (Eroica) as 'ticking like a field of mere grasshoppers'.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 15.

Hughes's next line is stark. He says bluntly that 'Beethoven had broken down' and the desperate composer 'Was trying to repair/The huge constellations of his silence'. This is entirely apt in the context of Beethoven's Opus 131, which Beethoven had composed in 1826 (shortly before his death in 1827). He had begun to lose his hearing in about 1818 and, at the time of composing Opus 131, he was completely deaf. However, in Hughes's poem, any effort by the composer to carry out some 'repair' is too late. The anthropomorphic musical notes ('with their sharp faces') have already dissected the poet's lover and carried off her separate anatomical parts 'into the corners of the Universe'. In 'Opus 131' Hughes suggests music is a powerfully destructive force, and likens it to a pathologist that carries out an autopsy of the poet's lover and strips her body parts but, rather than preserving the body parts, they are scattered to the ends of the universe. As with Beethoven, Hughes's 'Opus 131' allows the poet when 'confronted by an implacable world' to come to terms with his fate and the mortality of his loved ones.

Hughes returns again to this theme in his poem 'The Lodger' from *Birthday Letters* (1998). In this poem, Hughes considers the damaging effect of an intruder within his own body. The intruder appears as some alien force in the form of a lodger that inhabits and controls the poet, who asks:

Meanwhile

Who was using my heart.  
Who positioned our bee-hive and planted,  
With my unwitting hands, to amuse himself,  
Nine bean rows? Who was this alien joker  
Who had come to evict us,  
Sharing my skin.

These particular lines directly allude to Yeats' 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree' in which the Irish poet says:

Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,

In Yeats' poem, the rustic setting brings him peace ('And I shall have some peace there') and he can hear the 'lake water lapping' in his own 'deep heart's core'. However, this is not the case in Hughes's poem, which initially begins on a bright and enthusiastic note.

Potatoes were growing in the yard corner  
That September. They were the welcome wagon!  
First fruits of our own ground. And their flavour  
Was the first legend.

Hughes celebrates the arrival of Spring and the produce from the garden they (presumably Hughes and Plath) have made - the 'First fruits of our own ground'. He says 'their flavour/Was the first legend'. His enthusiasm for growing his own food is unbridled. He says 'I bought the spades, the forks, the overalls, the boots/And the books'. He describes himself in a fanatical sense, as 'a student/Gluttonous to swallow all horticulture/The whole cornucopia.' The opening lines of this poem reflect the importance to Hughes of connecting with the soil and the earth. He sees himself as a 'pioneer' and the flavour of the potatoes 'Was the first legend'. However, early on in the poem, Hughes introduces a negative ambience, a dark element and there is a deep sense of foreboding. Hughes says he 'began to dig' but that 'whatever hid in' his 'heart, dug with' him. At this stage, the reader is uncertain as to whether this is a *doppelganger*, the poet's alter ego or an alien force of some kind. In any event, this force appears to control and dominate the poet, who believes he is 'doomed' and it is only 'a matter of time' before his 'heart jumped out' of his body or 'simply collapsed'. This is the language of a desperate man fearing for his life. As he contemplates his frail heart, he reaches a moment of self-realisation: 'And yet my heart was me. I was my heart.' His sense of mortality is visceral. He truly believes he is 'going to die'. In this moment of extreme angst, Hughes searches for some relief or redemption. He turns to the nurturing, healing power of Beethoven's music:

[...] Efforts to make my whole  
Body a conduit of Beethoven,  
To reconduct that music through my aorta  
So he could run me clean and unconstrained  
And release me.

By these efforts, Hughes seeks to reconnect with the sacred, the fountain of the imagination so that the music can course through his aorta, clean his heart and provide relief from his own pain and anxiety much like the lapping of the lake water in the poem by Yeats. Regrettably, however, his efforts are futile: he says he 'could not reach the music' and that:

All the music told me  
Was that I was a reject, belonged no longer  
In the intact, creating, resounding realm  
Where music poured. I was already a discard,  
My momentum merely the inertias  
Of what I had been, while I disintegrated.

For Hughes, Beethoven's music emanates from the realm of the sacred, which is 'intact' - that is, it is holistic and complete - and a vital source of immense creativity. Hughes laments his situation and, with a deep sense of fatalism, says 'I was already posthumous.' Animals that see him regard him as 'already dead'. Hughes is commenting on his own situation in that he is unable to reach the music because he lacks that sense of an 'intact, creating, resounding realm', to which he 'no longer' belongs. The music tells him he is a 'reject' and 'already a discard'. The implication here is that Hughes perceives that Beethoven's music emanates from a sacred, creative source of pure imagination that provides him with poetic coherence and inspiration. Hughes suggests that Beethoven himself had access to this immense creative source and power: the 'intact, creating, resounding realm'.

By contrast, Hughes is dislocated from this realm, he has 'disintegrated' and is 'already posthumous'. In this poem, Hughes seeks to find the force that is using and manipulating him and his heart. He refers to 'this alien joker' and says it 'had come to evict us'. This deep sense of the poet dislocated from the music as the 'resounding realm' resonates in 'Opus 131'. In that poem, Beethoven's music - which provided a lifeline and could selectively disconnect the pain centre - is no longer accessible. In fact, Hughes says disconsolately that Beethoven 'Had broken down'.

In these two poems, 'Opus 131' and 'the Lodger', Hughes bemoans the inability of Beethoven's music to heal. The poems explore the chthonic realm of life: those dark, instinctual elements within the psyche. The poet's *cri de Coeur* is that, in these moments, the music lacks any quality of transcendence, consolation or prayer. It cannot disconnect the pain centre or 'repair' the failed relationship of the lovers. It also is unable to comfort Hughes and cleanse his ailing heart. Yet, by confronting the 'horror', the dark emotions, Hughes opens a pathway to understanding the emotional detritus of his failed relationships and his own sense of dislocation from the music, the source of creativity. The poems suggest the potential for the beginning of a healing process. As Jung wrote:

Let a work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning we must allow it to shape us as it shaped him. Then we also understand the nature of his primordial experience. He has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and suffering, but where all men are caught in common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole.<sup>87</sup>

In an interview with Eliat Negev in 1996, Hughes said:

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<sup>87</sup> Jung, *The Spirit in Man*, p. 105.



Every work of art stems from a wound in the soul of an artist. When a person is hurt, his immune system comes into operation and the self-healing process takes place, mental and physical. Art is a psychological component of the auto-immune system that gives expression to the healing process. That is why great works of art make us feel good.<sup>88</sup>

This statement of Hughes's is a significant reflection of the Romantic ideal that great art is generated from some kind of suffering. According to Hughes, it is this suffering or psychic disturbance ('a wound in the soul of an artist') that leads to the shamanistic call and flight. Hughes believed that both Yeats and Eliot were traditional poet shamans. Hughes says that:

Yeats's calling came to him, in a sudden awakening, as three simultaneous obsessions. Irish nationalist politics and the supernatural possessed his intellectual life, while Irish myth, legend and folklore took hold of his poetry. He donned his spiritual breastplate of hermetic disciplines and within a very short time had formulated his life mission on the grandest scale: to restore the energy and defiance of the ancestral heroes and lost gods to the prostrated soul of Ireland. This was pure shamanic thinking of the most primitive brand.<sup>89</sup>

In Eliot's case, Hughes says he (Eliot) 'underwent both the depression and the violent collapse of the ego [...] he submitted himself [...] to the slow, gradual change, according to that pattern where the true self remakes the ego in its own image, till the individual is wholly transformed'.<sup>90</sup> Hughes adds that 'poetry from the true source was acknowledged to be divine because it heals, and redeems the sufferings of life, and releases joy'.<sup>91</sup> Hughes develops this theme in *Winter Pollen*, where he says that:

The balm of great art [...] seems to be drawn from the depths of an elemental grisliness, a ground of echoless cosmic horror. The mystery of music opens this horror as often as we properly hear it. Perhaps music holds the key to it. If, as we are told, mathematical law is the tree of the original gulf, rooted outside the psychological sphere, outside the human event-horizon, and if music is a sort of nest, the consoling-shaped soul-nest, that we feathery and hairy ones weave out of the twigs of that tree (audial nerve sunk in the mingling chorales of the body's chemistry), then the horror which wells

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<sup>88</sup> *The Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1998 as quoted in Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*, Liverpool University Press, 2006, p. xi.

<sup>89</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp.271-2.

<sup>90</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 276-277.

<sup>91</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 275.

up out of music is also the sap of mathematical law, a secretion of the gulf itself – the organizing and creative energy itself.<sup>92</sup>

These comments are immensely prescient of Hughes's artistic vision. He asserts that great art emanates from an elemental source, which he calls 'a ground of echoless cosmic horror'. Music is the key to accessing this source, the 'original gulf'. The 'horror' that wells out of this music is, according to Hughes, 'a secretion of the gulf itself', the gulf being the source of 'organising and creative energy'.

These comments by Hughes are particularly significant in the context of 'The Lodger' because, in that poem, Hughes says the music pours from the 'intact, creating, resounding realm', which is arguably the same as the 'original gulf'. Hughes goes on to say:

In all art, everything that isn't the music rides on the music. Without that inner musicality of every particle, art ceases to do the work and have the effect and retain the name of art. And so the very thing that makes it art, that gives it the ring of cosmic law and grips us to itself and lifts us out of our egoistic prison and connects, as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself – is what makes it unpleasant.<sup>93</sup>

Hughes's poem 'Ludwig's Death Mask' is an interesting and poignant contrast between 'words' and 'silence'.

### **Ludwig's Death Mask**

Words for his ugly mug his  
Naked exhibitions at windows shaking a  
Fist at the gapers, his whalish appetite  
For cold douches and changing lodgings.

Words for his black-mouth derisive  
Engulfing in laughter the sweet-eyed attendance  
Of aesthetes spreading their marzipan amazement  
Over his music and nibbling it amazedly off.

But no words for the loyal  
Formations of angels which attended

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<sup>92</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 91-92.

<sup>93</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 92.

All this in misunderstanding and  
Despair and finally grimly as Shakespeare

Caused himself flee seventeen feet down  
Through the church-floor into dumb earth touched  
His ears dead to continue complete  
In union with the communion of angels.

In this poem, Hughes contrasts the relative ease at which people (including 'aesthetes') talked openly about aspects of Beethoven's life (his 'whalish appetite', 'cold douches') with the silence that accompanied the 'Formation of angels' that attended on Beethoven with 'misunderstanding and despair'. Hughes suggests Beethoven felt immense despair when he realised the sensory organ he most needed would fail him and drive him seventeen feet 'down through the church floor' like Shakespeare, who is rumoured to be buried at this depth and who demanded (as inscribed on his tombstone) that his bones not be moved. However, at this depth, Beethoven - although totally deaf - is able to commune with the angels. For Hughes, the music of Beethoven is connected to the sacred and, in this way, the composer is 'in union with the communion of angels' as if the music connects 'everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself'.

Hughes's co-mingling of the sacred as being both an 'intact, creating, resounding realm' and full of 'horror' finds unique expression in *Gaudete*. While *Gaudete* was originally prepared as a film script, it morphed into a series of poems and prose that bookended a short play called 'The Wound'. In *Gaudete*, Hughes specifically refers to Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 31 (Opus 110) in the following way:

### **The Scherzo**

Of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 110  
Is devouring itself, dragonish,  
Scattering scales,  
Havocking polished, interior glooms,  
Trembling dusty ivy, escaping towards the sky  
Through the wedding of apple blossom at the open French

Windows.

The 'scherzo' in Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 31 (Opus 110) is the second of the three movements and 'shows the humorous temper characteristic of Beethoven's scherzos even though the tonic is

minor'.<sup>94</sup> In the main section of this movement in his sonata, 'Beethoven alludes to two popular songs, *Unsa Kätz häd Katzln ghabt* ("Our cat has had kittens") and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich* ("I am dissolute, you are dissolute").<sup>95</sup> Kinderman says that this reflects 'Beethoven's delight in the paradoxical joining of the exalted and the common place, the sacred and the profane'.<sup>96</sup> The word '*lüderlich*' 'refers to a bedraggled or slovenly individual not fit for polite society [...]. Its main artistic significance lies in Beethoven's assimilation of the lowly, droll, and common place into the work, where such material proves complimentary to the most elevated of sentiments.'<sup>97</sup>

In Hughes's poem 'The scherzo', the musical protagonist who plays the Scherzo is Jennifer Estridge, the beautiful, twenty-two year old daughter of Commander Estridge, a conservative military man. Jennifer is one of two daughters of Commander Estridge, who has always dreamt of having beautiful daughters. However, when his daughters mature into grown women 'the reality is beyond him'. They have emerged as fully grown leopard cubs that have 'come into their adult power and burdened with it'. The Commander is unable to manage the power and primeval energy of his daughters, particularly their sexuality. Hughes suggests in 'The scherzo' that the music has an all embracing, fearsome power of its own. Its energy is directed both internally as well as externally. It devours itself as if it was a dragon.

At the same time, however, it has demonic and Machiavellian tendencies by destroying polished interior rooms which contain French windows. As the pianist in the poem playing the scherzo, young Jennifer is the vehicle, the medium, through which the music finds its expression. In *Gaudete*, Hughes sets up a powerful contrast between the music which is enlivened by the troubled nature and primitive animal magnetism of Jennifer and the controlled, rational behaviour of her father, the Commander. It is a classic contrast between Venus and Adonis, the instinctive, passionate part of human psyche and its rationale, ordered counterpart. The music is so powerful it strikes at Commander Estridge but with joker-like qualities, 'derisive laughter and contemptuous shouts'. As Jennifer plays the keyboard, she evokes so much passion and energy that her hands 'seem to be plunging and tossing inside his chest'.

There are a number of distinct sexual references in this poem. For example, Jennifer is 'oppressed' by the 'fullness of her breasts, and the weight of flame in her face'. She is young, passionate with a primitive energy that is totally alien to, and at odds with, the world of Commander Estridge. She has a primeval frame, is charged with a basic hunger and yet quite beautiful. She has 'uncontrollable eyes, and organs of horrific energy, demanding satisfaction'. The music bewilders

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<sup>94</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 246.

<sup>95</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 246.

<sup>96</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 246.

<sup>97</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 267.

Commander Estridge to the point where he cannot 'interpret' the atmospheric sounds and cries. In fact, the music played by Jennifer is 'shouting something impossible, incomprehensible, monstrous'. The music is so powerful that it metaphorically tears him to pieces. However, he is forced to listen and 'he hears something final approaching, some truly gloomy horror is pushing'. This is evil 'like his own creeping, death – dawn – emptiness fear'. The Commander knows that his daughters are part of it 'like the flames in fire' but there is very little that he can do as it is 'beyond him'. He fails to understand it and hence is powerless to stop it.

In the next poem headed 'But still the enraged', Hughes develops the theme of this music as a source of primitive energy, charged with destruction. He writes that the 'music goes on like a materialised demon'. It vandalises the Victorian house and 'grips the cellars' trying to 'lift the whole ungainly pile and shake off the chimneys'. Hughes presents the music as the link, the umbilical cord that climbs into the 'long attic', which is an aviary and also the place in which Commander Estridge's older daughter, Janet, prepares to take her own life. Janet's face is expressionless and she 'simply accepts the fate of being as it is' and Hughes reflects on her suicide with the following words:

Her decision feels solid and good  
Stronger than all the small appeals of tomorrow  
Like a final lying down into an immense weariness  
It has relaxed her.

Yet Janet experiences 'fear and dismay' before her final act of kicking away the chair. The poem ends with the following lines:

While the music elbows nakedly in through the broken  
glass with the wet stirred freshness of the garden trees.

Hughes presents the music as a demon, a spirit that inhabits people and plays witness to Janet's suicide but coldly and without any judgemental comment.

Hughes returns to the theme of music and its relationship with man and nature in a poem in the Epilogue to *Gaudete* in which he says that music eats people and 'transfixes them [...] to cut up at leisure'. Again, music is given animalistic qualities. It becomes a tiger and - with a cat like quality - 'licks them all over carefully gently'. As in '*Grosse Fuge*', Hughes uses Blake's powerful image of the tiger. He conjoins the music with the tiger and says it leaves 'nothing but the hair of the head and the soles of the feet'. Hughes says that this music:

Is the maneater  
On your leash.

In '*Grosse Fuge*', the 'maneater':

Opens its mouth and the music  
Sinks its claw  
Into your skull

This music is the 'maneater', the 'tiger of heaven'. However, in *Gaudete*, the poem ends in utter despair. All that the music can find of the writer when it picks him up:

Is what you have  
Already  
Emptied and rejected.

A recurrent theme in these poems is Hughes's belief that music of Beethoven and the tiger are one. Both contain a deep sense of primeval power and beauty yet paradoxically also terror and 'horror'. Yet, Hughes's own relationship appears dislocated from this primeval source. Often, his poetic endings portray a deep sense of despair and isolation as if all his efforts at connecting at trying to connect with the source of the music (the sacred) are completely futile.

Hughes was particularly drawn to Beethoven's late quartets. Beethoven composed his five late quartets (Opus 127, 130, 131, 132 and 135) between 1825 and shortly before his death on 26 March 1827. The composition of the late string quartets was clearly important to Beethoven and he returned to the centrality of the string quartet in the last years of his life even though it had offered him little revenue potential. There is no doubt that Hughes was deeply affected by Beethoven's late quartets. In a letter to Nick Gammage dated 28 July 1993, Hughes comments on his reworking of *Oedipus* for Peter Brook and Laurence Olivier and says that:

My idea was also to strip the basic rhythm of the language to two or three fundamentals – as those last quartets of Beethoven are constructed out of very simple phrases, very short simple figures.<sup>98</sup>

In a letter to Peter Brook on 19 May 1994, Hughes commented on the theatrical rendition by Brook of the case studies called 'The man who mistook his wife for a hat' by Oliver Sacks and said that:

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<sup>98</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 642.

The “Musical” construction of it, the way episode melted into episode, was simply perfect – and at each moment astonishing. Each of the actors, like one of the four necessary elements, or one of the instruments in a quartet, gradually became quite overpowering. That sense of cumulative power to affect & signify. Finally entering that holy of holies – those visionary dissolves of the creator & destroyer itself. Literally stunning. I have only ever felt that sensation of being drawn deeper & deeper into some holy beautiful, holy terrifying & utterly concentrated state of awareness by Beethoven’s late quartets.<sup>99</sup>

At different junctures throughout his *oeuvre*, Hughes refers to Beethoven and provides distinct references and allusions to Beethoven and his music, thereby inviting the reader into his own unique poetic space replete with symbols and metaphors. It is apparent from these poems and the extracts from Hughes’s letters, his play and prose, that Hughes believed Beethoven had access to a greater spiritual realm which Hughes understood to be a sacred realm. For Hughes, this sacred realm is the *fons et origo* of the true artist’s creative imagination. It has the capacity to heal and regenerate if the artist can tap into it. However, Hughes is at pains to examine constantly the duality of man’s existence, the good part as well as the chthonic realm. Whilst these poems, letters, play and prose serve to open ‘the great door in the air’ and shed some light on the influence of Beethoven on Hughes, the relationship between composer and poet is a complex dynamic that operates on many levels. We are reminded that ‘While Hughes’s poetry incorporates the epistemology, symbolism and myth of the Romantic Movement; it does so in a highly dynamic manner’.<sup>100</sup> Maynard Solomon writes that ‘Beethoven is not to be regarded as the sum of his intellectual influences: his sources are themselves fluid, constantly evolving, reciprocally open to influence. He himself generates ideas and is a wellspring of creative imagery, an essential source of Romanticism itself’.<sup>101</sup>

That Beethoven’s influence on Hughes never waned during the poet’s life is evident in a letter Hughes wrote to Keith Sagar in 1998, twenty-eight years after the Faas interview and a few months before the poet died. While reflecting on the influence upon him of his former English schoolteacher, John Fisher, Hughes says:

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<sup>99</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 671.

<sup>100</sup> Stigen-Drangsholt, *Ted Hughes and Romanticism*, p. 119.

<sup>101</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 9.

John F. [Fisher] had only to exclaim the unearthly mightiness of Beethoven - whom I had never knowingly listened to - for me to become such a sotted addict of Beethoven that his music dominated my life till I left University & lost my gramophone & radio. Even so, ever since, it has preoccupied me at some level. I still listen to it in preference to anything else.<sup>102</sup>

These prescient statements are a remarkable echo of comments Hughes had made some thirty-seven years earlier in an interview of him and Sylvia Plath by Owen Leeming of the BBC on 19 January 1961. In a telling reply to Owen Leeming's question as to whether music played a part in their lives, Hughes says:

I think Beethoven for instance has had more influence on me than any other single artist in any medium [...] If only my temperament - giving it a certain set direction - one which it was very inclined to take [...] this completely dominated me from the age of seventeen to well until I was twenty-six when I really left all my records and gramophone in England and I don't know how this influences directly your writing but it certainly influences your imagination and the coherence of your imagination.<sup>103</sup>

In a recent memoir, Hughes's older brother, Gerald Hughes, confirmed the influence that Beethoven exerted on Hughes when he says that:

By his mid-teens he [Ted] had become devoted to Beethoven and purchased the nine symphonies one by one, then the late quartets. All his life he revered Beethoven as, for him, the finest of composers.<sup>104</sup>

It is clear that, throughout Hughes's career, the name and music of Beethoven dominated his life. There is little doubt that the process of digging deep into Hughes's strata reveals that the poet did indeed connect inwardly to Beethoven and his music and that they influenced the poet and provided Hughes with 'coherence' for his poetic 'imagination'. It is this poetic imagination that is such a vital element of the artistic vision of many Romantic artists including Hughes and Beethoven.

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<sup>102</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 722.

<sup>103</sup> *Sylvia Plath The Spoken Word*, Interview by Owen Leeming of the BBC on 19 January 1961, British Library and transcribed by the author.

<sup>104</sup> Gerald Hughes, *Ted and I A Brother's Memoir*, p. 55.



## CHAPTER TWO: 'THE ORIGINAL CAULDRON OF WISDOM'<sup>105</sup>

While there is clear evidence of traces of Beethoven in Hughes's work, the composer's influence appears to have its most dramatic effect on Hughes's imagination. Hughes said that Beethoven and his music 'completely dominated'<sup>106</sup> him. It is not surprising then that Hughes, whose imagination is naturally drawn to Romanticism,<sup>107</sup> should identify Beethoven as influential in providing 'coherence' for his imagination. Beethoven, born in 1770, experienced at first hand the social and political changes associated with the Romantic Movement<sup>108</sup> as well as its grim *denouement*. The German composer mixed with artists, intellectuals and politicians of central Europe at the time the Romantic Movement dominated the political and cultural landscape. To some scholars,<sup>109</sup> Beethoven is regarded as a quintessential Romantic artist who was able to create sublime music from the depths of his own personal disability. The theme of the lonely, suffering artist who makes enormous personal sacrifices for art lies at the heart of Romanticism. In Beethoven's case, the suffering was real and even without his sense of hearing he continued to produce sublime work.

In 1957, 130 years after Beethoven's death, Hughes published his first volume of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain*. During the intervening period the world had changed irrevocably. The scientific and industrial revolution, which had developed such promising new technology, had been usurped for military purposes in two world wars. It reached its brutal apogee in 1945 when nuclear bombs were used to destroy civilian targets with devastating consequences so much so that Theodore Adorno famously commented that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'<sup>110</sup>. Clearly, Hughes's world was radically different to Beethoven's. Yet, in looking at his own world through a postmodernist<sup>111</sup> lens, Hughes was drawn to Romanticism and those artists who embraced Romantic values, particularly Blake and Beethoven. For various reasons, including historical specificity, Hughes's world is much darker than Beethoven's yet, despite the differences, there are significant confluences in their approach to their art, particularly in relation to the importance of the imagination.

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<sup>105</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 142.

<sup>106</sup> *Sylvia Plath The Spoken Word*, BBC Interview.

<sup>107</sup> The terms 'Romanticism' and 'Romantic Movement' are used interchangeably in this thesis and are intended to reflect traits common to both terms.

<sup>108</sup> The term 'Romantic Movement' has generated scholarly controversy. That controversy and the debate about when the 'Romantic Movement' may have started and ended are not the subject of this thesis.

<sup>109</sup> See, for example, Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffman and Maynard Solomon.

<sup>110</sup> Theodore Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1967.

<sup>111</sup> 'Postmodernist' in the context of this thesis, is a reference to the period of the 1950s and 1960s when postmodernism, representing a collection of different critical and philosophical approaches, was gaining greater prominence in art, literature and literary theory.

While there are numerous and distinct references to Beethoven in the work of Hughes,<sup>112</sup> this chapter takes as its starting point the proposition that Hughes's connection to, and empathy with, Beethoven is deeply intuitive. That is, it is not a relationship that is made explicit by Hughes in either technical or musicological terms. Beginning with a brief consideration of essential Romantic elements, this chapter examines aspects of Beethoven's late period (1810 - 1827) as well as Hughes's theory of imagination before concluding with a textual analysis of four poems of Hughes: 'The Thought-Fox', 'Ghost Crabs', 'Pike' and 'Jaguar'. What emerges is evidence that both artists shared a similar passion for Romantic imagination and a determination to exploit its innate potential.

Defining terms such as 'Romanticism' and 'Romantic Movement' is difficult and has generated significant debate. Arthur Lovejoy, the American philosopher and historian, asserted that the word 'Romantic' now means so many different things that it has no meaning. By contrast, Rene Wellek, the Czech-American literary critic, endeavoured to show that the Romantic Movement had a unity of theory and style. The French writer, Charles Baudelaire, said that Romanticism did not depict an exact truth, but rather reflected people's feelings. This chapter does not engage with this debate but instead relies on three critical assumptions. The first is that there were certain currents of thought commonly known today as Romanticism that emerged between about 1770 and 1830 in England and continental Europe. The second is that the leading exponents of English Romanticism are William Blake, Lord Byron, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Shelley, William Wordsworth and John Keats. Finally, the third assumption is that German Romanticism developed slightly later than, and was different to, its English counterpart and the chief protagonists in German Romanticism were Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, Friedrich Schiller, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schelling, Heinrich von Ofterdingen (Novalis) and Friedrich Hölderlin.

In essence, the Romantics were preoccupied with three key topics: nature, imagination and symbol. Of these three topics, imagination is the focal point of this chapter. For the English Romantic poets, writing during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, 'the most vital activity of the mind was the imagination'.<sup>113</sup> These poets believed that imagination was the source of energy which contained divine qualities. William Blake provided the following manifesto for Romantic artists:

This world of imagination is the World of Eternity; it is the Divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the Vegetated body. This World of Imagination is Infinite & Eternal whereas the world of Generation, or Vegetation, is Finite & Temporal [...] All Things are comprehended in their

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<sup>112</sup> David Heldinger, *Connecting Inwardly: Traces of Ludwig van Beethoven in the work of Ted Hughes* in The Ted Hughes Society Journal, Volume 1, May 2011. This is considered in detail in the first chapter of the thesis.

<sup>113</sup> Cecil Maurice Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, Oxford University Press, London, 1950, p. 3.

Eternal Forms in the Divine body of the Saviour, the True Vine of Eternity, The Human Imagination...<sup>114</sup>

According to Blake's mythic narrative, the imagination is the corridor to a deeper, spiritual world. Many Romantics believed that a person's true spiritual nature can only be fully realised if the imagination is unleashed. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, echoing Blake, said 'The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM.'<sup>115</sup> To many Romantic artists, imagination 'reveals an important kind of truth. They believed that when it is at work it sees things to which the ordinary intelligence is blind and that it is intimately connected with a special insight or perception or intuition.'<sup>116</sup> While the English Romantic poets certainly entertained different ideas about imagination,<sup>117</sup> it was commonly understood as being a living portal to the truth. John Keats, for instance, wrote that he was 'certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of the Imagination - What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth'.<sup>118</sup> The Romantics were 'inspired by their sense of the mystery of things and to probe it with a particular insight and to shape their discoveries into imaginative forms'.<sup>119</sup> Coleridge said that imagination is 'the soul that is everywhere, and in each, and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole'.<sup>120</sup> According to Jonathan Bate, the 'Romantic poet conjures something out of nothing through the sheer force of his imagination'.<sup>121</sup> Blake put it more bluntly: 'One Power alone makes a Poet: Imagination, the Divine Vision'.<sup>122</sup>

In addition to the critical faculty of imagination, many Romantics cherished a deep sense of their own individuality. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a leading Romantic philosopher and political activist, opens his autobiography *The Confessions* with the following definitive statement:

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<sup>114</sup> *A Vision of the Last Judgment* from *William Blake Selected Poems*, edited by Peter Butter, Everyman, London, 1993, p. 150.

<sup>115</sup> *Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIII* from *Samuel Taylor Coleridge The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 313.

<sup>116</sup> Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>117</sup> There is an excellent treatment of the different views about imagination held by the English Romantic artists in the chapter by Jonathan Wordsworth called 'The Romantic Imagination' in *A Companion to Romanticism*, edited by Duncan Wu, Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, 2009, pp 486-494.

<sup>118</sup> John Keats, *Letter to Benjamin Bailey*, 22 November 1817 from *John Keats Letters (1817-1818)*.

<sup>119</sup> Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>120</sup> *Biographia Literaria, Chapter XIV* extracted from *Samuel Taylor Coleridge The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, p. 320.

<sup>121</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2002, p.69.

<sup>122</sup> William Blake, *Annotations to Wordsworth's 1815 Edition Of His Poems (1826)* from *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake*, edited by David F. Erdman.

I am commencing an undertaking, hitherto without precedent and which will never find an imitator. I desire to set before my peers the likeness of a man in all the truth of nature, and that man myself. Myself alone! I know the feelings of my heart, and I know men. I am not made like any of those I have seen. I venture to believe that I am not made like any of those who are in existence. If I am not better, at least I am different.<sup>123</sup>

In this brief passage, Rousseau's repetitive use of the personal pronoun 'I' (ten times) and the words 'my' and 'myself' (four times) firmly places the individual at centre stage. According to Rousseau, a true individual's 'undertaking' has no 'precedent' and cannot be imitated. It is unique. However, the intense focus on individuality (the 'I') in the context of an awakened imagination paradoxically creates a deep sense of loneliness and isolation. The Romantic artist is the quintessential lonely individual who yearns for freedom. This often manifested as a transcendental desire to connect to a force more powerful than the artist and, to this end, many Romantic artists turned to nature in search of harmony and fulfilment. In essence, this yearning by the Romantics to return to a more spiritual world and to recognise the unity of forces at work in the natural world reflected the resurgence during the Romantic period of the ideas and philosophy of Renaissance Neoplatonism. Coleridge, for example, was steeped in Neoplatonic philosophy and believed that Nature represents the physical manifestation of God's word. Coleridge's poem 'Frost at Midnight' addresses his idea of the one life, which connects humans both to Nature and to God.

Consequently, many Romantics were sceptical of science, especially physics, because they believed it was inherently limiting and unable to describe the full range of human experience and the varied beauty that experience revealed. These Romantics yearned to reclaim human freedom. They were wary of the age of Enlightenment - which eulogised scientific inquiry, logic and reason - and believed this approach demoted individuality and constrained imagination, feelings, spontaneity and freedom. Keats said that he wanted 'a life of sensations rather than of thoughts'.<sup>124</sup> Many Romantics searched for their soul in the science of life, not in Newtonian science and celestial mechanics. These artists shifted their gaze away from the planets to closer to home: to plants and nature as a whole. For them, this experience was exhilarating. It liberated them from the soulless materialism and mechanistic thinking associated with the age of Enlightenment. These Romantic artists believed that the human heart and soul was enhanced by a communion with nature. Blake, in particular, turned to the visible world to ignite his imagination as he believed 'every living thing was a symbol of

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<sup>123</sup> *Confession of Rousseau* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, translated by W. Conyngham Mallory, Albert & Charles Boni, 1928.

<sup>124</sup> John Keats, *Letter to Benjamin Bailey*, 22 November 1817.

everlasting powers'.<sup>125</sup> Blake claimed that 'to the Eyes of the Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees.'<sup>126</sup>

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, at the time these Romantic notions took shape in England, Beethoven was emerging as a musician with prodigious talent. In what is often regarded as his 'late period' (circa 1810 to 1827), Beethoven's musical focus changed significantly. Maynard Solomon says that while, throughout his life, Beethoven

considered himself to be an adherent of Enlightenment rationalism [...] on a simultaneous yet separate track, he was drawn to Romantic restlessness, to Faustian striving for an unreachable objective, unnameable and mysterious [...] there seems to be a discernible shift in his aesthetic stance toward Romanticist conceptions and imagery.<sup>127</sup>

In his earlier period, Beethoven believed in the power and virtue of reason as an organising faculty. However, over time this changed and 'the weight of Beethoven's aesthetic formulations eventually shifted from the primacy of reason to the primacy of the imagination [...] as an unfettered instrument of investigation with the power of representing a multitude of previously undescribed modes of being and strategies of transcendence'.<sup>128</sup>

For Beethoven, imagination was a vital and powerful force. He regarded the imagination as a primary focus for artistic endeavour and this is reflected in many of his own statements. For example, he said that 'for me the spiritual kingdom is dearest, it is above all intellectual and worldly monarchies'<sup>129</sup> and 'my kingdom is in the air; as often the wind, so my tones whirl, so is it within my soul.'<sup>130</sup> Beethoven 'saw the conflict between the celestial and the earthly (and the subterranean as well) as a dialectic in which art attempts to escape from the world even as it is implicated in it.'<sup>131</sup> He wrote that 'the creative spirit ought not to be fettered by wretched wants.'<sup>132</sup> Beethoven's imagination appears more liberated and powerful at the time of his greatest personal tragedy - when he had become completely deaf. This is reflected in his later works which include the Ninth Symphony as well as the late string quartets. Solomon says that, in his last years, Beethoven:

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<sup>125</sup> Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p. 14.

<sup>126</sup> *Letter from William Blake to Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799* from *Selected Poems from William Blake*, Everyman, edited by Butter, 1982, p. 110.

<sup>127</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, pp. 95 and 101.

<sup>128</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 101.

<sup>129</sup> *Letter from Beethoven to Dr Johann Kanka, midsummer 1814* from *Beethoven's Letters*, translated by J. S. Shedlock and edited by A. Eaglefield-Hull, Dover Publications, New York, 1972, p. 160.

<sup>130</sup> *Letter from Beethoven to Count Franz Von Brunswick, 13 February 1814* from *Beethoven's Letters*, p. 150

<sup>131</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 94.

<sup>132</sup> *Letter from Beethoven to Dr Johann Kanka, midsummer 1814* from *Beethoven's Letters*, p. 160.

made explicit his belief in the primacy of a productive, shaping imagination, seen as a distinct faculty of the mind to set alongside reason and understanding, capable of anticipating reality, creating rather than reproducing, emulating or rivalling divine creation rather than deferring to the deity's prerogatives [...] there seems to be a discernible shift in his aesthetic stance towards Romanticist conceptions and imagery – emphasising expression, inwardness, transcendental longing, and a drive to discover new ways of symbolizing extreme states of being [...] Beethoven found a collateral organizing principle in the idea of the imaginative, seen as an adjunct to reason, as an unfettered instrument of investigation with the power of representing a multitude of previously undescribed modes of being and strategies of transcendence.<sup>133</sup>

This notion of imagination as 'an unfettered instrument' that represents 'a multitude of previously undescribed modes of being and strategies of transcendence' is remarkably close to the idea of imagination held by the English Romantic poets at that time. According to Solomon, the Romantic conception of unceasing striving or yearning for 'the infinite' (*das Unendliche*) resonates throughout Beethoven's conception of art. This is reflected in Beethoven's own words when the composer says: 'The true artist is not proud. He unfortunately sees that art has no limits; he feels darkly how far he is from the goal; and though he may be admired by others, he is sad not to have reached that point to which his better genius only appears as a distant, guiding sun'.<sup>134</sup>

On the autograph title page of his String quartet number 14 (opus 131), Beethoven described that quartet as 'put together from pilfering from one thing and another [*zusammengestohlen aus Verschiedenem diesem u. jenem*]'<sup>135</sup>. Solomon expresses surprise at this comment because he (Solomon) regards the quartet as 'extremely original and tightly-structured'.<sup>136</sup> However, he says it affirms that for Beethoven 'aesthetic wholeness may derive from heterogeneity, paying tribute to the potential for coherence that lies within the fragmentary and to the capability of the imagination to represent the unprecedented through the redeployment or transmutation of already existing ideas and imagery'.<sup>137</sup> This dialectical notion of a 'potential coherence' existing 'within the fragmentary' is something Hughes clearly recognised when he said in an interview by Ekbert Faas (in 1971) that:

You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual

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<sup>133</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, pp. 99 and 101.

<sup>134</sup> *Letter from Beethoven to Emilie M, 17 July 1812* from *Beethoven's Letters*, p. 132.

<sup>135</sup> *Thayer's Life of Beethoven*, edited by Elliot Forbes, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1964, p. 983 from Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 264, fn 51 and as quoted in Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 99.

<sup>136</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 99.

<sup>137</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 99.

up comes a goblin. Anyway within a week the whole thing has changed, one needs a fresh bulletin. And works go dead, fishing has to be abandoned, the shoal has moved on. While we struggle with a fragmentary Orestes some complete Bacchae moves past too deep down to hear. We get news of it later ... too late. In the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another'.<sup>138</sup>

Hughes is compelled to go on writing because one poem does not present a complete picture. While Hughes struggles with the fragmentary nature of his inspiration, some deeper, spiritual source, 'complete Bacchae', troubles him although it 'moves too deep down to hear'. As a result, Hughes's creative products appear disjointed as 'ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings'. Likewise, for Beethoven, his compositional ideas are stolen fragments, assembled or 'put together' 'from one thing and another'. On one level, both artists recognise the inherent disjointed, fragmentary nature of their art. Yet on another level, they both continue to pursue a distant, deep rooted sense of coherence and wholeness they believe exists even though it may be difficult to capture artistically.

Hughes's poetic career began at a time when the world was still trying to make sense of the horror of the Second World War, which he described as 'a colossal negative revelation'<sup>139</sup>. His contemporaries had in common

the mood of having had enough [...] enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They had seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs.<sup>140</sup>

These post Second World War poets were 'dead against negotiation with anything outside the cosiest arrangement of society'.<sup>141</sup> By contrast, Hughes set out on his own, radically different course. In an interview with Ekbert Faas in 1971, he said that 'I hadn't had enough. I was all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there'.<sup>142</sup> To open these 'negotiations' effectively, Hughes believed he had to accept the poet's shamanistic call, fully exploit his innate imaginative powers and 'be infinitely sensitive to what his gift is'. To this end, Hughes looks back through history and is naturally drawn to English Romanticism and, in particular, Blake, Coleridge and Wordsworth. He said that in looking back at the two decades after the French revolution 'we find

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<sup>138</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, pp. 204-5.

<sup>139</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 201.

<sup>140</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 201.

<sup>141</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 201.

<sup>142</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 201.

nothing so convincing and enlightening to so many of us, as the spirit which seems to touch us openly and speak to us directly<sup>143</sup> through the poems of these Romantic poets. In writing about Coleridge, Hughes said 'the significance of poetry depends on qualities of imagination, depth, breadth, intensity and accent in the spirit of it'.<sup>144</sup> However, of all these qualities, it is imagination which grips Hughes's attention. He distinguishes between the objective imagination (outer world) and the subjective imagination (inner world). He says that 'the eye of the objective imagination (meaning the outer world) is blind'<sup>145</sup> and adds that the

real problem comes from the fact that outer world and inner world are interdependent at every moment. We are simply the locus of their collision. Two worlds, with mutually contradictory laws or laws that seem to us to be so, colliding afresh every second, striving for peaceful co-existence and whether we like it or not our life is what we are able to make of that collision and struggle.<sup>146</sup>

Hughes offers a solution to this 'collision and struggle' and says what is needed is 'a faculty that embraces both worlds simultaneously. A large, flexible grasp, an inner vision which holds wide open, like a great theatre, the arena of contention and which pays equal respects to both sides. Which keeps faith, as Goethe says, with the world of things and the world of spirits equally'.<sup>147</sup> In essence, this is the manifesto for Hughes's concept of imagination and he says:

This really is imagination. This is the faculty we mean when we talk about the imagination of the great artists. The character of great work is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled with the full presence of the outer world and in them we see that the laws of these two worlds are not contradictory at all; they are one all inclusive system. They are laws that somehow we find it all but impossible to keep. Laws that only the greatest artists are able to restate. They are the laws, simply, of human nature [...] they are the greatest acts and they are the most human. We recognise these works because we are all struggling to find those laws, as a man on a tight rope struggles for balance because they are the formula that reconciles everything and balances every imbalance [...] more essentially, it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.<sup>148</sup>

Hughes contrasts this inner world, the world of subjective imagination, with the outer world, the objective view, iconically represented by the camera. He says that 'Scientific objectivity as we all

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<sup>143</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 2.

<sup>144</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 1.

<sup>145</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.145.

<sup>146</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.150.

<sup>147</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.150.

<sup>148</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.151.



know has its own morality, which has nothing to do with human morality. It is the morality of the camera.<sup>149</sup> He laments the fact that:

we sit, closely cramped in the cockpit behind the eyes, steering through the brilliantly crowded landscape beyond the lenses, focused on details and distinctions. In the end, since all our attention from birth has been narrowed into the outer beam, we come to regard our body as no more than somewhat of a stupid vehicle [...] The body, with its spirits, is the antennae of all perceptions, the receiving aerial for all wavelengths. But we are disconnected. The exclusiveness of our objective eye, the very strength and brilliance of our objective of intelligence, suddenly turns into stupidity, of the most rigid and suicidal kind.<sup>150</sup>

For Hughes, our true being is in our inner world. He says that ‘Our real selves lie down there. Down there, mixed up among all the madness is everything that once made life worth living. All the lost awareness and powers and allegiances of our biological and spiritual being.’<sup>151</sup> Hughes’s desire to explore this inner world and unravel the ‘lost awareness’ and the ‘powers and allegiances of our biological and spiritual being’ reflects a central theme of Romantic imagination as epitomised by Blake whose ‘attention is turned towards an ideal, spiritual world [...] What concerned him [Blake] most deeply and drew out his strongest powers was the sense of a spiritual reality at work in all living things’.<sup>152</sup> ‘Blake’s true home was in vision, in what he saw when he gave full liberty to his creative imagination [...] For him, the imagination uncovers the reality masked by visible things. The familiar world gives hints which must be taken, pursued and developed.’<sup>153</sup> Blake wrote:

To see a World in a Grain of Sand  
and a Heaven in a Wild Flower  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
and Eternity in an hour.<sup>154</sup>

In this passage, Blake’s wonderful contrapuntal arrangement of sublime, extraordinary elements (‘World’, ‘Heaven’, ‘Infinity’ and ‘Eternity’) with ordinary, earthly things (‘Grain of Sand’, ‘Wild Flower’, ‘palm of your hand’ and ‘hour’) is a direct invocation to the reader to open their imagination and allow it to truly experience the extraordinary beauty that exists in those ordinary things around

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<sup>149</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.146.

<sup>150</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.146.

<sup>151</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.149.

<sup>152</sup> Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p.14.

<sup>153</sup> Bowra, *The Romantic Imagination*, p.13.

<sup>154</sup> *Auguries of Innocence*, from *Selected Poems of William Blake*, Everyman, p. 121.

us. Hughes understood Blake's vision. He addresses it directly in 'Poetry in the Making' when he says 'as a poet, you have to make sure that all those parts over which you have control, the words and rhythms and images, are alive.'<sup>155</sup> This is accomplished, Hughes says, by doing 'one thing' and

That one thing is to imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic [...] You keep your eyes, your ears, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words. The minute you flinch, and take your mind off this thing, and begin to look at the words and worry about them then your worry goes into them and they set out killing each other. So you keep going as long as you can, then look back and see what you have written [...] you will read back through what you have written and you will get a shock. You will have captured a spirit, a creature.<sup>156</sup>

Hughes's choice of words in this passage ('magic', 'spirit' and 'creature') to explain the creative process is in itself highly significant. These words are all agents of Hughes's 'inner world' that allow him to penetrate the inner sanctum of deeper, creative supernatural forces. This is also illustrated by Hughes's description of the importance of ancient stories and storytelling. He says that 'every story is still the original cauldron of wisdom, full of new visions and new life'. The word 'cauldron' evokes a vivid image of witches huddled around a large pot exploiting their magical, supernatural talents. All three words used by Hughes in this context ('original', 'cauldron' and 'wisdom') have a connection to Middle or old English. The earliest recorded use of the word 'original' was in the phrase 'original sin'. The word 'cauldron' is first recorded in Middle English as *caudron* (although originally borrowed from old northern French). The word appears in *Macbeth* where the three witches cast a spell:

Round about the cauldron go;  
In the poisoned entrails throw.  
...  
Double, double toil and trouble;  
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.<sup>157</sup>

The word 'wisdom' is derived from old English. Hughes's precise choice of language is intended to direct the reader back to the landscape and realm of his forebears. Hughes invokes the dialect of the

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<sup>155</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.12.

<sup>156</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p.13.

<sup>157</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act 4 Scene 1, *William Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, Royal Shakespeare Company, Macmillan, 2007, p. 1895.

English Calder Valley in Yorkshire where he grew up. Seamus Heaney, (in an interview given to John Haffenden in 1979) describes Hughes's poetry in the following way:

Hughes's voice, I think, is in rebellion against a certain kind of demeaned, mannerly voice [...] the manners of that speech, the original voices behind that poetic voice are those of literate English middle-class culture, and I think Hughes's great cry and call and bawl is that English language and English poetry is longer and deeper and rougher. That's of a piece with his interest in Middle English, the dialect is insisting upon foxes and bulls and violence. It's a form of calling out for more, that life is more.<sup>158</sup>

A few years later (in 1984), Heaney expanded on this idea when he considered Hughes's poetry in the context of T. S. Eliot's notion of 'auditory imagination'.<sup>159</sup> In developing the notion of 'auditory imagination', Heaney said Eliot 'was thinking here about the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backyard and abyss of mind and body; thinking of the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play; thinking about the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the words as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.'<sup>160</sup> Heaney says that Hughes returns 'to an origin' and brings 'something back' and that Hughes:

relies on the northern deposits, the pagan Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements, and he draws energy from a related constellation of primitive myths and world views. The life of his language is a persistence of the stark outline and vitality of Anglo-Saxon that became the Middle English alliterative tradition and then went underground to sustain the folk poetry, the ballads, and the ebullience of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans.<sup>161</sup>

Heaney describes Hughes as 'pagan in the original sense: he is a haunter of the *pagus*, a heath-dweller, a heathen; he moves by instinct in the thickets beyond the *urbs*; he is neither urban nor urbane [...] the very titles of his books are casts made into the outback of our animal recognitions.'<sup>162</sup> Heaney says that Hughes's England 'of the mind' is characterised as 'a primeval landscape where

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<sup>158</sup> *Viewpoints: Poets in conversation with John Haffenden*, London, Faber and Faber, 1981 pp. 73-4 from Winter Pollen, p. ix.

<sup>159</sup> Seamus Heaney, *Hughes and England* in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, edited by Keith Sagar, University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1983, pp. 14 - 21.

<sup>160</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England* in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, p. 14.

<sup>161</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England* in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, p. 15.

<sup>162</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England* in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, p. 17.

stones cry out and horizons endure, where the elements inhabit the mind with a religious force'.<sup>163</sup> Heaney captures the essence of Hughes when he says 'the poet is a wanderer among the ruins, cut off by catastrophe from consolation and philosophy'. In this regard, Hughes is clearly aligning himself with the ideas of the English Romantic poets. As a 'wanderer among the ruins', Hughes pits his imagination against the harsh landscape closest to him and, in particular, the animals that inhabit that landscape.

'The Thought-Fox' (from *The Hawk in the Rain*, 1957) is one of Hughes's earliest and best known poems that provides insight into Romantic imagination at work in Hughes.

### **The Thought-Fox**

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:  
Something else is alive  
Beside the clock's loneliness  
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:  
Something more near  
Though deeper within darkness  
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,  
A fox's nose touches twig/leaf;  
Two eyes serve a movement, that now  
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow  
Between trees, and warily a lame  
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow  
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,  
A widening deepening greenness,  
Brilliantly, concentratedly,  
Coming about its own business

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<sup>163</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England in The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, p. 15.

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox  
It enters the dark hole of the head.  
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,  
The page is printed.

Ekbert Faas says that this poem:

already seems to carry the full impulse behind Hughes' gradual evolution into a visionary and mythmaker. The poem, unlike most others in *The Hawk in the Rain*, is neither all rhetoric and conceit nor all narrative and description. What it manages instead, is to embody a psycho-physiological process of imaginative projection and creation both prompted and carried by the poet's subconscious.<sup>164</sup>

Arguably, the key to this poem lies in the opening two words ('I imagine'). There is a sense of immediacy in those words as Hughes begins by concentrating on the dual Romantic notions of imagination and individuality. He dynamically positions the poet and the poet's creative faculty at the centre of things. The poem is written by the poet but is also about the poet. Yet at the same time, we are told emphatically that it is the poet's imagination that is at work and Hughes demands the reader's full attention. It is overly simplistic to suggest this poem is about the creation of a poem. At its core, Hughes is experimenting with the power of the imagination and reflecting on how imagination works. It is worthy of more than 'a glance', a point Keith Sagar makes in an article in which he revisits the poem. Sagar suggests that Hughes thought of this poem 'as an overture announcing the central theme of all his subsequent poems'.<sup>165</sup> Sagar adds 'Obviously, it is an animal poem, [...] not, primarily, a poem about a fox, but a poem about writing a poem, about the kind of thinking which produces poems'.<sup>166</sup> While Hughes is on record as saying that it took only a few minutes to write the poem, his comments about the poem are enlightening and yet, at the same time, also confusing:

This poem does not have anything you could easily call a meaning. It is about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox [...] It is both a fox and a spirit. It is a real fox; as I read the poem I see it move, I see its shadow going over the irregular surface of the snow. The words show me all this, bringing it nearer and nearer. It is very real to me. The words have made a body for it and given it somewhere to walk [...] every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head. And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the

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<sup>164</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 60.

<sup>165</sup> Keith Sagar, 'The Thought-Fox', [keithsagar@tiscali.co.uk](mailto:keithsagar@tiscali.co.uk) (website).

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them.<sup>167</sup>

What is the reader to make of these comments? Hughes warns of a heightened degree of complexity. He says the poem is about a thing (a fox) and yet also not about that thing (not a fox). Then he adds that it is about 'both a fox and a spirit', the 'spirit' being the 'not fox', presumably. To Hughes, that 'spirit' is the imagination writ large in the form of a fox. The 'spirit' is the 'Something' that is 'alive' and emerges from a place that is 'deeper within darkness' (possibly the realm of spirit or imagination). The 'spirit' - which is the power of the imagination - coalesces in the image of the fox which ultimately 'enters the dark hole of the head'. Sagar says that Hughes's first words 'I imagine' 'are his opening of the door, his invocation to "something else" to visit him out of the darkness.'<sup>168</sup> In a coruscating reflection on this poem, Heaney says that:

Hughes' vigour has much to do with the matter of consonants that take the measure of his vowels like callipers, or stud the line like rivets [...] His consonants are the Norsemen, the Normans, the Roundheads in the world of his vocables, hacking and hedging and hammering down the abundance and luxury and possible lasciviousness of the vowels 'I imagine this midnight moment's forest' – the first line of the well known 'The Thought Fox' – is hushed, but is a hush achieved by the quelling, batten-down action of the m's and d's and t's: iMagine This MiDnighT MoMenT's forresT. Hughes' aspiration in these early poems is to command all the elements, to bring them within the jurisdiction of his authoritarian voice. And in 'The Thought Fox' the thing at the beginning of the poem which lives beyond his jurisdiction is characteristically fluid and vovelling and sibilant: 'something else is alive' whispers of a presence not yet accounted for, a presence that is granted its full vowel music as its epiphany.<sup>169</sup>

Heaney's comments in this passage illustrate Hughes's careful and deliberate juxtaposition and interplay of vowels and consonants to achieve a specific poetic effect. In an interview with Ekbert Faas in 1971, Hughes said that:

Every writer if he develops at all develops either outwards into society and history, using wider and more material of that sort, or he develops inwards into imagination and beyond that into spirit, using perhaps no more external material than before and maybe even less, but deepening it and making it

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<sup>167</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>168</sup> Keith Sagar, 'The Thought-Fox', keithsagar@tiscali.co.uk.

<sup>169</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England in The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, pp. 17-18.

operate in the many different inner dimensions until it opens up perhaps the religious or holy basis of the whole thing.<sup>170</sup>

According to this statement, Hughes believes that artists develop either externally ('into society') or internally. If an artist develops 'internally' it is through a two stage process, the first is 'inwards into imagination' and the second is 'beyond that into spirit', as in 'The Thought-Fox'. In other words, the imagination is the vehicle for penetrating the 'spirit'. However, to achieve this, Hughes says the imagination must use less material but do so more effectively by 'deepening it' and exposing its 'many different inner dimensions'. The ultimate endgame is that this 'opens up [...] the holy basis of the whole thing'. There is, however, a hint of caution in the word 'perhaps'. While Hughes provides no explanation for what he means by the phrases 'holy basis' and 'whole thing', it is interesting that he often refers to Beethoven in remarkably similar terms.

A vivid example of this is to be found in Hughes's reaction to Peter's Brook's production of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* which was a theatrical treatment of the neurological case studies by Oliver Sacks. In a letter to Brook, Hughes says that - after seeing the production - he had 'only ever felt that sensation of being drawn deeper & deeper into some wholly beautiful wholly terrifying & utterly concentrated state of awareness by Beethoven's late quartets.'<sup>171</sup> Hughes's juxtaposition of beauty and terror echoes comments made by E. T. A. Hoffman<sup>172</sup> who said that Beethoven's music 'sets in motion the machinery of awe, of terror, of pain, and awakens that infinite yearning which is the essence of romanticism'.<sup>173</sup> A specific musical example that arguably 'opens up' the 'holy basis of the whole thing' is the third movement of Beethoven's String Quartet number 15 (Opus 132), composed in 1825, two years before his death and at a time when Beethoven was completely deaf. Beethoven named the movement Holy Thanksgiving (*Heiliger Dankgesang*) because he composed it at the time he was recovering from a life threatening illness. In this movement, Beethoven contrasts three slow, funereal parts with two faster parts he called 'feeling new strength'. The evocative dialectic in this movement reflected his own personal struggle to overcome his near fatal illness and recover his strength. Hughes was familiar with this particular movement and specifically refers to it in his letter written about his attendance at the funeral of John Fisher, his English teacher at Mexborough Grammar School:

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<sup>170</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 204.

<sup>171</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 670.

<sup>172</sup> German Romantic author, lawyer and music critic.

<sup>173</sup> Ernst Theodor Wilhelm Hoffman's *Musical Writings: "Kreisleriana," "The Poet and the Composer,"* Music Criticism, edited by David Charlton, translated by Martyn Clarke, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. 1989, p. 238, from Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 38.

So we asked the Minister to say nothing, except the formal funerary texts, and we played the slow movement from Opus 132. Only about ten of us there. The effect was strange. At least, we were drawn into a concentrated depth & a long intense stillness – very long & very intense. The music & the coffin there, together.<sup>174</sup>

This music clearly had a deep and lasting effect on Hughes - its legacy was to create 'a concentrated depth' and 'a long intense stillness' very similar to 'the utterly concentrated state of awareness' Hughes experienced while watching Brook's play. 'The Thought-Fox' is a clear example of this central artistic concern of Hughes. In this poem, the poet achieves that 'concentrated state of awareness' in his study of the fox as he carefully captures its 'eye' which has a 'widening, deepening greenness' and is 'brilliantly, concentratedly/Coming about its own business'.

Heaney has described Hughes's art as 'one of clear outline and inner richness. His diction is consonantal, and it snicks through the air like an efficient blade, marking and carving out fast definite shapes, but within those shapes, mysteries and rituals are hinted at. They are circles within which he conjures up presences'.<sup>175</sup> An excellent illustration of this is Hughes's poem 'Ghost Crabs' (*Wodwo*, 1967).

### **Ghost Crabs**

At nightfall, as the sea darkens,  
A depth darkness thickens, mustering from the gulfs and the  
submarine badlands,  
To the sea's edge. To begin with  
It looks like rocks uncovering, mangling their pallor.  
Gradually the labouring of the tide  
Falls back from its productions,  
Its power slips back from glistening nacelles, and they are crabs.  
Giant crabs, under flat skulls, staring inland  
Like a packed trench of helmets.  
Ghosts, they are ghost-crabs.  
They emerge  
An invisible disgorging of the sea's cold  
Over the man who strolls along the sands.  
They spill inland, into the smoking purple  
Of our woods and towns – a bristling surge

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<sup>174</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 436.

<sup>175</sup> Heaney, *Hughes and England in The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, p. 17.



Of tall and staggering spectres  
 Gliding like shocks through water.  
 Our walls, our bodies, are no problem to them.  
 Their hungers are homing elsewhere.  
 We cannot see them or turn our minds from them.  
 Their bubbling mouths, their eyes  
 In a slow mineral fury  
 Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on beds,  
 Or sit in rooms. Our dreams are ruffled maybe,  
 Or we jerk awake to the world of possessions  
 With a gasp, in a sweat burst, brains jamming blind  
 Into the bulb-light. Sometimes, for minutes, a sliding  
 Staring  
 Thickness of silence  
 Presses between us. These crabs own this world.  
 All night, around us or through us,  
 They stalk each other, they fasten on to each other,  
 They mount each other, they tear each other to pieces,  
 They utterly exhaust each other.  
 They are the powers of this world.  
 We are their bacteria,  
 Dying their lives and living their deaths.  
 At dawn, they sidle back under the sea's edge.  
 They are the turmoil of history, the convulsion  
 In the roots of blood, in the cycles of concurrence.  
 To them, our cluttered countries are empty battleground.  
 All day they recuperate under the sea.  
 Their singing is like a thin sea-wind flexing in the rocks of  
     a headland,  
 Where only crabs listen.  
 They are God's only toys.

Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, suggest that in this poem the 'narrative is a journey into the imagination, or the unconscious [...] It moves from a realistic sea at nightfall, through the dissolving, ambiguous process of metaphor, to the assertion of a mythic other reality'.<sup>176</sup> The title of the poem is revealing. These are not real crabs, they are 'Ghost Crabs'. They are from another world, a

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<sup>176</sup> Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, London, 1981, p. 48.

supernatural and metaphysical world that is beyond the human world. They emerge at night time through the darkness. In essence, the crabs are a dramatic symbol of the forces of the poet's imagination. Do they, like the fox (in 'The Thought-Fox'), represent a positive force? The reader cannot be sure. The crabs are presented as creatures of the id and resonate with war imagery: 'Mustering', 'submarine', 'flat skulls' and 'helmets'. With this vivid imagery, Hughes presents the human dilemma of technological progress gone awry. The crabs appear as mechanical pieces (tanks and other battle symbols) controlled by a human brain bent on destruction. This evokes the powerful image of the *Wehrmacht*, once a symbol of German military might. Sagar says Hughes presents an image of the 'sea as cradle of primitive life-forms, permanent battleground [...] and grave of all things.'<sup>177</sup> The crabs are presented as elements of the id: they are rapacious, violent beings that 'stalk each other', 'mount each other' and 'tear each other to pieces'. They are bestial, violent, dangerous and immensely powerful. The id is unconscious by definition and is the dark and negative aspect of our personality. According to Sigmund Freud, the sole function of the id is to satisfy the human's instinctive desires.

There is a dynamic evolution of conceits in the poem that is fluid and organic. The crabs emerge from the chasm between day and night, sea and land, the known and unknown, conscious and unconscious, real world and spirit world. The crabs are the elemental force that connects these binary opposites and the poem represents a journey of discovery in almost every line. The crabs are a power or force much greater than humans who are marginalised and rendered insignificant: the crabs 'press through our nothingness where we sprawl on our beds'. It is the crabs and not the humans that 'own this world', 'They are the powers of this world', 'God's only toys'. This last line is singled out for attention, and appears isolated. Some readers may find it disturbing as it challenges the traditional, Christian notion of humans as the supreme beings, on top and in control of the food chain. Hughes inverts this notion and suggests we are less significant and that there are forces working within us, over which we have no control. Sagar says these are historical forces, genetic forces that are 'totally oblivious of the devastating effect they have on the human effort to live in this world'<sup>178</sup>. In this poem, Hughes uses the symbol of the crabs to explore the chthonic realm of our humanity, that dark human underbelly of primeval instinct and animal conditioning fully realised in, and exposed by, the crabs. The notion of a dark underbelly of primeval instinct is a part of Romantic imagination, which found expression, for example, in gothic fiction. It was also a notion that Beethoven confronted particularly in the latter period of his life when he:

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<sup>177</sup> Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1971, p. 70.

<sup>178</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 71.

created music that plumbed deeper and soared higher than the music of any composer who preceded him [...] and this interplay between deep chthonic forces and the upward striving toward the eternal spirit that [...] infused his soul is the quintessence of all his music [...] In the third movement of Op. 110, he demonstrated that after unbearable suffering we may again be restored to unity.<sup>179</sup>

Beethoven understood 'unbearable suffering' as he battled to overcome his hearing disability. It is interesting that Hughes uses the scherzo (second movement) from Beethoven's Opus 110 in *Gaudete* (1977) and presents it as a weapon that is both vindictive and destructive.<sup>180</sup> 'The music flings' in Commander Estridge's face and 'it strikes at him/With derisive laughter and contemptuous shouts [...] It is shouting something impossible, incomprehensible, monstrous'. However, unlike Beethoven who strove to find and restore a sense of unity and purpose after unbearable suffering, Hughes often appears deeply mired in the chthonic realm, that dark underbelly of primeval instinct.

In characteristic Romantic vein, both Beethoven and Hughes believed that artists must commit themselves to their art wherever it might lead them. Beethoven said 'I live entirely for my art and for the purposes of fulfilling my duties as a man. But unfortunately this too cannot always be done without the help of the powers of the underworld [*ohne die unterirdischen Mächte*] [...] The upward glance must also lose itself in the depths, there where the evil subterranean powers dwell'.<sup>181</sup> The notion of 'evil subterranean powers' provides an excellent gateway to Hughes's poem 'Pike' from *Lupercal* (1960), the volume of poetry dedicated to Sylvia Plath.

### Pike

Pike, three inches long, perfect  
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.  
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.  
They dance on the surface among the flies.

Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,  
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette  
Of submarine delicacy and horror.  
A hundred feet long in their world.

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads –

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<sup>179</sup> Helen Anderson, *The Innate Transformational Properties of Beethoven's Passion Music in Music and Psyche*, ed. by P.A. Ashton and S. Bloch, Spring Journal Books, New Orleans, Louisiana, 2010, p. 58.

<sup>180</sup> There is a more detailed discussion of this in chapter one of the thesis.

<sup>181</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 100.

Gloom of their stillness:  
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.  
Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs  
Not to be changed at this date;  
A life subdued to its instrument;  
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

Three we kept behind glass,  
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,  
And four and a half: fed fry to them -  
Suddenly there were two. Finally one

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.  
And indeed they spare nobody.  
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long,  
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb -

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:  
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks -  
The same iron in this eye  
Though its film shrank in death.

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,  
Whose lilies and muscular tench  
Had outlasted every visible stone  
Of the monastery that planted them -

Stilled legendary depth:  
It was as deep as England. It held  
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old  
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished  
With the hair frozen on my head  
For what might move, for what eye might move,

The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods

Frail on my ear against the dream

Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,

That rose slowly towards me, watching.

She strikes the cage in a tantrum and swirls out:

Instantly beak, wings, talons crash

The bars in conflagration and frenzy,

And his shriek shakes the house.

The pike is a carnivorous cannibal and a classic ambush predator. It can hold still for a long time while lying in wait for its prey. It then accelerates at pace to strike. Even young pike are vulnerable and must find shelter to avoid being eaten. In this poem, Hughes explores the inner sanctum of the pike. He presents the pike as the perfect killing machine (reminiscent of the hawk): 'submarine delicacy and horror', 'a life subdued to its instrument' and 'indeed they spare nobody'.

On one level, Hughes is simply observing nature for what it is. However, unlike his poem, 'The Hawk in the Rain', 'Pike' arguably offers the reader more as it operates on a number of different levels. Like 'Ghost Crabs', there are three distinct parts to this poem. First, the fish is examined in its own habitat and emerges as the ultimate predator. Then the scene shifts to the poet's house where he describes a story about three pike that he kept in a tank and then he meditates on their cannibalism in anecdotal fashion. In the third and final part, the poet returns to his boyhood memories of the outdoors and collects his thoughts while fishing in a pond that appears to contain supernatural qualities ('Stilled legendary depth', 'It was as deep as England'). The powers that lurk beneath the pond include pike 'too immense to stir' and terrified, the poet 'dared not cast' for fear of disturbing 'the dream' which 'darkness beneath night's darkness had freed' and was 'watching' the poet. What is the 'darkness' that so troubles the poet? To Hughes, this 'darkness' represents 'the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the universe'<sup>182</sup> that can only be laid bare by the power of the artist's imagination. The crabs emerge at nightfall 'as the sea darkens' and 'A depth darkness thickens'. Likewise, the pike 'too immense to stir' inhabit 'the dark pond' where there is 'Darkness beneath night's darkness'. In essence, the crabs and the pike provide Hughes with a gateway that opens his immense imaginative powers - it is 'the dream' that is 'freed' from this 'Darkness'.

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<sup>182</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

According to Ekbert Faas, the poem 'Pike' is an expression of Hughes's personal statement. It not only seems to unravel its secret but is related to the poet's childhood experience of literarily fishing for those 'elusive and shadowy thoughts' which in flash visions of sudden revelation open and access the 'luminous spirit' of life. Sagar suggests that, in the last few stanzas, Hughes 'is no longer fishing for pike, but for the nameless horror which night's darkness frees to rise up from the legendary debt of his dream, his own subconscious'.<sup>183</sup> Hughes seeks to connect directly with the natural world, to penetrate deeper and expose the forces that shape animals and, by extension, humans. Sagar says of Hughes that:

no poet has observed animals more accurately, never taking his eyes from the object, capturing every characteristic up to the limits of language [...] But the description generates metaphors, and the metaphors relate the creature to all other creatures and to human experience and concepts [...] In nearly all his poems Hughes strives to find metaphors for his own nature, and his own nature is a peculiar general interest not because it is unusual, but because it embodies in an unusually intense, stark form, the most typical stresses and contradictions of human nature and of Nature itself. The poems are bulletins from the battleground within.<sup>184</sup>

A poem that uniquely 'embodies in an unusually intense, stark form, the most typical stresses and contradictions of human nature and of Nature itself' is 'The Jaguar' (*The Hawk in the Rain*), which was the first of Hughes's animal poems to be published.

### **The Jaguar**

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.  
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut  
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.  
Fatigue with indolence, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor's coil  
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or  
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.  
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But who runs like the rest past these arrives

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<sup>183</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 42.

<sup>184</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 38.

At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,  
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes  
On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom –  
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,  
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear–  
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:  
His stride is wilderness of freedom:  
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.  
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

This poem is split into two parts that allow it to operate on two distinct levels: In the first part (Stanzas 1-2), Hughes playfully captures the everyday experience of animals in a zoo. The verse is light, anecdotal and amusing. The animals 'yawn', 'shriek' or are fatigued 'with indolence'. This level is necessarily superficial as reflected in the line 'It might be painted on a nursery wall'. The pace in this first part is deliberately slow and Hughes uses words such as 'yawn', 'lie still', 'fossil', 'indolence' and 'sleepers' to enhance the musical sense of *adagio* in which things are at ease. However, there is then a notable shift in the second part of the poem (stanzas 3-5) introduced with the disjunctive word 'But'. Hughes moves from the jocular to the serious, from the general to the particular as he zeros in on the animal which has gripped everyone's interest. The crowd 'stares, mesmerized' in a dreamlike, catatonic state. The object of their focus is the jaguar, which is 'hurrying enraged' 'on a short fierce fuse'. Hughes skilfully combines alliterative techniques ('fierce fuse' and 'bang of blood in the brain') with powerful linguistic mastery in his deft interchange of consonants and vowels. The pace in the second part of the poem intensifies to the level of the equivalent of a musical *allegro* with words such as 'runs', 'hurrying enraged', 'stride' and 'spins'.

This poem on the whole engenders an ambivalent response: while it attracts some readers, it also repels others. There is an awareness that the poet is in a sense identifying himself with the jaguar. Gifford and Roberts say:

It is not a poem just of about observation but of longing and affirmation [...] to suggest a human possibility: an enticing possibility but one that entails preserving intact the predatory ferocity, rage, blindness and deafness of our own animal nature [...] The fact that it is caged is a natural representation of a person's imprisoned animal energies. He is objectively caged but subjectively free,

since he cannot formulate the concept of imprisonment. He is an example to the man who longs to live fully in those energies.<sup>185</sup>

When interviewing Hughes in 1971, Faas said that the two jaguar poems ('The Jaguar' and 'Second Glance at the Jaguar') 'are often interpreted as celebrations of violence'. Hughes's lengthy response was that he preferred:

to think of them as first, descriptions of a jaguar, second ... invocations of the Goddess, third ... invocations of a jaguar-like body of elemental force, demonic force [...] it is my belief that symbols of this sort work. And the more concrete and electrically charged and fully operational the symbol, the more powerful it works on any mind that meets it. The way it works depends on that mind ... on the nature of that mind. I am not at all sure how much direction, how much of a desirable aim and moral trajectory you can fix onto a symbol by associated paraphernalia. A jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects ... he is a beautiful, powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is a super charged piece of cosmic machinery, he is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation, he is an ancient symbol of Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power, he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon ... a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy. The symbol opens all these ... it is the reader's own nature that selects.<sup>186</sup>

It is interesting that, in the passage above, Hughes provides at least seven different ways in which the symbol of the jaguar 'can be received'. This is intended to demonstrate the many levels the reader can pursue, depending on the reader's subjective response to the poem. Earlier in that same interview, while addressing the issue of violence in his poetry, Hughes refers to Beethoven and says that 'Violence that begins in an unhappy home can go one way to produce a meaningless little nightmare of murder etc. for TV or it can go the other way and produce those moments in Beethoven.'<sup>187</sup> How is the reader meant to interpret this in the context of this poem? Embedded in 'The Jaguar' is a clear reference to Beethoven, 'deaf the ear'. There are arguably other possible allusions to the composer: 'On a short fierce fuse'; Beethoven was notoriously short tempered and 'His stride is wildernesses of freedom'. Is Hughes suggesting that the Jaguar can be interpreted as a symbol of Beethoven? Beethoven began to lose his hearing at the age of about twenty-six and became completely deaf in about 1818, some nine years before his death in 1827. As a composer, Beethoven's sense of hearing would have been critical to him. Its gradual deterioration and ultimate

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<sup>185</sup> Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p. 63.

<sup>186</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 199.

<sup>187</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 199.



loss would have driven him to despair and left him with a deep sense that he had become imprisoned by his own body, like the jaguar trapped in a cage. Despite his own physical limitations and ill health, Beethoven's late compositions are considered to be his most accomplished work. In this regard, the German composer is a clear example of the Romantic artist who, by struggling, was able to overcome the sense of imprisonment created by his own deafness, 'there's no cage to him' and his imagination continued to soar to even greater heights: 'wildernesses of freedom'.

Like Coleridge, Hughes believed that the poet 'brings the whole soul of man into activity, with the subordination of its faculties to each other, according to their relative worth and dignity' and that the poet 'diffuses a tone, a spirit of unity, that blends and (as it were) fuses, each into each, by that synthetic and magical power, to which we have exclusively appropriated the name of imagination.'<sup>188</sup> Hughes reinforces the significance of this point when he says that:

it is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of all those many mansions inside the head and express something - perhaps not much, just something - of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a crow flies over and the way a man walks and the look of a street and from what we did one day a dozen years ago. Words that will express something of a deep complexity that make us precisely the way we are, from the momentary effect of the barometer to the force that created men distinct from trees. Something of the inaudible music that moves us along in our bodies from moment to moment like water in a river. Something of the spirit of the snow flake in the water of the river. Something of the duplicity and the relativity and the merely fleeting quality of all this. Something of the almighty importance of it and something of the utter meaninglessness. And when words can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being - not of an atom, or a geometrical diagram, or of a heap of lenses - but a human being, we call it poetry.<sup>189</sup>

For Hughes, 'man's principal occupation' is about the 'struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self'.<sup>190</sup> This is essentially the same as Beethoven's view of himself as a composer when he writes that: 'for you there is no longer any happiness except within yourself, in your art. O god! Give me strength to conquer myself'<sup>191</sup>. Hughes's poetry endeavours to tap 'into that depth of imagination where understanding has its roots and stores its X-rays'.<sup>192</sup> Einstein said that imagination is more important than knowledge because knowledge is limited to everything that we now know and understand, whereas imagination is all embracing and

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<sup>188</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, p 319.

<sup>189</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 24.

<sup>190</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 24.

<sup>191</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, p. 246.

<sup>192</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen* p. 226.

encompasses the entire world and everything there ever will be to know and understand. Beethoven also 'revealed an increasing affinity with some of the dominant categories and preoccupations of early Romanticism, an affinity strikingly exemplified in his adoption of certain of Romanticism's imaginative tropes and phenomenological metaphors.'<sup>193</sup> For Hughes, 'The myths and legends [...] can be seen as large-scale accounts of negotiations between the powers of the inner world and the stubborn conditions of the outer world [...] They are immense and at the same time highly detailed sketches for the possibilities of understanding and reconciling the two'<sup>194</sup>. This is an echo of Beethoven who says that 'Music is the electric soil in which the spirit thinks, lives and invents [...] All that is electrical stimulates the mind to flowing, surging, musical creation. I am electrical by nature.'<sup>195</sup> However, invoking the 'elemental power circuit of the Universe'<sup>196</sup> is fraught with danger. Hughes says 'If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you.'<sup>197</sup> As quintessential Romantic artists, albeit in different historical periods, both Hughes and Beethoven constantly strove to conquer themselves, to regain their genuine selves so that they could discover 'the vital signature of a human being', unlock the powerful forces of their imagination to get access, as Blake put it, to the sublime, the 'World of Eternity'.

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<sup>193</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p.7.

<sup>194</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 151.

<sup>195</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, London, Travis & Emery, 2007, p. 23.

<sup>196</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

<sup>197</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

### CHAPTER THREE: 'LET BRAIN MIST INTO MOIST EARTH'<sup>198</sup>

Discovering 'the vital signature of a human being' and unlocking the powerful forces of the imagination to access the sublime (Blake's 'World of Eternity') requires one to engage directly with Nature. In *Henry von Ofterdingen*, the novel by the German author and philosopher Novalis<sup>199</sup> published in 1802, the main protagonist (Henry) says:

Once I heard tell of the days of old, how animals and trees and cliffs talked with people then. I feel as though they might start any moment now and I could tell by their looks what they wanted to say to me.<sup>200</sup>

Later in the same novel, Henry realises that the poet's calling is to awaken 'the secret life of the woods and the spirits hidden in trees'.<sup>201</sup> Solomon writes that 'these soulful trees are but one aspect of Romanticism's desire to achieve a fusion of humanity with nature by deciphering the language of mere matter'<sup>202</sup> and to re-establish that ancient link between man and Nature. Novalis says that 'If God could become man, He can also become stone, plant, animal, and element, and perhaps there is in this way a progressive redemption in nature'.<sup>203</sup>

Throughout history and even more so today, humankind has sought to study, explore and understand Nature, often choosing to exert control over it and to exploit its resources. We have come to regard our natural environment with awe yet also recoiled in horror as we witness its immensely destructive powers. The realisation that humans are an integral part of Nature has added further complexity to this dimension and raised interesting questions about the essence of our own human nature in the context of the overall picture of Nature *per se*. In their respective artistic quests, Beethoven and Hughes were deeply captivated and yet troubled by Nature. Their art became a platform from which they were able to observe and closely examine their natural world and to reflect on their own place as men within it. They wanted to develop a deeper understanding of their natural environment as it provided the mirror for a deeper and more granular examination of their own humanity. In essence, Nature offered these two artists a pathway to self discovery. They both

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<sup>198</sup> From Ted Hughes, 'Go Fishing' in *River*, 1983.

<sup>199</sup> Novalis was the pseudonym of Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg (1772 - 1801) an author and philosopher of early German Romanticism.

<sup>200</sup> Novalis, *Henry Von Ofterdingen*, translated by Palmer Hitty, Waveland Press, Long Grove, Illinois, 1964, p. 15.

<sup>201</sup> Novalis, *Henry von Ofterdingen*, p. 33.

<sup>202</sup> Maynard Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 45.

<sup>203</sup> Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed Paul Kluckhohn, Richard Samuel, et al., 4 vols, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1960 - 75, vol. 3, p. 664 as quoted in Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 45.

believed Nature represented a window to the enormous, mysterious powers that exist in the universe. Wellek identified Nature and its relation to man as one of the three essential elements of Romanticism. He described Nature as a living whole, a concept elegantly captured by Wordsworth in *Tintern Abbey*:

For I have learned  
To look on Nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing oftentimes  
The still, sad music of humanity,  
Nor harsh, nor grating, though of ample power  
To chasten and subdue. And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts, a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of the setting suns,  
And the round ocean, and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man –  
A motion and a spirit that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

...

well pleased to recognize  
In Nature and the language of my sense  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.<sup>204</sup>

According to Beethoven, 'every thought in music is intimately, indivisibly related to the whole of harmony which is oneness'<sup>205</sup> and he said:

You will ask where my ideas come from. I cannot say for certain. They come uncalled, sometimes independently, sometimes in association with other things. It seems to me that I could wrest them from Nature herself with my own hands, as I go walking in the woods.<sup>206</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> William Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey*, from *The Penguin Book of Romantic Poetry*, edited by Jonathan and Jessica Wordsworth, Penguin Books, 2001, p. 266.

<sup>205</sup> Wilfred Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, London, Travis & Emery, 2007, p. 253.

<sup>206</sup> Quoted by Louisa Metzger on page 4 of the sleeve to the CD 'The Timeless Music of Beethoven', 2006, ABC.

In this chapter, I examine Hughes's and Beethoven's common interest in, and concern with, Nature paying particular attention to their different historical and cultural contexts. I explore their desire to understand what it is to be human within Nature, to connect with what Hughes described as 'the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe'.<sup>207</sup> The focus of this chapter is on thematic confluences that exist between Hughes and Beethoven *vis-à-vis* Nature paying attention to these artists' fascination with two archetypal symbols of Nature: trees and wind. However, in this chapter I also examine Hughes's preoccupation with environmental issues and the different perspectives on ecology held by Hughes and Beethoven.

During Beethoven's life, Nature was depicted as 'pastoral' and it has been said that 'as a set of musical tropes pastoral mirrors an unbounded universe, and it provides copious means of sounding the main themes of a deeply felt existence within that universe'.<sup>208</sup> In a letter to Therese Malfatti in 1807, Beethoven said:

I am happy as a child at the thought of wandering among clusters of bushes in the woods, among trees, herbs, rocks. No man loves the country more than I. For do not forests, trees, rocks re-echo that for which mankind longs.<sup>209</sup>

Marion Scott says that 'with Beethoven nature was a passion' and that:

Neate, the English pianist to whom Beethoven took a warm liking, testified that he had never met a man who so enjoyed nature, or who took such intense delight in flowers, in the clouds, in everything-nature was like food to him, he seemed really to live in it [...] when with nature he was most himself.<sup>210</sup>

Beethoven often walked the countryside with a sketchbook in his pocket, composing as he walked. On a leaf of sketches dated late 1815, Beethoven wrote 'Almighty in the forest! I am happy, blissful in the forest: every tree speaks through Thee.'<sup>211</sup> Later, Beethoven wrote 'It is indeed as if every tree in the countryside spoke to me, saying "Holy! Holy!" In the forest, enchantment! Who can express it all?'<sup>212</sup> In these passages, Beethoven expresses his rapture for Nature and his belief in her redemptive features: 'bushes', 'woods', 'trees', 'grass' and 'rocks'. In his mind, these emanations of

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<sup>207</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 200.

<sup>208</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 72.

<sup>209</sup> *Beethoven's Letters*, translated by John South Shedlock, edited by A. Eaglefield-Hull, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, 1972, pp. 68-69.

<sup>210</sup> Marion Scott, *Beethoven The Master Musicians*, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London, 1974, p. 119.

<sup>211</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, Chapter 3, n. 3, p. 252.

<sup>212</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, Chapter 3, n. 5, p. 252.

Nature produce the echo that humans desire to hear. Yet, he also recognises and explores the ambivalence in nature - as both a creative and destructive force - particularly in the Pastoral Symphony (Symphony no. 6). Solomon writes that:

In the pastoral poetry of the ancient world [...] is a sense that the idyllic state is a precarious one, vulnerable to being lost. From the start, pastoral style has been a global metaphor for an extensive range of effects and images, including burdensome issues and unsettling states of being [...] Ancient pastoral poetry did not shrink from violence and death.<sup>213</sup>

In similar vein, Hughes writes that 'The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man [...] When something abandons Nature, or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end'.<sup>214</sup> Clearly, Nature plays a central role in Hughes's *oeuvre*. Sagar writes that the core of Hughes's quest is 'his struggle to get into a right relation with the source, that is, with Nature and the female, from the beginning'.<sup>215</sup> Hughes's early childhood was a formative learning experience that shaped his poetic quest. He was born in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire and moved to Mexborough in South Yorkshire when he was seven years old. Sagar says that Hughes:

claimed that his first six years 'shaped everything', and that included his attitude to nature [...] The geography of Hughes' childhood world became his map of heaven and hell; the interplay of the elements there gave him his sense of the creating and destroying powers of the world; the local animals became his archetypes. This landscape was imprinted on his soul, and, in a sense, all his poems were to be about it. Nature was his spiritual midwife and was not benign.<sup>216</sup>

As a young boy, under the guidance of his older brother (Gerald), Hughes learnt to hunt and fish. Hughes has even compared the art of writing poetry to the act of hunting:

The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerised and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that

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<sup>213</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 71.

<sup>214</sup> Ted Hughes, Review of Max Nicholson, *The Environmental Revolution, Your Environment* 13 (Summer 1970), p. 81.

<sup>215</sup> Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation*, Fastprint Publishing, Peterborough, 2009, p. xiv.

<sup>216</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature*, pp. 31-32.

is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own.<sup>217</sup>

In his own, recent memoir of his younger brother, Gerald Hughes reminisces about their early childhood experiences together and says:

By 1936, when Ted was six years old, he came with me wherever I went, asking endless questions. I explained all that went on in the hills and farms above our home, and told him about the plentiful wildlife. We could see hawks, magpies, rooks, jackdaws, wood pigeons, partridge and grouse – as well as a multitude of smaller birds. There were the odd squirrel and fox, and higher up, on the moor's edge, stoats and weasels. So Ted was steadily absorbing the fascinating life of the countryside.<sup>218</sup>

Gerald recalls that this was a special time and place for them both and he says that:

I remember vividly the high, oak-studded slope of the wood; the peace of the place. We never experienced such a wonderful bird chorus anywhere else as that heard along the bottom path through the wood. Ted once said 'I love the wood and hope no one ever builds on it. What a dull old world it would be without wildlife'. He was so right.<sup>219</sup>

Hughes maintained a special interest in, and passion for, fishing throughout his life. Fishing also served as a metaphor for the state of intense concentration required to create poetry. Hughes says the critical skill required of a poet is to be able settle his/her mind onto the subject matter:

Your whole being rests lightly on your float, but not drowsily: very alert, so that the least twitch of the float arrives like an electric shock. And you are not only watching the float. You are aware, in a horizonless and slightly mesmerized way, like listening to the double bass in orchestral music, of the fish below there in the dark. At every moment your imagination is alarming itself at the sight of the thing slowly leaving the weeds and approaching your bait. Or with the world of beauties, suspended in total ignorance of you. And the whole purpose of this concentrated excitement, in this arena of apprehension and unforeseeable events, is to bring up some lovely solid thing, like living metal, from the world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>218</sup> Gerald Hughes, *Ted and I*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>219</sup> Gerald Hughes, *Ted and I*, p. 30.

<sup>220</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 19.

The importance of Nature in Hughes's work is evident from his first publication of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). However, Hughes's depiction of the natural forces and images in his poems has an earlier origin and can be found in his earliest work, for instance, 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1', a poem that elegantly captures Nature's creative and destructive forces.<sup>221</sup>

In an interesting overlap with Beethoven, there is significant evidence in Hughes's own poetry that he has a fascination for trees as the genuine embodiment of Nature. At different junctures in his work, Hughes depicts trees as the representative of the many complex elements in Nature. However, Hughes's examination of trees is uniquely different to Beethoven's approach and those of the German Romantic writers, such as Novalis and Hughes displays heightened levels of complexity, originality and ambiguity. For instance, in his poem 'Trees' from *Recklings* (1966), Hughes explores the troubled relationship between Nature (as represented by the trees) and humans (as represented by the poet):

### **Trees**

I whispered to the holly ....  
There was a rustle of answer – dark,  
Dark, dark, a gleamer recoiling tensely backward  
Into a closing nest of shattered weapons,  
Like a squid into clouds of protection.  
I plucked a spiny leaf. Nothing protested.  
Glints twitched, watched me.

I whispered to the birch....  
My breath crept up into a world of shudderings.  
Was she veiled?  
Herself her own fountain  
She pretended to be absent from it, or to be becoming air  
Filtering herself from her fingertips,  
Till her bole paled, like a reflection on water,  
And I felt the touch of my own ghostliness -

I moved on, looking neither way,  
Trying to hear  
The outcry that must go with all

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<sup>221</sup> This poem is considered in greater detail in chapter one of the thesis.



Those upflung maidenly gestures, that arrested humpback rout  
Stumbling in blackberries and bracken –

Silence.

Trees, it is your own strangeness, in the dank wood,  
Makes me so horrifying  
I dare not hear my own footfall.

In the opening lines of the first and second stanzas, the poet whispers to the holly tree and the birch tree. The word 'whisper' suggests a degree of reverence and intimacy, almost as if the poet is communicating with his lover. It is a tender, gentle and sensual approach that implies the trees have a feminine quality reminiscent of the Goddess as depicted by Robert Graves.<sup>222</sup> Hughes's choice of the two trees in this poem - the holly and the birch - is significant. The leaves and berries of the holly tree are inextricably linked with Christmas. Christian symbolism connects the prickly leaves of the holly tree with the crown of thorns worn by Jesus and the berries are often associated with the blood of Jesus, which is the basis for the Christian notion of human salvation. According to Western tradition, holly is usually brought into a house to protect the home from benevolent fairies or reduce friction between the fairies and the humans living in the house. In Celtic mythology, the Holly King was said to rule over half the year from the summer to the winter solstice and was often depicted as a powerful giant covered in holly leaves and branches and wielding a holly bush as a club. In *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the author describes a colossal creature as bright green holding a solitary branch of holly in his one hand. The birch also has strong fertility connections and is linked with the May Day celebrations. Coleridge often referred to the birch tree as the Lady of the Forest. The birch tree has many uses as its wood is tough and grows straight, which means it is ideal for turning into handles and toys, as well as bobbins, spools and reels for the cotton industry. The bark of the birch tree is also used for tanning leather and has been associated with a variety of medicinal properties.

In this poem ('Trees'), the holly and the birch recoil and shudder in response to the poet's whispers. The holly tree recoils 'Into a closing of shattered weapons' and 'Like a squid into clouds of protection'. These military images suggest that the trees think they are under attack and are forced to take defensive postures in order to protect themselves. The repetition of the word 'dark' three times creates a sombre mood. When the poet plucks 'a spiny leaf', Hughes writes that:

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<sup>222</sup> For further details on the influence of Graves on Hughes and his notion of the White Goddess, see chapter one of the thesis.

Nothing protested.

Glints twitched, watched me.

The holly tree is deeply suspicious of the poet. When the poet whispers to the birch tree, he suggests that the tree is a potential symbol of Isis<sup>223</sup>, the Goddess of Nature and asks whether she 'was veiled'. Hughes's attempt to communicate with the birch tree is wholly unsatisfactory and leaves him feeling as if he has touched his 'own ghostliness'. By whispering to these trees and seeking intimate communication, he exposes his own frailty. The response of these trees to the poet's advances opens a supernatural door for the poet. The effect of this is to galvanise the poet to move on and as he stumbles through the blackberries and bracken, he strains to hear 'Those upflung maidenly gestures' and 'The outcry that must go with it all'. Instead, however, the poet hears nothing. There is only 'Silence', a word and image that is totally isolated, alone in its own stanza. The poet adds that it is the 'strangeness' of the trees that horrifies him so much so that he 'dare not hear' his 'own footfall'.

In this poem, Hughes suggests that by communicating properly and deeply with trees (Nature), we expose our true selves and what we see is filled with horror as if we had come face to face with our own 'ghostliness'. The poem demonstrates that Hughes's efforts at communicating with the trees are futile. The trees perceive him as hostile. Unlike Beethoven who hears the echo of the trees (in the sense of a deep connection with Nature), Hughes's entreaties are met with a wall of silence as the trees adopt defensive postures. In the world of these trees, Hughes is a disconnected stranger, an alien perceived as a threat. While Hughes begins the poem by seeking to commune with Nature, in keeping with the Romantic ideals espoused by Beethoven and Novalis, what he ultimately discovers is not Romantic but rather deeply disturbing. Hughes and the trees are estranged from each other. The trees are suspicious of him - they twitch and keep watch on him. In looking at the trees and their strangeness, he sees an image of himself 'like a reflection on water'. The effect of this for Hughes is to feel 'the touch of his own ghostliness'. The trees' 'own strangeness' has a marked effect on Hughes, as they leave him with a sense 'so horrifying'. The trees are a metaphor for Hughes's own dark and menacing nature, his chthonic self. The trees expose this side of Hughes and the experience is immeasurably frightening, so much so he doesn't want to hear his own footfall. In this poem, Hughes inverts the Romantic image of man in harmony with Nature. It is a distinctly postmodernist view of trees and contains a deep sense of cynicism compared to the more traditional view espoused by Beethoven and Romantic writers such as Novalis. In contrast to some Romantic

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<sup>223</sup> For a detailed consideration of the mythic figure of Isis, see chapter four of the thesis.

writers, Hughes is prepared to explore the darker side of Nature and her complex manifestations even if it unearths the darker, more menacing side of his own nature.

In a shorter poem entitled 'Beech Tree', which is part of the same volume (*Recklings*) as 'Trees', Hughes takes a very different approach to Nature.

The beech-bole is an angle of the earth. A torso sooted and silvery,  
Twisting muscular upwards  
To the whirlwind of light, as a menhir to its own might.

Blind with God. And like a bursting sea  
The shoulders of a girl.  
A soldier in a frozen coat, living by rote.

And like an old, mossed hunter, sucking the bones  
Of all speculation. On its leashes  
Fly owls and astronomers' skulls.

In this poem, he displays a reverence for the beech tree: 'The beech-bole is an angel of the earth'. It is 'Blind with God' and is represented as a masculine, anthropomorphic figure: 'A torso sooted and silvery', 'Twisting muscular upwards' and 'A soldier in a frozen coat'. However, the tree appears to contain androgynous qualities as it has 'The shoulders of a girl'. The tree also has the qualities of 'an old, mossed hunter' that sucks 'the bones/Of all speculation'. This characteristic of a reverential worship for trees continues in two short poems in *Gaudete*, the first beginning with the line: 'I see the oak's bride in the oak's grasp'.

**I see the oak's bride in the oak's grasp.**

Nuptials among prehistoric insects  
The tremulous convulsion  
The inching hydra strength  
Among frilled lizards  
Dropping wigs, and acorns, and leaves.

The oak is in bliss  
Its roots  
Lift arms that are a supplication  
Crippled with stigmata

Like the sea-carved cliffs earth lifts  
Loaded with dumb, uttering effigies  
The oak seems to die and to be dead  
In its love-act.

As I lie under it

In a brown leaf nostalgia

An acorn stupor.

In this poem, Hughes describes two oak trees in a sexual embrace: 'Nuptials among prehistoric insects', 'The oak is in bliss' and 'The oak seems to die and to be dead/In its love-act'. The poet lies under the oak tree 'In a brown leaf nostalgia/An acorn stupor'. The oak tree has a rich mythological history. Homer referred to the oak tree as high-headed and lofty-leaved. It was a tree that was sacred to Zeus. The ancient Greek tragedian, Aeschylus, refers to the talking oaks and Socrates talks about an oak of many tongues. The oak tree is regarded as the lord of the woods in England and is also a traditional symbol of English stoicism. In Rome, a crown of oak leaves was given to the person who saved a citizen's life in battle. The oak tree was one of the most important trees to the Celts. It provided acorns, which was a favourite food for pigs, whose flesh became part of human diet (alluded to by Hughes in *Orts*, when he says 'The acorn, in its nightmare of pigs'). The oak's long lasting wood was good for building and for sailing and its bark produces a substance used for tanning leather. The Celts harvested mistletoe from oak trees for ritual use in curing disease and encouraging human fertility. The Druids considered the oak to be a sacred tree. The etymology of the word 'druid' is from the Greek word for oak which means 'drus'. The sacred tree trinity includes the oak, elm and thorn trees. 'There is evidence from Sanskrit, Celtic, Germanic and Slavic cultures as well as Greek and Latin cultures, that the Indo-Europeans worshiped the oak and connected it with a thunder or lighting god'.<sup>224</sup>

The second poem from *Gaudete* is entitled 'Your tree – your oak'.

### **Your tree – your oak**

A glare

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<sup>224</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 144.

Of black upward lightning, a wriggling grab  
Momentary  
Under the crumbling of stars.

A guard, a dancer  
At the pure well of leaf.

Agony in the garden. Annunciation  
Of clay, water and the sunlight.  
They thunder under its roof.  
Its agony is its temple.

Waist-deep, the black oak is dancing  
And my eyes pause  
On the centuries of its instant  
As gnats  
Try to winter in its wrinkles.

The seas are thirsting  
Towards the oak.

The oak is flying  
Astride the earth.

In this poem, the reference to 'your' could be to God or Nature given the line 'Agony in the garden', the 'garden' being a reference to the Garden of Eden. The oak has godlike as well anthropomorphic qualities. The oak attempts to connect to the sacred source in the 'glare/Of black upward lightning' where there is a transient, momentary 'wriggling grab'. The oak is capable of human movement: 'the black oak is dancing' yet it has a magnetic attraction for the seas that 'are thirsting/Towards the oak.' Finally, 'The oak is flying/Astride the earth' suggesting a godlike quality.

The oak tree holds a special place in Hughes's poetry. Poem '1' in *Orts* (1978) presents the fallen oak tree as a symbol of hope:

The fallen oak sleeps under the bog  
Assuming new centuries  
Of black strength.

It is nursing a hope  
Of being disinterred in some good age  
And lovingly carved into a hard body  
For the goddess of oaks.

In poem 42 of *Orts*, Hughes writes that:

The bulging oak is not as old  
As the crooked tree of blood  
In the body of the girl  
Who marvels at it.

In this poem, the life blood of the young girl who observes the oak tree is presented as a 'crooked tree' and Hughes says that the oak tree 'too, knows its owner'. The owner could be a reference to the sacred as represented by Nature. When the girl leaves and walks away, the 'history oak':

That leaned over immortal water  
Fell in a flurry of shadows  
Ghosting away downstream.

Hughes's poem 'The Oak Tree' from *'Uncollected'* (1992 - 1997) reflects on the historical relationship between Nature - as represented by the oak tree - and the English character. The oak tree symbolises the unchanging, stoical face of Nature through lengthy periods of conflict and destruction.

Your tap-root, deep in starry heaven,  
Brought your life to you.  
Your eyes opened and Creation  
Looked calmly through.

Deep into Scotland's battlefields  
Your second root sank.  
Richer than all the tartans  
Was the blend you drank.

Through the British trenches  
Your third root struck.

Your leaves bronzed on the lost mystery  
That it brought back.

Then under the throne of England  
Your fourth root went down.  
Your leaves and acorns glittered as  
The jewels of the crown.

Your fifth root wrapped so light around  
This island's bedrock.  
When pyromanic Swastikas  
Sent Europe up in smoke  
Our stone raft rode the open sea  
In the hold of an oak.

Survivors, who knew what it meant  
To be fumes in a shell-hole  
Or scattered like shrapnel, were eager  
To let your sixth root steal  
Through all their veins, your leaves their faces  
You their one oak bole.

The survivors and their children –  
Dazed in the after-shock –  
No longer knew the oak from the island  
Or themselves from the oak.

Their century became a tree  
Of fifty million lives,  
And the tree-spirit you, your smile  
The glance among the leaves.

Now the roar of the saws in the boughs  
Is the song of our island race.  
The crown of oak-leaves amplifies  
A global market-place.

Yet under it all, each year your oak

Deepens its deep roots,  
Renewing itself from the hidden core  
With bare, pure leaf-shoots.

The rings of age in the heartwood  
As the years in your face  
Carry the strength of the oak tree  
And the strength's grace.

Your oak's years are not fallen.  
Each year, life a relief,  
This tree lifts our only future  
Leaf – after leaf.

The oak tree has six roots in this poem. The first and deepest root ('Your tap-root') has its origins 'deep in starry heaven' at the same time as 'Creation'. The next root sank 'Deep into Scotland's battlefields', a reference to the wars between the Scots and the English which the oak tree overcame as this root was 'Richer than all the tartans' and accepted the mended relationship between the English and the Scots. British soldiers were supported by the third root as it struck 'Through the British trenches' and its leaves brought back the 'lost mystery'. The fourth root went down 'under the throne of England' and its 'leaves and acorns glittered' as 'The jewels of the crown'. During the Second World War, England was protected by the fifth root when the Germans 'pyromanic Swastikas' attacked and sent 'Europe up in smoke'. The survivors of the two World Wars let the sixth root course 'Through all their veins'. Hughes then links these survivors, the oak tree and England and says they are all one and the same, fused together through historical circumstance. Hughes says that the 21<sup>st</sup> century 'became a tree/Of fifty million lives' and that Nature was the 'tree-spirit'; her smile 'The glance among the leaves'. However, the poem then makes a leap into the modern era and pauses to reflect on the destruction of the natural environment by the culling of its trees: 'Now the roar of saws in the boughs/Is the song of our island race'. Yet, having introduced this spectre of environmental destruction, Hughes concludes the poem on an optimistic note: that the oak is the constant amidst generational changes that include mass destruction and human brutality ('Scotland's battlefields', 'British trenches', 'pyromaniac Swastikas') as well as the current degradation of Nature ('roar of saws in the boughs'). However, even though the oak has been witness to all these changes, it remains an evergreen constant representing that sturdy unyielding element of Nature. Its roots continue to deepen and the 'oak's years are not fallen' because with



perennial certainty, every year, the tree caters for the future as represented by its leaves: 'This tree lifts our only future/Leaf – after leaf'.

The notion of the tree being an emanation of the sacred part of Nature that constantly regenerates and replenishes is a theme that Hughes explores in *Cave Birds* (1978) in two poems that are quite different: 'A Green Mother' and 'As I came, I Saw a Wood'. Some scholars<sup>225</sup> argue that *Cave Birds* is 'the natural development of the process of 'pulling yourself together' which Hughes inaugurated in *Crow*'.<sup>226</sup> Nick Bishop goes so far as to say that the individual poems in *Cave Birds* are not 'made available for consideration as separate literary objects'.<sup>227</sup> While it is apparent that *Cave Birds* is intended to work as a holistic alchemical drama, it is open to the reader to extract his or her own meaning from each poem whether collectively or separately. While Bishop's assertion that these two poems 'narrate the hero's encounter with two "false paradises"' may be correct on one level, there are other, alternative interpretations open to the reader of these poems some of which are explored below.

The first poem, 'A Green Mother' opens with a leading question 'Why are you afraid?' and implies a response to some (unknown) anxiety within the reader. The poet's response to this question is that 'In the house of the dead are many cradles', which is a reference to the Gospel (St John 14:2) where Jesus is quoted as saying that 'In my Father's house are many mansions'. In this poem, Hughes creates a wonderful juxtaposition with the words the 'house of the dead' and the 'cradle' thereby suggesting that in Nature, as mirrored in our own human nature, death and life naturally co-exist.

### **A Green Mother**

Why are you afraid?

In the house of the dead are many cradles.

The earth is a busy hive of heavens.

This is one lottery that cannot be lost.

Here is the heaven of the tree:

Angels will come to collect you.

And here are the heavens of the flowers:

These are an ever-living bliss, a pulsing, a bliss in sleep.

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<sup>225</sup> See, for example, Keith Sagar (*The Art of Ted Hughes and Terror and Exultation*) and Nick Bishop (*Re-making Poetry Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology*).

<sup>226</sup> Nick Bishop, *Re-making Poetry Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology*, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1991, p. 175.

<sup>227</sup> Bishop, *Re-making Poetry*, p. 175.

And here is the heaven of the worm –  
A forgiving God.  
Little of you will be rejected –  
Which the angels of the flowers will gladly collect.

And here is the heaven of insects.  
From all these you may climb  
To the heavens of the birds, the heavens of the beasts, and of the fish.

These are only some heavens  
Not all within your choice.  
There are also the heavens  
Of your persuasion.  
Your candle prayers have congealed an angel, a star –  
A city of religions  
Like a city of hotels, a holiday city.  
There too I am your guide.  
In none of these is the aftertaste of death  
Pronounced poor. This earth is the sweetness  
Of all the heavens. It is Heaven's mother.

The grave is her breast, her nipple is its dark aura.  
Her milk is unending life.

You shall see

How tenderly she wipes her child's face clean

Of the bitumen of blood and the smoke of tears.

The title is clear and unambiguous. This poem is about Mother Nature presented as a sacred being whose function is to provide nourishment and succour. The 'earth' is portrayed as 'a busy hive of heavens'. With the word 'hive', Hughes evokes an image of a vibrant community (of bees) all working together in harmony to sustain their mother (Queen), which is the reason for their existence. In this hive, there are many heavens that accommodate the panoply of earth's creatures including trees, flowers, insects, worms, birds, beasts and fish. Here, God is 'A forgiving God' and this is a place of acceptance and inclusion in which 'Little of you will be rejected'. However, Hughes introduces a significant note of caution and concern with the alliterative line 'This is one lottery that

cannot be lost', which follows on from the earlier alliteration of 'hive of heavens'. The first four stanzas depict the universe in its own terms, where all the elements of Nature peacefully coexist. It is an Edenic paradise where a natural sense of recycling and regeneration permeates each being. The dead are recycled by the worms and insects which, in turn, are eaten by the birds. In contrast to this world, where the earth is a 'busy hive of heavens', Hughes makes it clear in the fifth stanza that these heavens are 'only some heavens' that are 'Not all within your choice'. In other words, there is a sense of predestination in these heavens which are outside of our human control. This is in stark contrast to the next two lines in which the poet refers to 'the heavens/Of your persuasion'. This is a reference to the artifice of man-made religions ('Your candle prayers') that 'have congealed an angel, a star'. Hughes says that there is a multitude of religions ('a city of religions') which he demeans by comparing to a 'city of hotels, a holiday city' reminiscent of Las Vegas, perhaps the epitome of human excess. The word 'city' is repeated three times and it is the city of 'religions', 'hotels' and 'holidays'. Cities represent the ultimate human urban landscape. However, the poet says that even in these heavens, Nature ('Heaven's mother') acts as a guide. Hughes adds that in these many heavens, all creatures coexist peacefully and 'the aftertaste of death' is not 'Pronounced poor' because 'This earth is the sweetness/Of all the heavens' and that the earth ('busy hive of heavens') is 'Heaven's mother'. In this poem, death and life are conjoined for the purpose of regeneration: 'The grave is her breast, her nipple is its dark aura/Her milk is unending life'. On one level, these two lines are arguably the quintessence of this poem - that Nature in the form of a mother suckling her young contains the seeds of both death and life and that the two are wholly interdependent. The breast (which provides the milk of 'unending life') is simultaneously the 'grave', the place for the burial of the dead.

Hughes's paradoxical fusion of life and death echoes Blake's vision of the importance of opposites and that, according to Blake, 'without contraries, there is no progression'. However on another level, these two lines seem disjointed in this poem, almost as if the obvious hyperbole runs against the rhythm of the remainder of the poem. The paradoxical phrase 'unending life' is overly dense and also makes little sense as all life has to end. The poem concludes with an image of the earth as a mother wiping her child's face clean 'Of the bitumen of blood and the smoke of tears'. This line is isolated from the rest of the poem and the staccato like alliteration ('bitumen of blood') has a powerful effect. This last line resonates with another Biblical reference (Luke 22:44): 'And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground'. However, Hughes deliberately refers to 'bitumen' and 'smoke', two potent images of the Industrial Revolution.

In the very next poem in *Cave Birds* ('As I came, I saw a Wood'), Hughes takes a different approach and explores the more complex dimensions of Nature.

**As I came, I saw a Wood**

Where trees craned in dirt, clutching at the sky  
Like savages photographed in a middle of a ritual  
Birds danced among them and animals took part  
Insects too and around their feet flowers

And time was not present none ever stopped  
Or left anything old or reached any new thing  
Everything moved in an excitement that seemed permanent

They were so ecstatic  
I could go in among them, touch them, even break pieces off them  
Pluck up flowers, without disturbing them in the least.  
The birds simply flew wide, but were not for one moment distracted  
From the performance of their feathers and eyes.  
And the animals the same, though they avoided me  
They did so with holy steps and never paused  
In the glow of fur which was their absolution in sanctity

And their obedience, I could see that.

I saw I stood in a paradise of tremblings

At the crowded crossroads of all the heavens  
The festival of all religions

But a voice, a bell of cracked iron  
Jarred in my skull

Summoning me to prayer

To eat flesh and drink blood.

This poem is replete with many possibilities. By using anthropomorphic techniques in this poem, Hughes invests the trees with distinctive human qualities. They are 'craned in dirt', reaching forward to clutch at the sky. The trees represent 'savages [...] in the middle of a ritual'. The trees are filled with the energy and ecstasy of a Shamanistic ritual in which birds, insects, flowers and animals all take part. The effect of this ritual is to arrest time ('time was not present') in which nothing grows old and there is no 'new thing'. The motion generated by this ritual creates 'an excitement that seemed permanent'. It is a timeless zone where nothing 'ever stopped' or 'left anything old'. Even the poet is able to 'go in among them', 'touch them' and 'Pluck up flowers'. In this scene, the poet is at one with Nature where the birds 'were not for one moment distracted' and the animals avoid the poet with 'holy steps' and their fur glowed as 'their absolution in sanctity'. The combination of the words 'holy', 'absolution' and 'sanctity' reflect the sacred element of this ritual, which suggest that all the various elements of Nature are in harmony with each other. Hughes is overawed with the beauty of this scene and his sense of rapture is awakened when he realises that he stands 'in a paradise of trembling/At the crowded crossroads of all the heavens'.

However, there is a seismic shift in the last four lines of the poem as Hughes is summoned to prayer by 'a voice' which jars in his skull like 'a bell of cracked iron'. Hughes's choice of the word 'Iron' is significant and very symbolic. While iron is the most common element (by mass) which forms much of the earth's outer and inner core, it is the natural element most exploited by humans. Iron metal has also been used since ancient times and - due to its hardness and durability - it has been used to manufacture implements of destruction for war. Iron is the component for making steel and the most widely used of all metals that accounts for a substantial part of worldwide metal production, construction of factories, mills, machinery, machine tools, motor vehicles, hulls for ships and structural components for buildings. Put simply, iron represents the apogee of man's exploitation of earth's natural elements. It is as if man surrounds himself with iron to strengthen and defend himself and thereby provide a potent sign of man's progress. Interestingly, Hughes's description of the hero in his book for children called *Iron Man* (which Hughes dedicated to his own children) was that:

The story opens at the moment of complete crisis, when the defences of my hero have been shattered. He's finished. My hero is completely exposed. He's without any outer defences whatsoever. His Iron Man, his St. George armour, has been completely scattered off him. I begin right at the centre of his difficulty and then I piece him together, I bring him out of it. It's a way of starting at the bottommost point simply.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>228</sup> Bishop, *Re-making Poetry*, p. 189.

In this poem, however, the iron is 'cracked' reflecting the fragmented nature of human understanding based on religion. This is the jarring voice of man that instructs Hughes to command and exploit Nature so that he can 'eat flesh and drink blood', a reference to the consecration, the Christian tradition of drinking wine as the symbol of the blood of Christ and eating holy bread as the symbol of his body. This voice transports the poet back to his human reality, divorced from Nature, and implores him to use it for his own purposes. The voice, however, is a 'bell of cracked iron'. Hughes continued to develop this iron theme with the publication of *Iron Woman* in 1993 (as a sequel to the *Iron Man*) and in which the heroine (Iron Woman) came 'to take revenge on mankind for its thoughtless polluting of the seas, lakes and rivers'.<sup>229</sup>

Eight years earlier, before these two poems appeared in *Cave Birds* in 1978, Hughes had provided an insightful review of Max Nicholson's book, *The Environmental Revolution* (1970). In this review, Hughes said that Nicholson provides a history of conservation and gives 'a full picture of how things stand at the moment, and projects vivid panoramas of the earth's alternative futures, which are now within the power of man to choose.'<sup>230</sup> Hughes says that this 'involves the salvaging of all nature from the pressures and the oversights of our runaway populations, and from the monstrous anti-Nature that we have created, the now nearly – autonomous Technosphere'.<sup>231</sup> According to Hughes, public ignorance has become part of the problem and that 'We have a biologically inbuilt amnesia against the fears of extinction. And hunger and greed will always sacrifice almost anything. And most people have already more than enough to worry about.'<sup>232</sup> There is a point in his review that Hughes makes about the ability of the earth to regenerate and to repair, a theme elegantly depicted in the poem 'A Green Mother':

Even when it [Nature] is poisoned to the point of death, its efforts to be itself are new in every second. This is what will survive, if anything can. And this is the soul-state of the new world. But while the mice in the field are listening to the Universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are inter-dependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stands the whole army of madmen's ideas and shareholders, impatient to cash in the world.'<sup>233</sup>

Hughes argues that imagination has a vital role to play as part of these efforts of this regeneration. He says 'what alters the imagination alters everything. We hold this globe in our hands, and all the

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<sup>229</sup> Ted Hughes, *The Iron Woman*, Faber and Faber, London, 1993, foreword.

<sup>230</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 128.

<sup>231</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 128.

<sup>232</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 129.

<sup>233</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 129-130.

inherited ideas vanish: the evidence is too plain. This miniature earth has our stomach, our blood, our precarious vital chemistry, and our future'.<sup>234</sup> Towards the end of his review, Hughes says that 'Nature's obsession, after all, is to survive. Every new baby is a completely fresh start. If Westernised civilised man, that evolutionary error, is still open to correction presumably she will correct him. If he is not open enough, she will still make the attempt.'<sup>235</sup> This review demonstrates that Hughes was keenly aware of his environment and had a passionate interest in understanding and protecting Nature, the source of which can be traced to his early childhood in Yorkshire. The degradation of the earth in the period after the Industrial Revolution was of great concern to Hughes. Gifford has documented Hughes's role as a voice for environmental action and the various steps he took to influence decision makers.<sup>236</sup> Hughes was particularly concerned with marine pollution and in an interview said:

Most people I talk to, seem to defend or rationalise the pollution of water. They think you're defending fish or insects or flowers. But the effects on otters and so on are indicators of what's happening to *us*. It isn't a problem of looking after the birds and the bees, but of how to ferry human beings through the next century. The danger is multiplied through each generation. We don't really know what bomb has already been planted in the human system.<sup>237</sup>

While there are strong parallels between Hughes and Beethoven in relation to the inspiration they drew from Nature and, in particular trees and woods, Hughes's perspective on the natural environment and ecology is markedly different to that of Beethoven. Clearly, much of this difference is due the historical times in which the artists lived. Beethoven lived through significant historical events including the social and political changes brought about by the French and American revolutions as well as the Industrial Revolution which began late in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. However, the deep social and environmental changes caused by the Industrial Revolution occurred sometime after Beethoven's death.

In contrast, Hughes emerged as a writer at a critical time in history after the Industrial Revolution had left its deleterious imprint on Nature and the two World Wars had demonstrated the human capability for immense brutality, cruelty and horror. It is no coincidence that Beethoven's view of Nature is seen through a Romantic prism in contrast to Hughes's approach. However, Beethoven enjoyed the beauty of Nature and he would walk through country areas and meadows

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<sup>234</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 134.

<sup>235</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 135.

<sup>236</sup> Terry Gifford, *Hughes's Social Ecology* in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, edited by Terry Gifford, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 81 – 93.

<sup>237</sup> Blake Morrison. 'Man of Mettle', *Independent on Sunday* (5 September 1993), pp. 32-34 as quoted in Gifford, *Hughes's Social Ecology* in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, p. 86.

for hours with his sketch book in his hand. He even protested against the gradual disappearance of forests in Vienna largely as a result of urbanisation.

In 1979, a year after the publication of *Cave Birds*, Hughes collaborated with the photographer Fay Godwin to produce a combination of poems and black and white photographs entitled *Remains of Elmet*. Elmet is part of the Calder Valley in which Hughes spent his early childhood and he says that:

For centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees. Then in early 1800s it became the cradle for the Industrial Revolution in textiles, and the upper Calder became the hardest-worked river in England. Throughout my lifetime, since 1930, I have watched the mills of the region and their attendant chapels die. Within the last 15 years the end has come. They are now virtually dead, and the population of the valleys and the hillsides, so rooted for so long, is changing rapidly.<sup>238</sup>

In the poem 'Hardcastle Craggs' from *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes depicts the healing ability of the Elmet landscape that contain a 'leaf-loam silence' where the 'beech-tree solemnities' silence the image of war ('muffle the cordite'). In a deep gorge, the conifers are a 'hide-out of elation' and the 'beech-roots repair a population/Of fox and badger'. In that same volume of poems, Hughes provides an anthropomorphic image of a tree as 'A priest from a different land' in 'Tree':

### Tree

A priest from a different land  
Fulminated  
Against heather, black stones, blown water.

Excommunicated the clouds  
Damned the wind  
Cast the bog pools into outer darkness  
Smote the horizons  
With the jawbone of emptiness

Till he ran out of breath –

In that teetering moment

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<sup>238</sup> Sagar, *Terror and Exultation*, p. 227-8.



Of lungs empty  
When only his eye-water protected him  
He saw  
Heaven and earth moving  
And words left him.  
Mind left him. God left him.

Bowed –  
The lightning conductor  
Of a maiming glimpse – the new prophet –

Under unending interrogation by wind  
Tortured by huge scalding of light  
Tried to confess all but could not  
Bleed a word

Stripped to his root-letter, cruciform  
Contorted  
Tried to tell all

Through crooking of elbows  
Twitching of finger-ends.

Finally  
Resigned  
To be dumb.

Lets what happens to him simply happen.

In this poem, Hughes presents an angry image of the priest as a tree fulminating 'Against heather, black stones, blown water', who excommunicates 'the clouds', damns 'the wind', casts 'the bog pools into outer darkness' and smotes 'the horizons/With the jawbone of emptiness'. This is a dark and sceptical view of religion where the priest is brutal and vicious, at least until he runs out of breath. At that 'teetering moment', with empty lungs, the priest/tree sees 'Heaven and earth moving' and words, mind and God leave him. He is interrogated and tortured by the wind and the light and tries unsuccessfully to confess. He cannot 'Bleed a word'. Language deserts the priest. He tries to communicate by the 'crooking of elbows' and 'Twitching of finger-ends' but fails. In the end,

the priest/tree resigns himself to his fate, to be dumb. There is a deep sense of resignation and fatalism to the ending of the poem when Hughes says 'Lets what happens to him simply happen'.

In another poem from *Remains of Elmet* called 'Two Trees at Top Withens', Hughes depicts the two trees as 'Wind-shepherds' who 'Play the reeds of desolation' in a lonely, solitary landscape:

### **Two Trees at Top Withens**

Open to huge light  
Wind-shepherds  
Play the reeds of desolation.

Dragged out of the furnace  
They rose and staggered some way.  
It was God, they knew.

Now hills bear them through visions  
From emptiness to brighter emptiness  
With music and with silence.

Startled people look up  
With sheep's heads  
Then go on eating.

In this poem, the trees are 'Dragged out of the furnace' and 'staggered some way'. The trees know that they were created by God ('the furnace'). In this harsh landscape, the hills provide succour to the trees whose visions are 'From emptiness to brighter emptiness'. The third line of the third stanza perfectly captures the paradox of this environment: 'With music and with silence'.

Trees have an ancient mythological heritage. In a Biblical sense, there is the tree of life as well as the tree of knowledge of good and evil. According to the Kabbalah, each human being is a potential tree of life. Hughes was familiar with the Kabbalah and its influence on Renaissance Neoplatonism.<sup>239</sup> In many respects, Hughes's work is infused with a combination of both Neoplatonism and Celtic mythology. In 'The Two Trees', a poem by W. B. Yeats there is an inner tree that grows in one's heart ('the holy tree is growing there) and an outer tree reflected in a glass 'of outer weariness' where 'ravens of unresting thought' fly through broken branches.

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<sup>239</sup> For an excellent discourse on Renaissance Neoplatonism see Désirée Hirst, *Hidden Riches Traditional Symbolism from the Renaissance to Blake*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, London, 1964.

More recently, the English poet, Felix Dennis, pays tribute to the significance of trees in his collection of poems titled *Tales from the Woods* (2010).<sup>240</sup> In 'The Children of Wood', Dennis writes:

Every age is a wood age, as it has been from the first,  
...  
From wood we smelted iron – and hollowed the first canoes,  
Of wood we built our temples to banish our own taboos,  
Wood fired the kilns of our potters, from bark we wove our twine  
...  
As the logs burn in your fireplace – so the past returns, revealed  
When wood was our only ally, and fire our only shield,  
We are wedded to wood as surely as a bole is wedded to bark –  
So bless the trees, my children, they kept you from the dark;  
  
They nurtured and sustained us, they raised us from the dust,  
....  
We are the children of the wood!

This is very reminiscent of Hughes's poem 'The oak tree' and closely evocative of Marvell's depiction of Nature in 'The Garden' where Marvell writes that:

Here at the fountain's sliding foot,  
Or at some fruit tree's mossy root,  
Casting the body's vest aside,  
My soul into the boughs does glide:  
There like a bird it sits, and sings,  
...  
Such was that happy garden-state,

The tree has a long and treasured history in English mythology. In *Albion, the origins of the English imagination*, Peter Ackroyd says that:

The worship of the forest and the forest forms, characterised the piety of the Druids in whose rituals the spurs of the oak, the beech and the hawthorn are honoured [...] the poetry of England is striated with the shade that the ancient trees cast, in a canopy of protection and inclusion.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Felix Dennis, *Tales from the Woods*, Ebury Press, UK, 2010.

<sup>241</sup> Peter Ackroyd, *Albion: the origins of the English Imagination*, Nan A. Talese, USA, 2002, p. 3.

Ackroyd argues that there is continuity between this historical veneration for trees and contemporary society when he says that:

The ash represents the threshold of creation, for Hopkins in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century no less than for the ancient priests of Britain. There is, here, a continuity. In 16<sup>th</sup> Century tapestry the antlers of stags resemble the tree upon a hillside, as if all nature was animated by one aspiring spirit; 15<sup>th</sup> century English mystics saw trees as men walking, a visionary recalled by Tolkien in his legend of Moving Trees, ents in *The Lord of the Rings*.<sup>242</sup>

The concept of trees as symbolic of Nature is one that resonated deeply with Hughes. His view of Nature, drawn from his early childhood was that it was a dark and mysterious place that represented a connection to his notion of the sacred. Some of Hughes's poetry explores this darkness and mystery. His poetic journey is essentially a voyage of self discovery and Hughes uses Nature as the mirror for a coruscating examination of his own human nature. In 1912, when D.H. Lawrence wrote that he would like to be a tree for a while, Ackroyd said he was:

expressing his need for deep and yet deeper absorption into the earth; it represents that descent into the layers of the past time, which is very like the journey into his own inner self where all unacknowledged fantasies and unknown power lie hidden. That is why, in ancient poems, the woods are places of refuge and sanctuary [...] so the tree grows through the literature of the English.<sup>243</sup>

Man's relationship with trees and vegetation finds expression in the old, traditional story of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.<sup>244</sup> The Green Knight is the Green Man and appears as human face surrounded by leaves. Branches and vines sprout from the mouth and nose. The Green Man as a mythological figure is related to natural vegetative deities. It is a symbol of rebirth or renaissance, representing the cycle of growth each Spring. Hughes develops the theme of the Green Man in the mysterious figure of Wodwo, the title poem of his collection *Wodwo* (1967). Wodwo is an ambiguous figure - a wild man who is part man and part beast. Wodwo has been described as a 'sort of larval Hamlet, questioning everything'<sup>245</sup>. He is an observer, reflective yet unknowing who poses a

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<sup>242</sup> Ackroyd, *Albion: the origins of the English imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>243</sup> Ackroyd, *Albion: the origins of the English imagination*, p. 7.

<sup>244</sup> Edited by J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, 2ed, Oxford University Press, London, 1971.

<sup>245</sup> Sagar, *The Laughter of the Foxes*, p. 90.

barrage of questions yet cannot find any answers. He recognises he is part of Nature yet at the same time feels estranged from Nature. In a sense, he is alienated from his own 'roots'.<sup>246</sup> Sagar says:

Hughes is a wotwo in all his poems, asking these same questions of the world in which he finds himself, looking at that world and its creatures to discover where he ends and the other begins and what relationship exists between the naked self and 'the endless without-world of the other'.<sup>247</sup>

Through the figure of Wodwo, Hughes probes his relationship with Nature. In addition to the central image of the tree in Romantic tradition, Nature is also represented by the image of the wind (breeze) or breath, as depicted by Coleridge in 'The Eolian Harp':

And what if all of animated nature  
Be but organic Harps diversely fram'd,  
That temble into thought, as o'er them sweeps  
Plastic and vast, one intellectual breeze,  
At once the Soul of each, and God of all?

In Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio*, the imprisoned Florestan has a vision of Leonore (his faithful wife) as the breeze 'arriving to release his soul to eternity'<sup>248</sup>:

Do I not sense a mild, murmuring breeze?  
Like an angel in golden mists  
Coming to my side to console me;  
An angel...leading me to freedom in heavenly realms

'Leonore's presence is heralded by a gentle movement of air, a breeze that is a harbinger both of liberation and of reunion'<sup>249</sup>. It can be soothing and calming like a gentle breeze or soft Spring wind. This image recurs in Beethoven's later vocal music. For instance, in the text of his song cycle, *An der ferne Geliebte* (Opus 98), 'the murmuring breeze again appears as an emblem of yearning for and symbolic reunion with a distant beloved'<sup>250</sup>:

Silent West Wind, as you drift

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<sup>246</sup> See chapter five of the thesis for a detailed analysis of the poem 'Wodwo'.

<sup>247</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 98.

<sup>248</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 49.

<sup>249</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 49.

<sup>250</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 49.

Yonder to my heart's chosen one,  
Bear my sighs which die  
Like the last rays of the sun.

...

May comes again, the meadows are in bloom,  
The breezes stir so gently, so warmly.

According to the Renaissance Neoplatonists, 'breath' and 'spirit' are one and the same thing. Edgar Wind says that:

Since breath and spirit are but one *afflatus* (the Latin word *spiritus* signifying both) [...] What descends to the earth as the breath of passion returns to heaven as the spirit of conciliation.<sup>251</sup>

The Romantic image of the breeze was subjected to a critical transformation 'from winter to spring [...] the return to a sense of community after isolation, the renewal of life and emotional vigour after apathy and a deathlike torpor, and an outburst of creative power following a period of imaginative sterility.'<sup>252</sup> Solomon argues that:

This was Beethoven's plain intention in combining the two poems by Goethe as a text for his miniature cantata, *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, op. 112, in which Aeolus "unlooses the strings" of the zephyr to relieve the "deathlike stillness" that lies upon the immense waters. Invisible yet palpable, mild yet capable of raging force, the movement of air represents emanations of the human spirit as a regenerative force. And it is in this capacity that Florestan's breeze is foreshadowed in the Chorus of the Prisoners:

Oh what joy to breathe the scent open air:  
Only here, here is life<sup>253</sup>

In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Coleridge says that:

But soon there breathed a wind upon me,  
Nor sound nor motion made:  
Its path was not upon the sea,  
In ripple or in shade.

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<sup>251</sup> Edgar Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, W W Norton and Company, 1968, p. 125.

<sup>252</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 51.

<sup>253</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 51.

It raised my hair, it fanned my cheek  
Like a meadow-gale of Spring –  
It mingled strangely with my fears,  
Yet it felt like a welcoming.<sup>254</sup>

Hughes explores this image of the wind as the breath of life and a symbol of freedom or release from bondage in his own poems. However, Hughes adds a further, complex dimension. His poetry exposes the dark underbelly of Nature as represented by the destructive capabilities of the wind. In 'Wind' from *The Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes explores the raw power of the wind as an explosive force of nature:

### **Wind**

This house has been far out at sea all night,  
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,  
Winds stampeding the fields under the window  
Floundering black astride and blinding wet

Till day rose; then under an orange sky  
The hills had new places, and wind wielded  
Blade-light, luminous and emerald,  
Flexing like the lens of a mad eye.

At noon I scaled along the house-side as far as  
The coal-house door. I dared once to look up –  
Through the brunt wind that dented the balls of my eyes  
The tent of the hills drummed and strained its guyrope,

The fields quivering, the skyline a grimace,  
At any second to bang and vanish with a flap:  
The wind flung a magpie away and a black –  
Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly. The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note  
That any second would shatter it. Now deep

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<sup>254</sup> Coleridge, *The Complete Poems*, p. 181.

In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip  
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,

Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,  
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,  
Seeing the window tremble to come in,  
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

In this poem, the 'Winds stampede the fields' and 'dented the balls' of the poet's eyes. He exposes the wind's brutality as he feels the 'roots of the house move'. The wind is immensely cruel. It flings 'a magpie away' and bends a gull 'like an iron bar slowly'. It terrifies the human inhabitants of the house, usually a place of refuge:

In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip  
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought

Or each other.

The power of the wind forces the stones to 'cry out under the horizons'. The images in Hughes's poem 'Wind' are strongly reminiscent of Yeats' poem 'A Prayer for my Daughter' where Yeats conjures up some visceral images when he writes about that 'the storm is howling', 'the sea wind screams' and Yeats depicts the 'Assault and battery of the wind'.

Historically, the wind was seen as paradoxically the beneficial or destructive instrument of the gods and used to carry their voices and those of the spirits of the dead. It is often described as the hand of fate and a raging wind was, and still is, a prelude to a destructive storm. Odysseus heard the song of the sirens carried on the sea winds and ordered his sailors to tie him to the mast. Many Romantic poets had a particular affinity for the wind as the inspiration for, and emanation of, Nature. In 'Ode to the West Wind', Shelley says:

Oh wild West Wind, thou breath of autumn's being,  
Thou, from whose unseen presence the leaves dead  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing,  
...  
Wild Spirit, which art moving everywhere –  
Destroyer and preserver – hear, oh, hear!



Among the English Romantics, the harp (whose sound is created by wind) became a favourite image. Coleridge in 'The Aeolian Harp' says the harp is 'such a soft floating witchery of sound' and the music is:

the one Life within us and abroad,  
Which meets all motion and becomes its soul

In his '1805 Prelude', Wordsworth says:

For I, methought, while the sweet breath of Heaven  
Was blowing on my body, felt within  
A corresponding mild creative breeze,  
A vital breeze

Shelley in *Queen Mab* says that 'the dulcet music swelled/Concordant with the life-strings of the soul'.

These Romantic images were used by Hughes but with certain differences. For example, in 'Pastoral Symphony No. 1', Hughes explores the duality in the wind, its positive and negative capabilities: the 'Spring winds run' and the ravens are 'hung murderous in the wind'. In keeping with the paradox identified by Shelley, Hughes explores the wind as an elemental force that can destroy as well as preserve. In particular, Hughes often dwells on the darker, chthonic forces in Nature, and in this regard his poetry represents a significant diversion from the views of Nature espoused by Beethoven and many of the Romantic poets. The Romantic vision of Nature was perfectly captured by Rainer Maria Rilke in this extract from 'The Ninth Elegy' of the *Duino Elegies*:

But because *truly* being here is so much; because everything  
here  
apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which is some  
strange way  
keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.  
*Once* for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too,  
just once. And never again. But to have been  
this once, completely, if only once:

to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing.<sup>255</sup>

Jonathan Bate says that 'Like the Romantics, Rilke is in search of a way of thinking and living which reconciles instrumental rationality with openness to "the open". This involves him in the acceptance of finitude and of mortality [...] He seemed to become nature itself, to share his being with tree and singing bird as inner and outer were gathered together into a single "uninterrupted space"'.<sup>256</sup>

In conclusion, while there are certain parallels in the way in which Hughes and Beethoven were drawn to Nature, there are also significant differences in how the two artists understood and responded to their natural environment. These differences were primarily due to their specific historical contexts. However, both artists were clearly inspired by the elemental forces in Nature strongly represented by the images of trees and wind, which they used as a canvas for their artistic imagination. However, Hughes's understanding of, and relationship to, Nature went through a substantial transformation during his poetic development. His 'vision of nature in his early poems is a waking nightmare'<sup>257</sup> but there is a sense of redemption and reconciliation by the time of the publication of *River* in 1983. For both artists, their exploration of Nature provided them with the ability to engage with their inner self to try to understand their own human nature.

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<sup>255</sup> *Ahead of All Parting, The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Maria Rilke*, edited and translated by Stephen Mitchell, The Modern Library, New York, 1995, p.383.

<sup>256</sup> Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 263.

<sup>257</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature*, p. 28.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: 'I AM THAT WHICH IS'<sup>258</sup>

The fascination with Nature shared by Beethoven and Hughes is complemented by other strong correlations between them. In particular, both artists demonstrated a philosophical interest in ancient myths and, in his 'late period',<sup>259</sup> Beethoven's philosophical search took an eclectic turn and his 'readings in Homer, Schiller, Kant, and Herder, in the ancient classical writers and the modern Romantics, and in Brahman and Masonic texts provided a mosaic of ideas that gave voice to his own sentiments'.<sup>260</sup> Intriguingly, Beethoven kept - in full view under glass on his writing table - a framed copy of a German translation of the following Egyptian and Orphic inscriptions:

I am that which is.

I am everything that is, that was, and that shall be. No mortal man has lifted my veil.

He is unique unto himself, and it is to this singularity that all things owe their existence.<sup>261</sup>

The first two inscriptions 'are Saitic inscriptions about the veiled goddess Isis, one allegedly taken from a statue of her and the other said to have been inscribed on either a temple or a pyramid at Sais; the third is from an Orphic hymn used in initiation rites of the Eleusinian Mysteries'.<sup>262</sup>

Hughes had a large poster of an engraving of Isis, with all her attributes listed, on the wall of his study.<sup>263</sup> This bears a strong correlation to Beethoven's copy of the inscriptions about Isis and arguably provides a distinct point of confluence between these two different artists. Embossed in gold on the cover of *Poems*, the second book of Hughes's own Rainbow Press Publication, is a picture of Isis: *Magnae Deorum Matris* (Great Mother of the Gods). *Birthday Letters* (1998) includes a poem by Hughes called 'Isis'. Like Beethoven, Hughes was equally fascinated with the figure of Isis. Yet what drew these two artists, living and working in significantly different historical periods and in distinctly different art forms (music and poetry), to the same iconic figure; a figure that so captivated them, they copied her inscriptions and attributes and placed these close by their respective places of work? This chapter explores this question by looking closely at the Isis myth itself, considering the significance of Isis to Hughes and Beethoven and examining how Hughes endeavours to unveil Isis,

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<sup>258</sup> This is part only of the famous inscription about the veil of Isis which, in his later years, Beethoven kept on his desk: Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, pp. 68-9.

<sup>259</sup> Musicologists have traditionally divided Beethoven's life into three distinct periods: 'early period' (1770 - 1792), 'middle period' (1793 - 1812) and 'late period' (1813 - 1827).

<sup>260</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 5.

<sup>261</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, pp. 68-69 and 146-147 and fn 88 on p. 257 referring to Wegeler Collection, Beethoven-Archiv, Bonn.

<sup>262</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, pp. 68-69.

<sup>263</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation*, p. 41 and fn 33. See also Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes and Small Press Publication* at <http://ann.skea.com/>.

specifically in his poems 'Hawk Roosting' and 'Isis'. What becomes evident is that both artists envisaged Isis as the source of a primal energy, the *fons et origo* of 'elemental opposites, and in whom the collision and pain become illumination.'<sup>264</sup> There is a further confluence of interest in the manner in which Beethoven and Hughes approached and adapted the myth of Prometheus, which is examined in the second part of this chapter to demonstrate further the strong correlations that exist between these two artists.

As the greatest goddess in Egyptian mythology, Isis was worshipped for over three millennia from before 3000 BC until the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Her influence spread to Greece and the Roman Empire and 'she crossed boundaries of culture, race and nation'.<sup>265</sup> However, the figure of Isis is not a static one and she appears in various guises including: 'the milk-giving cow goddess; goddess of the serpents of the primeval waters; the star goddess Sirius [...]; the fertile pig goddess; the bird goddess; goddess of the underworld [...]; goddess of the Tree of Life [...] goddess of the words of power.'<sup>266</sup> Isis has been described as 'the Great Mother Goddess of the Universe, from whom all gods, goddesses, worlds and humanity were born'.<sup>267</sup> Isis was the most prominent representative of the Great Mother Goddess, the 'myth that prevailed in the Palaeolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age Crete'<sup>268</sup> and in which 'humanity and nature share a common identity'.<sup>269</sup>

In traditional Egyptian folklore, Isis was the first daughter of Geb (god of the earth) and Nut (goddess of the sky). She married her brother Osiris, who was murdered by their jealous sibling, Seth. Isis used her magic to restore Osiris back to life by collecting his body parts that Seth had violently scattered about the earth, an image drawn on by Shakespeare in the final, bloody scene (Act 5, Scene 3) of *Titus Andronicus* when Marcus Andronicus says:

O let me teach you how to knit again  
This broken corn into one mutual sheaf,  
Those broken limbs again into one body

During the Greco-Roman period, there was a belief that the annual flooding of the Nile represented the tears of sorrow that Isis wept for Osiris. The story of Isis and Osiris:

is, on one level, a myth of the invisible reality that underlies and makes intelligible the workings of what we call Nature, which is also, ultimately, for the Egyptians, the drama of human nature. It is

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<sup>264</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 158.

<sup>265</sup> Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, Penguin Books, London, 1993, p. 225.

<sup>266</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 225.

<sup>267</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 225.

<sup>268</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 660.

<sup>269</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 660.

essentially a myth of immanence [...] In this way the manifold dimensions of the phenomenal world were brought into relation with human feeling, and the mystic bond that unified humanity with nature could be explored.<sup>270</sup>

In his *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, Athanasius Kircher, the 17<sup>th</sup> century German Jesuit scholar, interpreted the veil of Isis as a symbol of the secrets of Nature. The growth of science and the development of scientific inquiry during the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries led to the view that the ‘human mind could penetrate the secrets of Nature and therefore raise the veil of Isis’.<sup>271</sup> Notwithstanding the exponential growth in modern technology and the enlightened discoveries and scientific developments that have occurred in the last few centuries, Nature (in her myriad forms) continues to surprise scientists and the public alike with her resilience and, in certain instances, her unfathomable mysteries. While science has indeed begun to lift Nature’s veil, it seems that we are ‘becoming intensely aware of the fact that we are a part of nature, and that in this sense we ourselves are this infinite, ineffable nature that completely surrounds us. Let us recall Hölderlin “To be but one with all living things, to return, by a radiant self-forgetfulness, to the All of Nature”’.<sup>272</sup>

The origins of Beethoven’s fascination for Isis can be traced to readings of the German Romantic writers, most notably Friedrich Schiller and Immanuel Kant. Beethoven had copied the Egyptian inscriptions he kept on his writing desk from Friedrich Schiller’s essay, ‘The Mission of Moses’<sup>273</sup>. In a footnote to his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant equates Isis with ‘Mother Nature’ and says that nothing more sublime was ever said and no thought ever expressed more sublimely than in the Saitic inscription ‘I am all that is and that was and shall be, and no mortal has lifted my veil’. The leading German Romantic poet and scholar, Friedrich Schlegel, said that ‘It’s time to tear away the veil of Isis and reveal the mystery [...] whoever can’t endure the sight of the goddess, let him flee or perish’.<sup>274</sup> Novalis<sup>275</sup> agreed with Schlegel and added that ‘He who does not wish to lift the veil is no disciple of Sais’.<sup>276</sup> In a letter to Countess Erdödy on 19 September 1815, Beethoven specifically refers to the Temple of Isis in one of his letters when he writes that:

We mortals with immortal minds are only born for *sorrows and joys*, and one might also say that the most excellent only receive their *joys through sorrows* [...] God give you further strength to arrive at

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<sup>270</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, pp. 232-3.

<sup>271</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, translated by Michael Chase, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 238.

<sup>272</sup> Hadot, *The Veil of Isis*, p. 319.

<sup>273</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 146. Schiller’s essay in German is titled ‘Die Sendung Moses’.

<sup>274</sup> Friedrich Schlegel, *Ideas, no. 1, in Lucinda and the Fragments*, edited and translated by Peter Firchow, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1971, p. 241.

<sup>275</sup> The pseudonym for Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg.

<sup>276</sup> Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed by Kluckhohn, Samuel et al, 4 vols, vol. 1, p. 14.

your *Temple of Isis*, where the refining fire will consume all your evil, and you will arise a new phoenix.<sup>277</sup>

It is evident from this passage that Beethoven explores key antithetical notions such as ‘mortal’ and ‘immortal’ and ‘joys’ and ‘sorrows’. It is interesting that he links these paradoxes to the notion that the Countess must discover her own ‘Temple of Isis’, which will cleanse her with its ‘refining fire’ and ‘consume’ all her evil. Maynard Solomon says that Beethoven ‘luxuriated in the idea of the oneness of humanity and its manifold deities; he delighted in every expression of the polytheistic imagination’ and he sought in Isis ‘a quasi-initiatory process of purification and resurrection’.<sup>278</sup> It has been said that some of Beethoven’s aesthetic convictions ‘parallel those of Friedrich Schelling [...] Schelling’s concept of the natural world, like Goethe’s, was organicist; for him, mind itself was seen as emanating from the unending activity of nature’.<sup>279</sup> Beethoven was particularly drawn to the philosophy of Kant and the German philosopher’s concept of the sublime:

Kant saw in beauty a harmonious relationship between the imagination and understanding; in his view, a beautiful object is brought into accord with unknown laws that govern a higher unity in nature. The sublime, however, entails a relationship between the imagination and reason that resists the idea of reconciliation; for Kant, as for Schiller, the structure of the sublime is characterized by an unresolvable conflict.<sup>280</sup>

Significantly, both Kant and Schiller envisaged ‘the structure of the sublime’ as ‘characterized by an unresolvable conflict’. This ‘unresolvable conflict’ is a theme that is at the core of Beethoven’s music. E. T. A. Hoffman described Beethoven’s music in a wonderfully contrapuntal manner by saying that it sets in motion the machinery of awe, of fear, of terror, of pain, a point echoed by the philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer when he said that:

[A] symphony of Beethoven presents us with the greatest confusion which yet has the most perfect order as its foundation; with the most vehement conflict which is transformed the next moment into the most beautiful harmony. It is *rerum concordia discors* [the discordant concord of the world], a true and complete picture of the nature of the world, which rolls on in the boundless confusion of innumerable forms, and maintains itself by constant destruction.<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> *Beethoven’s Letters*, translated by John South Shedlock, pp. 180-1.

<sup>278</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 69.

<sup>279</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, pp. 7 - 8.

<sup>280</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 9.

<sup>281</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation), Chapter XXXIX: *On the Metaphysics of Music*.

This paradoxical notion of the discordant concord of the world was an integral part of Renaissance culture. For instance in Shakespeare's play, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the character Theseus asks:

Merry and tragical? Tedious and brief?  
That is, hot ice and wondrous strange snow.  
How shall we find the concord of this discord?<sup>282</sup>

While Solomon says that 'We cannot altogether know what led Beethoven to copy, frame and keep [...] a German translation of the famous inscription about the Veil of Isis', it appears that Beethoven's fascination for Isis is deeply connected to, and largely reflects, Kant's view of the sublime. It is conceivable that the composer believed that Isis represented Nature (including human nature) which was in a state of 'unresolvable conflict'. Beethoven's music is arguably his creative response to this and in which he seeks (as Schopenhauer said) to capture 'a true and complete picture of the nature of the world, which rolls on in the boundless confusion of innumerable forms, and maintains itself by constant destruction.' Rainer Maria Rilke elegantly captured the essence of this 'unresolvable conflict' in his 'Duino Elegies: The First Elegy':

For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror  
which we barely able to endure and are awed  
because it serenely disdains to annihilate us.

Likewise, when Beethoven says he is a mortal with an immortal mind 'only born for *sorrows and joys*', he is reflecting on the inherent dialectic in human nature in the form of this 'unresolvable conflict'. To Beethoven, Isis is the embodiment of opposites in a continual dialectical transformation: from the 'greatest confusion' to the 'most perfect order' and from the 'most vehement conflict' to the 'most beautiful harmony'. This view of Isis resonated deeply with Hughes.

Hughes's interest in Isis has its origins in *The White Goddess A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* by Robert Graves. At the age of 17, Hughes was given a copy of the book by his English teacher as a school leaving gift.<sup>283</sup> According to Graves, many ancient communities were matriarchal and they believed in the existence of a White Goddess encapsulating death, birth and beauty made

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<sup>282</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act 5, Scene 1, lines 60 - 62 from *William Shakespeare Complete Works*, edited by Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen, The Royal Shakespeare Company, Macmillan, Hampshire, 2007, p.404.

<sup>283</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, pp. 273 and 679.

manifest in the triple Goddess: the pure maiden, the nurturing mother and the witch. Graves believed the White Goddess is the muse for the genuine poet:

The Poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth; his heart breaks with longing and love for her. She is the Flower-goddess Olwen or Blodeuwedd; that she is also Blodeuwedd the Owl, lamp-eyed hooting dismally, with her foul nest in the hollow of a dead tree, or Circe the pitiless falcon or Lamia with a flickering tongue or the snarling-chopped Sow-goddess or the mare-headed Rhiannon who feeds on raw flesh.<sup>284</sup>

*The White Goddess* had a dramatic influence on Hughes who regarded *The White Goddess* 'as the chief holy book' of his 'poetic conscience'.<sup>285</sup> *The White Goddess* opened up new pathways and enlivened metaphors and symbols that empowered Hughes to focus on Nature and grapple with all the different forces at play including the chthonic elements of death and destruction. It also provided a platform for him to explore the complex relationship between humans and Nature and thereby examine his own complex nature. In his artistic journey, Hughes was drawn to the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians and, in particular, the myriad and powerful incarnations of Isis, which he viewed (like Beethoven) as the source of a primal energy in Nature (and humans). That primal energy contained positive as well as negative elements and reflected the 'unresolvable conflict' which he wanted to explore. In an interview with Ekbert Faas in 1971, Hughes was asked about critics who had described his poetry as the 'poetry of violence' and his response was that:

Poetry is nothing if not [...] the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error [...] Violence that begins in an unhappy home can go one way to produce a meaningless little nightmare of murder etc, for TV or it can go the other way and produce those moments in Beethoven.<sup>286</sup>

In this passage, Hughes recognises that there are universal powers beyond man's control - 'the forces of the universe' - and that these forces try to correct 'some balance disturbed by human error'. That 'error' can result either in a violent domestic or be realigned by the 'forces of the Universe' to create something sublime: 'those moments in Beethoven'. In other words, according to Hughes, the extraordinary beauty of Beethoven's music is the product of these forces in the universe redressing the imbalance created by human error. For Hughes, Beethoven's music has the power to

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<sup>284</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, Faber and Faber, London, 1948 edited by Grevel Lindop, p. 439.

<sup>285</sup> *Hughes, Letters*, p. 273. Hughes wrote this letter to Robert Graves himself.

<sup>286</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, pp. 198 - 199.



heal and regenerate, a remarkably similar view to Beethoven when the composer implored Countess Erdödy (156 years earlier) to find the strength 'to arrive at' her '*Temple of Isis*' where 'the refining fire will consume' all her 'evil' and she will 'arise a new phoenix'.<sup>287</sup>

The issue of violence has infiltrated Hughes's poetic space much to the poet's chagrin. In the interview with Faas, he was asked whether one can celebrate violence for its own sake. In response, Hughes refers to his poem 'Hawk Roosting' and says:

That bird is accused of being a fascist ... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe as Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature and Nature became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is.<sup>288</sup>

It is interesting that, in this poem, Hughes compares his figure of the hawk to 'Isis, mother of the gods'. His poem is a significant departure from poems that embrace a similar theme such as 'The Windhover' by Gerard Manley Hopkins. Hopkins's poem is subtitled 'To Christ our Lord' and is a reverent celebration of Nature in the form of the kestrel. Hopkins describes the bird as a 'dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon' representing 'Brute beauty and valour'. However, in an ironic rebuttal of Hopkins's poem, Hughes presents a different perspective on Nature in the form of Isis in 'Hawk Roosting'.

### **Hawk Roosting**

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.

Inaction, no falsifying dream

Between my hooked head and hooked feet:

Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!

The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray

Are of advantage to me;

And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.

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<sup>287</sup> *Beethoven's Letters*, translated by John South Shedlock, p. 181.

<sup>288</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 199.

It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather:  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and resolve it all slowly –  
I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
There is no sophistry in my body:  
My manners are tearing off heads –

The allotment of death.  
For the one path of my flight is direct  
Through the bones of the living.  
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

The reaction of certain scholars to this poem is interesting. For example, Sagar says the poem is 'horrifying' and that 'This hawk is a robot programmed by an insane god'.<sup>289</sup> Faas says that 'every line, with its clipped self sufficiency of madness, seems to pronounce its deadly verdict like an oracle of destruction'.<sup>290</sup> Arguably, these reactions reflect a traditional response one may expect of most readers of this poem as they are drawn into, and repulsed, by the evident brutality of its language and imagery which may offend the reader's sense of morality and judgment. Indeed, this may have been Hughes's intention - to engage the reader directly with imagery that operates on a visceral level to evoke a strong response by way of a deliberate provocation. However, this typical reaction can limit a potentially deeper interpretation of the poem. If one accepts that, in this poem, Hughes is inviting the reader to enter the mind of the hawk as it thinks aloud, then this arguably requires the reader to *wilfully suspend their moral judgement* (to adapt Coleridge's statement) and thereby fully embrace the language, and connect directly with the imagery, used by Hughes.

In this regard, it is worth pausing on Hughes's own comments about the poem. He makes two fundamental points. Firstly, he says that 'in this hawk Nature is thinking'. By this, he means Nature and not human morality, thought or judgement. He invites us into the mind of the hawk and

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<sup>289</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes: Terror and Exultation*, p. 83.

<sup>290</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 67.

presents the world according to the hawk. Secondly, Hughes says that the hawk is 'Isis, mother of the gods'; in other words the animal is an emanation of the mother of all Gods, Isis. If one approaches the poem from this paradigm and temporarily suspends one's moral judgement, then the poem provides a 'mosaic of ideas' for the reader and allows the reader (like the poet) to lift the veil of Isis and gain a better insight into the mind of the hawk, as the representative of Isis. The title of the poem is revealing. The 'hawk' enjoys a rich tradition as an ancient symbol. To native north Americans, the hawk is often depicted as the guardian and protector of the earth. It is believed to protect people from evil spirits of the air and is closely associated with forces such as rain, wind, thunder and lightning. In ancient Egypt, the hawk was considered a royal bird and a symbol of the soul.

The poem's title captures the hawk 'roosting'- resting, in a calm state and reflective mood. The main focus of the poem is on the hawk and what it says about itself. The poem contains over 20 repetitions of personal pronouns in the form of the words 'I', 'my', 'me' and 'mine', representing a deeply Narcissistic focus on the cult of the individual where animals are pitted against each other in a desperate fight for survival of their own individuality. In this world, only the strongest are in control. Yet, this may be overly simplistic. Hughes endeavours to capture the 'hawkness' of this animal. He achieves this by delicately combining phrases that uniquely describe the physicality of the hawk ('hooked head and hooked feet', 'My feet are locked upon the rough bark', 'For the one path of my flight is direct') with its mental process, that focuses only on its natural function as a raptor in a typically blunt, matter of fact manner ('I kill where I please', 'My manners are tearing off heads' and 'The allotment of death'). Most readers recoil with horror at these phrases and their sheer sense of brutality, particularly measured against their own moral barometer. However, Hughes's point is that animals, such as the hawk, don't have that same moral barometer: their inherent nature is to kill and allot death by tearing heads off. This is how these animals survive. By imposing human morality on the hawk, we lose sight of its essence. The hawk is the aerial version of 'Pike' with its 'submarine delicacy and horror', 'A life subdued to its instrument' and 'indeed they spare nobody'.

Hughes describes both the pike and hawk as 'obedient, law-abiding [...] the law in creaturely form. If the hawk and pike kill, they kill within the law and their killing is a sacrament in this sense. It is not an act of violence but of law'.<sup>291</sup> In 1965, he wrote that he didn't see the poem 'as having anything to do with random, or civil or even elemental violence [...] I think my poem is about Peace'.<sup>292</sup> No doubt, these insightful yet provocative comments reflect Hughes's desire to distinguish the world of the hawk from the world of humans and to demonstrate that animals operate within their own legal system in which killing is the acceptable *modus operandi* required for survival. There

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<sup>291</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 262-3.

<sup>292</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 244.

is clearly a tension between Hughes's comments about the poem and the language of the poem itself. What are we to make of this? On the one hand, Hughes asserts that these predators 'kill within the law' and that this is the law of Isis, Nature namely 'that which is' and this governs animal behaviour. However, on the other hand, to suggest that this killing is a 'sacrament' and that the poem 'is about Peace' is potentially offensive and insensitive given that the poem was written at the time of the emergence of the civil rights movement in America, an historical context Hughes is apparently content to ignore. Hughes invites us to enter the mind of the hawk and listen to its brutal soliloquy yet refrain from drawing the conclusion that the hawk's killing is not a 'sacrament' and the poem is inherently not about 'Peace'. However, there is a degree of ambiguity and uncertainty in Hughes's position on this poem. He says 'It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple'. Arguably, this is an acknowledgement of the complexity in Nature (and humans) but that is as far as Hughes is prepared to go on the issue.

Hughes creates a wonderful dialectic with his powerful contrasts between the direct action of the hawk including its physicality and the indirect passive qualities of humans including their tendency to intellectualise. This dialectic is reflected in the title of the poem: 'Hawk Roosting'. The hawk has no attributes usually associated with human intelligence: 'sophistry' and 'arguments'. There is no artifice to the hawk, no 'falsifying dream' or rehearsal. It retains its single mindedness that is required to ensure its survival. The hawk is in total command of its natural environment and naturally exploits it for his own purposes. Hughes suggests that while it 'took the whole of Creation' to 'produce' the hawk's foot and feathers, the hawk is now in control and holds 'Creation' in its foot. This dialectical metaphor of Creation as the source and nurturer of the life of the hawk that ultimately now allots death is a dominant theme in Hughes's *oeuvre*.

In the final stanza, Hughes explores the complexity between immutability and the inherent transience in all living things, including the hawk. The hawk has an intense self belief in its own indestructibility. It wants 'to keep things like this' where its 'eye has permitted no change' and 'Nothing has changed since I began'. The hawk appears, at least on one level, to have the power to arrest change and yet the hawk's strong sense of immutability is eclipsed by the first line of the last stanza with its elegantly simple words: 'The sun is behind me'. The sun is an ancient symbol. 'For the Greeks, to be alive was to see the sun. When a child was born he was brought "into the light, and he saw the sun's rays," according to Homer, while during one's life one sees the light and when one dies one 'must leave the light of the sun'".<sup>293</sup> In 'Extempore Effusion', Wordsworth writes that many friends have passed 'from sunshine to the sunless land'. Sophocles said that 'everyone worships the turning wheel of the sun'. The sun measures time, the eternal unit of change. In this stanza, the

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<sup>293</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 209.

hawk's fate is revealed: the hawk mistakenly believes 'Nothing has changed since I began' but things have indeed changed although the hawk doesn't recognise it. The hawk is as ephemeral and destined to die as all other living creatures. Even the hawk is not spared from the ineluctability of change, and thereby its own demise.

'Hawk Roosting' is a fine example of Hughes's endeavours to lift the veil of Isis by bridging the gap between the reader as an observer of, and displaced from, Nature and the quest to penetrate Nature's most inner secrets via the mind of the hawk. In this poem, the hawk is the embodiment of natural law that allots death. The hawk is a perfect killing machine whose 'manners are tearing off heads'. The odour of death pervades this poem and Hughes cleverly exposes the hawk's own mutability by the subtle references to the sun. Even the hawk's life will come to an end. The undercurrent in this poem is Hughes's exploration of elemental forces in opposition: temporary versus permanence, immutability versus change, life versus death, Creation (the source of life) versus destruction (and death) and the direct, physical actions of the hawk versus the passive inactivity of humans.

'Hawk Roosting' was written in 1960 at the beginning of Hughes's career. In 1998 - almost 40 years later - Hughes revisits the figure of Isis (*Birthday Letters*) directly in a poem by that name.

### Isis

The morning we set out to drive around America  
She started with us. She was our lightest  
Bit of luggage. And you had dealt with Death.  
You had come to an agreement finally;  
He could keep your Daddy and you could have a child.

Macabre debate. Yet it had cost you  
Two years, three years, desperate days and weepings.  
Finally you had stripped the death-dress off,  
Burned it on Daddy's grave.  
Did it so resolutely, made  
Such successful magic of it. Life  
Was attracted and swerved down –  
Unlikely, like a wild dove, to land on your head.  
Day of America's Independence  
You set out. And I, not Death,  
Drove the car.

Was Death, too, part of our luggage?

Unemployed for a while, fellow traveller?

Did he ride on the car top, on the bonnet?

Did he meet us now and again on the road,

Smiling in a cafe, at a gas station?

Stowaway in our ice-box?

Did he run in the wheel's shadow?

Or did he sulk in your papers, back in your bedroom,

Waiting for your habits

To come back and remember him? You had hidden him

From yourself and even deceived Life.

But your blossom had fruited and in England

It ripened. There your midwife,

The orchardist, was a miniature Indian lady

Black and archaic, half-Gond,

With her singing manner and her lucky charm voice,

A priestess of fruits.

Our Back Isis had stepped off the wall

Shaking her sistrum –

Polymorphus Daemon,

Magnae Deorum Matris – with the moon

Between her hip-bones and crowned with ears of corn.

The great goddess in person

Had put on your body, waxing full,

Using your strainings

Like a surgical glove, to create with,

Like a soft mask to triumph and be grotesque in

On the bed of birth.

It was not Death

Weeping in you then, when you lay among bloody cloths

Holding what had out of you to cry.

It was not poetic death

Lifted you from the blood and set you

Straightaway lurching – exultant –

To the phone, to announce to the world  
What Life had made of you,  
Your whole body borrowed  
By immortality and its promise,  
Your arms filled  
With what had never died, never known Death.

There is a striking resemblance in Hughes's poem to Emily Dickinson's poem '479 (712)' in which she opens with the following stanza:

Because I could not stop for Death -  
He kindly stopped for me -  
The Carriage held but just Ourselves -  
And Immortality.

In his introduction to a selection of poems of Dickinson in 1968, Hughes wrote that Dickinson's:

poems record not only her ecstatic devotion, but her sharp, sceptical independence, her doubt, and what repeatedly opens under her ecstasy – her despair [...] Death obsessed her, as the one act that that could take her the one necessary step beyond her vision. Death would carry her and her sagacity clean through the riddle. She deferred all her questions to death's solution. And so these three – whatever it was that lay beyond her frightening vision, and the crowded, beloved creation around her, and Death – became her Holy Trinity'.<sup>294</sup>

'Isis' is an intriguing poem that describes the birth of Hughes's and Plath's daughter, in the context of a struggle between the forces of 'Life' and 'Death' in which Isis intercedes to assist with the birth. In a sense, the poem represents the point made so cogently by the character Pozzo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*:

One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second [...] They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.<sup>295</sup>

In the opening lines of the first stanza of the poem, Hughes introduces a mysterious female figure, which although unidentified, is of course Isis. The first part of the poem is set in north America as

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<sup>294</sup> *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse selected by Ted Hughes*, Faber and Faber, London, 1968, pp. xv and xvi.

<sup>295</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts*, Faber and Faber, London, 1956, p. 89

Hughes and Plath drive around that country. However, in the third line of the first stanza, the mood darkens as Hughes presages the figure of 'Death'. Hughes says that Plath had dealt with 'Death' by making a pact in which Death could keep Plath's father in exchange for allowing Plath to have her own child: a life for a life. Plath's father had died when Plath was only eight years old. The reference to 'Daddy' is to Plath's poem of the same name, which is a powerful and bitter indictment of her father as symbolic of the dominant male, authoritarian figure she parodies and calls 'Panzer-man'. In her own poem called 'Daddy', Plath says that she had come to terms with her father's death by supplanting him with another man (Hughes) with similar qualities as her father:

And then I knew what to do.  
I made a model of you,  
A man in black with a Meinkampf look<sup>296</sup>

In the second stanza of 'Isis', Hughes describes Plath's obsession with 'Death' as a 'Macabre debate' which had taken a huge emotional toll on Plath over the years with 'desperate days and weepings'. Plath had attempted suicide by overdose before she met Hughes. Hughes says Plath finally overcame her father's death by stripping off 'the death-dress' and burning it on her father's grave. By acting 'resolutely', Plath made 'successful magic of it' so much so that 'Life' (the other key protagonist in this poem) was 'attracted and swerved down [...] like a wild dove' to land on Plath's head. The image of the dove is a delightful counterpoint to the hawk. Traditionally, doves are 'symbols not only of love but of the kindred virtues of gentleness, innocence, timidity, and peace'.<sup>297</sup> All four Gospels in the Bible describe the spirit of God descending like a dove on Jesus at his baptism. Sagar says that:

The dove became sacred to the great goddesses Ishtar, Venus and Isis. The softness, warmth and milkiness of the dove's breast and its caressing call suggest all that is feminine, loving, maternal, protective. This aspect allowed its sacredness to be carried over into Judaic and Christian symbolism, where the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit.<sup>298</sup>

Having reached this point, made a deal with 'Death' and overcome the burden of her father's memory, Plath started anew and set out on the 'Day of America's Independence' with Hughes (and not 'Death') at the wheel of the car. For both Hughes and Plath, this signifies a new dawn, a new beginning.

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<sup>296</sup> *Sylvia Plath Poems chosen by Carol Ann Duffy*, Faber and Faber, London 2012, p. 105.

<sup>297</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 62.

<sup>298</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation*, p. 203.



However, this is undermined immediately by the next few lines in which Hughes displays his angst and wonders whether 'Death' was 'part of' their 'luggage', travelling with Isis in her guise as a figure of destruction. Hughes sees the shadow of 'Death' everywhere. It is a 'fellow traveller', riding on the 'car top, on the bonnet', 'at a gas station', stowed away in their 'ice-box', back in Plath's bedroom 'Waiting' for her 'habits' that will 'come back and remember him'. In these lines, 'Death' is omnipresent and Hughes is fearful that 'Death' will seek Plath out. He says that Plath had managed to hide 'Death' from herself and in so doing 'deceived even Life'. Hughes's juxtaposition of Life and Death as forces in opposition yet still conjoined was the subject of his comments on engravings by the American artist and sculptor, Leonard Baskin, in 1962. Hughes said:

So these engravings, in their endless variety, are the self-portraits of the Angel of Life in its wholeness: men, beasts, birds, insects, plants and supernatural beings, each in the terrible immobility of being forced and fated to move at once in two opposite directions, for the Angel of Life is also, in spite of itself, the Angel of Death [...] These are emissaries from the sole source.<sup>299</sup>

At this point, the geographical setting of the poem moves from America to England where Hughes says Plath's 'blossom had fruited' and 'ripened'. Plath had become pregnant and the midwife who attended on Plath to deliver her baby was a small Indian lady described as 'half-Gond' with a 'singing manner', a 'lucky charm voice' and 'A priestess of fruits'. In an earlier poem from *Birthday Letters* called 'Remission', Hughes refers to 'Your Indian midwife' who for Plath 'was a deity from the Ganges/Black with alluvial wisdom'. This midwife stroked Plath's hair, made Plath 'weep with relief'. In 'Isis', Hughes says the midwife was their Black Isis (the Black Virgin) who 'had stepped off the wall'. This is an express reference to the picture of Isis which Hughes and Plath kept on the wall of their study in their flat in London. This picture of Isis by Athanasius Kirchner from 'Oedipus Aegyptiacus' was published in about 1652 and depicts Isis in her role as mother and creator. She holds a pail in her left hand symbolising the flooding of the Nile and a sistrum in her right hand. The sistrum is a percussive musical instrument which has a handle and a U-shaped metal frame with thin loops of metal on its crossbars. When shaken vigorously, the sistrum can make a loud jangling sound and is used by Isis to frighten away Seth, her cruel brother responsible for Osiris's death. This particular image of Isis was also used by Hughes in his second book (*Poems*) for the Rainbow Press Publication. In this image, Isis is 'crowned with ears of corn' because she represents fecundity and is considered responsible for discovering corn.

There are Latin inscriptions on both the left and right sides of the Isis figure, some of which are repeated by Hughes *ad verbatim* in the poem:

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<sup>299</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 166.

Polymorphus Daemon  
Magna Deorum Matris

A 'Polymorphus daemon' is a spirit of many forms and 'Magna Deorum Matris' means 'Great Mother of the gods. The reference to a spirit of many forms is entirely apposite because in the next three stanzas, Hughes says that Isis 'Had put on' Plath's 'body, waxing full'. In essence, Isis becomes Plath in the process of the creative act of the birth. There is a delicate paradox in the line that depicts birth as both a 'triumph' and yet 'grotesque'. In the last two stanzas of the poem, Hughes exalts the power of Isis. Hughes describes Plath in the moments shortly after birth, when she feels a mixture of relief and ecstasy at the creation of a new life. Plath goes 'Straightaway lurching - exultant' to the telephone 'to announce to the world' the birth of their daughter and 'What Life had made of you'. The presence of Isis at this moment is almost overpowering.

Hughes identifies Plath with Isis, the Goddess who creates and nurtures, who ushers in new life with the promise of immortality. The new life is the figure of Plath and Hughes's daughter that fills Plath's arms shortly after the birth and who 'had never died, never known Death'. In the moment of creating life and giving birth, Plath's 'whole body' is 'borrowed' by Isis, the nurturer and creator, who promises Plath 'immortality'. In these lines, the powerful sense of immortality is undone by the words 'borrowed' which suggests a temporary arrangement and 'promise', that something that may happen. However, lurking throughout this poem is the image of death and it dominates the last line of the poem: 'With what had never died, never known Death' even though the language is clearly intended to hold death at bay ('never died', 'never known death').

In 'Hawk Roosting', Hughes takes the reader into the mind of the hawk to understand what 'Nature is thinking. Simply Nature'. Hughes suggests that this process of unveiling is important because, if we approach an understanding of the phenomenal world of Nature, we are more likely to understand our own human nature. It is the poet's endeavour to lift the veil of Isis so he and the reader who embarks on the same journey can explore 'the mystic bond that unified humanity with nature'. However, Hughes cautions that 'It's not so simple maybe because perhaps Nature is no longer so simple'. In 'Hawk Roosting', the reader is made aware that the self-deluded hawk (who genuinely believes it can prevent change) will face its own death which is as inevitable as its instincts are of 'tearing off heads'. Ironically, it is Nature - in the form of Isis - that is ultimately responsible for the 'allotment of death'.

In 'Isis', the Great Mother of the Gods (the *Polymorphus Daemon*) becomes Plath and reflects 'What Life had made of' her including its promise of 'immortality'. Much like the hawk - whose self deluded sense of immutability is undone by the movement of the sun and the ineluctable

change in Nature (Isis) - the reader knows that Plath is not immortal even though Isis may have 'borrowed' her 'whole body'. It is only a 'promise', in any event and the borrowing is a temporary event. In 'Isis', while life and death are presented as opposing forces in conflict, they necessarily co-exist as they are 'are emissaries from the sole source'. Both these poems reflect deeply on what Faas calls

creation's unalterable duality of life and destruction, which Artaud<sup>300</sup> summed up in the word "cruauté" in the sense of "life-appetite, cosmic rigor and implacable necessity". "For it is understood," as the Frenchman wrote, "that life always means death to someone else"<sup>301</sup>.

In these two poems, Hughes explores the forces in opposition and conflict both in Nature and in humans to seek what Schopenhauer found in Beethoven's music, namely 'a true and complete picture of the nature of the world, which rolls on in the boundless confusion of innumerable forms, and maintains itself by constant destruction'.<sup>302</sup>

In addition to their interest in the mythical figure of Isis, Beethoven and Hughes were drawn in different ways to the myth of Prometheus. Prometheus was a Titan and the Titans, according to Greek mythology, were powerful deities - descendants of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven) - who ruled during the legendary Golden Age. They were immortal beings with incredible strength and stamina. According to traditional mythology, Prometheus is known for his intelligence and as a champion of human values. He created man out of clay and then - in a rebellious act against Zeus - stole fire from the gods for use by humans. This act enabled humans to progress and become civilised. Sagar says that Prometheus 'became the champion of mankind against the injustice of Zeus, stealing fire from heaven that men might warm themselves and cook their meat and forge metal'.<sup>303</sup> In other words, Prometheus provided the means by which mankind could make progress, a point made by the Classical writer Aeschylus in *Prometheus Bound* when he says that:

And fire has proved  
for men a teacher in every art, their grand resource.<sup>304</sup>

However, Zeus punished Prometheus for his act of treachery in stealing fire from the Gods and the Titan was tied to a rock so that a vulture could gorge itself daily upon his liver, which regenerated

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<sup>300</sup> Antoine Marie Joseph Artaud, better known as Antonin Artaud (1896 - 1948) was a French playwright, poet, actor, theatre director and a proponent of the 'Theatre of Cruelty'.

<sup>301</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 31.

<sup>302</sup> Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* (The World as Will and Representation, Chapter XXXIX.

<sup>303</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 146.

<sup>304</sup> As cited in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 146.

during the night due to his immortality. Zeus also punished mankind by providing the gift of the first woman, Pandora who was beautiful but brought with her all the 'evils which have ever since beset mankind'<sup>305</sup> as well as hope. Aeschylus says that:

I caused men no longer to foresee their death.  
I planted firmly in their hearts, blind hopefulness.

Hughes and Beethoven adapted the myth of Prometheus in different ways to suit their own artistic purposes. In 1971, in a co-production with the theatrical director, Peter Brook, Hughes wrote a play called *Orghast* which contained a mythical, primal language which Hughes had invented. The theatrical production took place at the International Centre for Theatre Research in Iran (then Persia) at the Fifth Shiraz festival. At the centre of *Orghast* is the story of Prometheus. At the time that Hughes wrote *Orghast*, he penned 21 poems about Prometheus which are collected in *Prometheus on His Crag*. These poetic vignettes bear a striking parallel to Beethoven's musical composition for the ballet called *Die Geschöpfe des Prometheus (The Creatures of Prometheus)*, written one hundred and seventy years earlier in collaboration with the librettist and dance master, Salvatore Viganò. The music for *The Creatures of Prometheus* was Beethoven's first major stage work and enjoyed early success with more than 20 performances in Vienna between 1801 and 1802. This was the only complete ballet that Beethoven composed. This creative piece was intended to be experimental and Kinderman says that:

The version of the Prometheus myth that Beethoven and Viganò tackle reinterprets the ancient tale of the defiant champion of humanity in a manner compatible with the spirit of Enlightenment. Prometheus enabled humankind through his gifts of knowledge and art fashioned from fire that he stole from the gods. In all versions of the myth, Prometheus is severely punished in reprisal for his actions on behalf of humanity.<sup>306</sup>

It is the archetypal, stoical rebellious nature of Prometheus that resonated so deeply with Beethoven and Hughes. After years of suffering, Prometheus is eventually freed by Hercules but, the key is that, throughout his suffering, Prometheus refuses to yield. In this regard, the Prometheus myth stands for spiritual freedom in the face of physical and material bondage. 'In the world of myth, there is perhaps no more telling symbol of resistance to the arbitrary exercise of authority'.<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 147.

<sup>306</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, pp. 95-96.

<sup>307</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 96.

In *The Creatures of Prometheus*, Beethoven modified the original myth in two significant respects. First, Prometheus is put to death rather than endure intense suffering although he is restored to life again. Secondly, two creatures are introduced called *Urmenschen*, representing a man and a woman. In this ballet, the original Greek myth (which is supposed to predate the creation of women) is revised to embrace all humanity as potential beneficiaries of the sacrifice Prometheus has made. According to Kinderman:

Prometheus's long trials and agonies are replaced here by a progression of death and rebirth, since Prometheus is subsequently restored to life. The ballet concludes with the apotheosis of Prometheus as he is celebrated by his two creatures who are at last beginning to display a true understanding of the significance of his heroic deed.<sup>308</sup>

In his adaptation of the Prometheus myth, Beethoven is concerned not only with the notion of the hero's journey, depicted in the 'progression of death and rebirth' in his main protagonist but also in the journey towards enlightenment experienced by the two secondary characters in the ballet: the man and the woman.

At the time he wrote *Prometheus On His Crag* (one hundred and seventy years after Beethoven's ballet), Hughes was enduring a period of artistic sterility. He had been working for some time on his *Crow* poems and had reached a deep emotional nadir following the tragic deaths by suicide of his partner Assia Wevill and their daughter Shura in 1969. Further, Hughes still had to deal with the premature death also by suicide of his creative partner, wife and soul mate, Sylvia Plath, in 1963. In a letter to Keith Sagar in November 1973, Hughes said that, since his last poem *Horrible Religious Error* on 20 March 1969, he had 'written virtually nothing. The Prometheus sequence is an expression of limbo - limbo in Persia, but limbo. A numb poem about numbness.'<sup>309</sup> In stark contrast to this statement of Hughes, Sagar argues that the poems 'are much more than that. It is the culmination of 'the search for liberation through knowledge' which has constituted Hughes' main creative effort for so long.'<sup>310</sup> The notion of a 'search for liberation through knowledge' bears a strong correlation to the artistic theme that lies at the core of Beethoven's *The Creatures of Prometheus*.

The Prometheus myth has been a subject of exploration by a number of other writers particularly the English (and German) Romantic writers, most notably, Shelley, who in 1820 published *Prometheus Unbound*, a four act lyrical drama. Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* was

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<sup>308</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 96.

<sup>309</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 340.

<sup>310</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 147.

inspired by *Prometheia*, a trilogy of plays by Aeschylus, although Shelley's play focuses on Prometheus's release from captivity and - unlike the version by Aeschylus - there is no reconciliation between Prometheus and Zeus. In Shelley's drama, Zeus is overthrown and Prometheus is freed. Lord Byron wrote a poem called 'Prometheus' and Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* was subtitled 'The Modern Prometheus'. Goethe wrote a *sturm and drang* poem also entitled 'Prometheus'.

The title of Hughes's collection of poems is interesting. Hughes's Prometheus sits on his own crag. The word 'crag' is a Middle English word but originally Celtic from the Welsh word *creik*, meaning rock. In this way, Hughes's poems combine the elements from both the classical period and Hughes's own Celtic ancestry. The poems in *Prometheus On His Crag* are short, pithy vignettes that range in length from 11 - 36 lines and are dominated by stanzas containing triplet lines. Sagar argues that many of the poems are:

internal monologues of Prometheus as he contemplates his own situation, the god who has condemned him to it, the vulture, and such fellow sufferers as Io [...] They are poems stripped of everything but their meanings, expressed in a few stark images. They are the forged links of a chain, as hard as blue steel. The world is shrunk to the size of an icon, a water-bead, a grain of sand, an atom. Language is an instrument for probing relentlessly towards the centre.<sup>311</sup>

In this sequence of poems, Hughes invites the reader into the mind of a Prometheus as he contemplates his own suffering. The poems are infused with a deep existentialism. For example, the opening lines of poem 1 begin with the words 'His voice felt out of the way.' Prometheus says 'Something is strange – something is altered.' Hughes ends the poem with a question: 'Am I an eagle?' It appears that this Titan is totally unaware of his own essence, nature and purpose. Arguably, the poems represent different stages in the development of the character of Prometheus. It is important, as part of this development, that Prometheus continually question his circumstances and thus pose a plethora of questions, to which there are no obvious answers. There is also a deep sense of fatalism in some of the poems. In poem 2, Hughes says that Prometheus:

Relaxes  
In the fact that it has happened.

Prometheus is wedged into his crag and he accepts this as his fate and even exults:

In the broadening vastness, the reddening dawn

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<sup>311</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 147.

Of the fact

that cannot be otherwise  
and could not have been otherwise,

and never can be otherwise.

The last three lines of this poem embrace all possible events relating to the past, present and future. The repetition of the word 'otherwise' closes out any other possibility for Prometheus. By accepting his fate and relaxing, he is able to feel his own titanic strength.

The poems take the form of a soliloquy by Prometheus and, while the Titan's narrative unfurls, his voice is given its own interesting dimension. At the beginning of the sequence of poems, Prometheus's voice emerges as 'a world's end shout', the effect of which is immensely destructive:

Then the swallow folded its barbs and fell,  
The dove's bubble of fluorescence burst,

Nightingale and cuckoo  
Plunged into padded forests where the woodpecker  
Eyes bleached insane

Howled laughter into dead holes.

The voice of Prometheus shatters 'A world of holy, happy notions' and, while it brings Prometheus peace, it has the ominous effect of awakening the vulture, Prometheus's tormentor. In poem 4, the sense of fatalism grows as Prometheus realises when he sees the vulture 'coming out of the sun' that 'There was nothing for him to do' other than to lie passively on his crag as the vulture 'splayed him from breastbone to crotch' and 'peruse its feathers'. The Titan sees his fate written in the form of a mantra in headline letters that are 'Black, bold and plain' and say the same thing:

'Today is a fresh start  
Torn up by its roots  
As I tear the liver from your body.'

Poems 5 and 6 are filled with dark and ghoulish images as Prometheus loses his lucidity and begins to hallucinate: 'Dreamed he had burst the sun's mass', 'the exploded heavens peeled away/Into a

mess of glare', 'a cow swallows its afterbirth', 'Mountains gargoyle the earth/And the sea retches bile'. Sagar says that in poem 6:

Instead of a clearly articulated vision of the future, dead thoughts issue in senseless chatter, a heap of broken images, ancient proverbs mixed with fortune-telling and a dabbling in the occult, in a fragmented wasteland vision.<sup>312</sup>

In poem 7, the suffering continues and Prometheus occupies a twilight zone:

Arrested half-way from heaven  
And slung between heaven and earth

In this twilight zone, the chains that bind Prometheus are the roots 'Reaching from frozen earth' that search 'into his flesh' and interrogate 'his bones'. Although Prometheus flowers under the power of the sun, his flowers are a 'numb bliss, a forlorn freedom'. The Titan's agony is depicted in the 'Groanings of the sun, sighs of the earth'. While Prometheus 'begins to recover his lucidity'<sup>313</sup> in poem 8, he continues with his persistent questioning. While he knows that he cannot walk or crawl, he asks:

Was he newborn was he wounded fatal  
An invalid newborn healing  
Bone fractures alert alarmed death numbness

Was this stone his grave this cradle  
Nothingness nothingness over him over him  
Whose mouth and eyes?

He also wonders if his mother is 'another Prisoner' or 'a jailor?' These deep and unfathomable mysteries persevere in poem 9 where Prometheus asks:

What secret stays  
Stilled under my stillness?  
Not even I know.

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<sup>312</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p.149.

<sup>313</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p.149.



In this poem, the Titan realises that the vulture ('that bird', 'that Filthy-gleeful emissary') holds the key to his fate ('Only he knows'). In this sense, there is a deep connection between the vulture and Prometheus, the tormentor and the tormented. As a result of this cathartic realisation, Prometheus begins to admire the vulture in poem 10 because:

It knew what it was doing

It went on doing it

Swallowing not only his liver  
but managing also to digest its guilt

And hang itself again just under the sun  
Like a heavenly weighing scales  
Balancing the gift of life

And the cost of the gift  
Without a tremor  
As if both were nothing.

Unlike Prometheus – who is weighed down by guilt, pain, suffering and endless internal questioning and doubts – the vulture achieves a perfect balance and goes about its business of eating the Titan's liver without any guilt or doubt. Both the 'gift of life' and the 'cost of the gift' (pain, suffering and death) and held in perfect balance by the vulture 'Without a tremor' and as if 'both were nothing'.

Poem 11 is a turning point for Prometheus as he emerges from a dream state (where the sea and the sky fight like 'two cosmic pythons' and the spike through his chest 'Was a swallowtail butterfly') into a world where things are what they are and are reduced to their bare essentials:

But now he woke to a world where the sun was the sun,  
Iron iron,  
    sea sea,  
        sky sky,  
            The vulture the vulture.

This is a crucial moment for the Titan, a pivotal epiphany in his life of pain and suffering. He begins to understand the true nature of things and sees them for what they are, in their primitive,

unvarnished state. This moment of truth - in which Prometheus achieves self realisation - allows him to sing:

A little before dawn  
A song to his wounds.

The result of his singing is that:

The sun signalled him red through his closed eyelids  
The vulture rustled  
And the smoulder of man rose from the cities.

As Prometheus continues singing, it produces an incredible result which is:

A pure  
Unfaltering morphine  
  
Drugging the whole earth with bliss.

In poem 13, Prometheus hears 'the cry of the wombs', the children and inheritors of the earth which the Titan had invented and in them hidden the 'holy fire' he had stolen from the gods. It 'seemed' to Prometheus that the wombs were 'drummed like furnaces', that 'men were being fed into the wombs' and 'babies were being dragged crying pitifully/Out of the wombs'. To the Titan, the vulture seems to be 'the revenge of the wombs', that 'his chains would last' and 'the vulture would awake him/As long as there were wombs'. From his vantage point on the crag, Prometheus sees the wind as the source that whips 'all things':

And men and women are whipped  
By invisible tongues  
They claw and tear and labour forward  
  
Or cower cornered under the whipping

Men and women are totally subjugated:

They lift their faces and look all around

For their master and tormentor

The torment is so unbearable, the people are 'beyond pain or fear'. In Poem 15, Prometheus appears to reach a state of enlightenment. In this poem, Prometheus has 'such an advantageous prospect' and can see, even as he sleeps, 'The aeons revolving'. He is able to see the essential nucleus of the finest, smallest particle:

He could see, centre of every aeon,  
Like the grit in its pearl,  
Himself sealed on his rock.

Even though there is a 'dark nothing' between these aeons, Prometheus can see himself wading and escaping through this 'dark nothing' and 'prophesying Freedom'. However, this freedom is illusory as it is only a dream: 'It was his soul's sleep walking and he dreamed it'. Prometheus is dragged back to reality (and his own immense, ongoing suffering) and he is woken up by the vulture:

In a new aeon  
To the old chains  
And the old agony.

Poem 16 captures the essence of the Promethean myth. The Titan realises he has to suffer 'out his sentence' because he has robbed earth of clay and heaven of fire'. This is a moment of intense self realisation. He is forced to pay 'A daily premium' by yielding 'his own entrails'. However, this suffering redeems Prometheus for having stolen fire from the gods. It also spares the humans any punishment by the gods: 'Now they owe nothing'. There is a sense of dislocation about poems 17 and 18 in the context of *Prometheus On His Crag*. Both of these poems (as well as poems 7, 9 and the first and last poems) do not begin with the phrase that prefaces all the other poems in this collection: 'Prometheus On His Crag'. Poem 17 is the shortest poem in the collection. It is merely 8 lines in length with 3 double line stanzas bookended by 2 single lines. In this poem, there is no God, no chains and no vulture. There is 'only a flame', which is both 'A word' and 'A bitten-out gobbet of sun'. This flame is buried behind Prometheus's navel and is 'The vital, immortal wound, comprising 'One nuclear syllable, bleeding silence'. Poem 18 is a meditation on an important 'character neglected in this icon'. While an icon contains religious connotations, this poem suggests that:

The figure overlooked in this fable

Is the tiny trickle of lizard

The lizard lies close to the ear of Prometheus and whispers to him that he is 'Lucky [...] so lucky to be human'. The lizard 'represents [...] the greatest ancestor of all living species [...] As a result, it was feared and worshipped [...] The Egyptians even regarded it as a benevolent spirit'<sup>314</sup> while the Romans believed that the lizard symbolises death and resurrection as it sleeps throughout the winter and emerges in the spring. Poem 19 reflects on the inadequacy and limitations of language. In this poem, Prometheus shouts out and his words:

Go off in every direction  
Like birds  
...  
For words on the birds of everything-  
So soon  
Everything is on the wing and gone

There is a hint of optimism when Hughes suggests that 'speech' (the human act of communication) 'starts hopefully to hold/Pieces of the wordy earth together'. However, any potential optimism is shattered when the 'wordy earth' is engulfed by a cold silence like space and:

Emptied by words  
Scattered and gone.

Poem 20 represents the pinnacle of the existentialism that grips Prometheus. This poem is suffused with questions and doubts. Prometheus asks whether the vulture is his 'unborn-self' or some 'hyena afterbirth' or even 'some lump of his mother' He asks whether the vulture is 'his prophetic familiar' or 'the fire he had stolen'. There is a deep sense of anxiety redolent throughout this poem. Prometheus asks whether the vulture was his 'anti-self':

The him-shaped vacuum  
In unbeing, pulling to empty him?  
  
Or was it, after all, the Helper  
Coming again to pick at the crucial knot  
of all his bonds...?

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<sup>314</sup> Didier Colin, *Dictionary of Symbols, Myths & Legends*, Hachette, London, 2000, pp. 318-9.

Sagar turns to Joseph Campbell to unravel the reference to the 'crucial knot'. Campbell says that:

In every system of theology there is an umbilical point [...] where the possibility of perfect knowledge has been impaired. The problem of the hero is to pierce himself [...] precisely through that point; to shatter and annihilate that key knowledge of his limited existence.<sup>315</sup>

The images in the final poem (21) are powerful, vivid and visceral. The mountain (as symbol of the earth) is the mother of Prometheus: 'The Mountain splits its sweetness/The blue fig splits its magna' and 'The mountain is flowering/A gleaming man'. In the last four lines of this poem, there is a sense of release, of freedom and possible reconciliation:

And Prometheus eases free.  
He sways to his stature.  
And balances. And treads

On the dusty peacock film where the world floats.

Sagar says that 'The transfigured world is beautifully evoked in the last line with its delicate evanescence and weightless splendour.'<sup>316</sup> However, there are strong undercurrents of dislocation and disharmony in this collection of poems. Sagar says that:

There is no sense, in Prometheus On His Crag, of any system being worked out. The poems are the stages of the psychic journey subjectively experienced, objectified as myth. The ending, however, is abrupt and elusive [...] we have had no more than hints [...] of the possibility of rebirth.<sup>317</sup>

There can be no doubt that, in these poems, Hughes is experimenting and this is reflected in the overwhelming sense of incompleteness that emerges from the poems. Hughes wrote these poems at the time he was working on *Orghast*, in collaboration with Peter Brook. These poems serve as a preview for *Orghast* and as a medium in which Hughes could develop his ideas to greater fruition in the theatrical production. Hughes summarises the first part of *Orghast* as:

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<sup>315</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, London, 1993, p. 147.

<sup>316</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 155.

<sup>317</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 155.

the story of the crime against material nature, the Creatress, source of life and light, by the Violater, the mental tyrant Holdfast, and her revenge. The first plan of her revenge is on the animal level, and it fails, because on the animal level the situation is unalterable, or rather inevitably reproduces itself; the second plan is on the truly human level, and it succeeds, transcending the conflict by creating a being which, like Prometheus (this is the story of how he survives), includes the elemental opposites, and in whom the collision and pain become the illumination, because it is the true account.<sup>318</sup>

In essence, the poems in *Prometheus On His Crag* served as a blueprint for the material that Hughes was developing in *Orghast*. As such, they do have their limitations, a point acknowledged by Hughes when he describes them as 'A numb poem about numbness'. For Hughes, the story of *Orghast* is the same as the story of Prometheus: it is about the archetypal hero surviving against great odds and continually striving to challenge and overcome "the elemental opposites".

Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus* are made up of 18 short musical vignettes divided into two acts as follows<sup>319</sup>:

1. Overture: Adagio – Allegro molto con brio.
2. Introduction 'La Tempesta': Allegro non troppo.

#### Act I

3. Poco adagio.
4. Adagio – allegro con brio.
5. Allegro vivace.

#### ACT II

6. Maestoso – Andante .
7. Adagio – Andante quasi allegretto.
8. Un poco Adagio – Allegro.
9. Grave.
10. Allegro con brio – Presto.
11. Adagio – Allegro molto.
12. Pastorale: Allegro.
13. Andante.
14. Solo di Giola: Maestoso – Allegro.
15. Allegro – Comodo.
16. Solo della Casentini: Andante – Andante – Allegro.
17. Solo di Viganò: Anadantino – Adagio – Allegro.

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<sup>318</sup> A. C. H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis*, The Viking Press, New York, 1972, p. 132-3.

<sup>319</sup> This is taken from the sleeve notes of the Helios CD of Beethoven *The Creatures of Prometheus* by the Scottish Chamber Orchestra as conducted by Sir Charles Mackerras, Hyperion Records Limited, London, 2005.

18. Finale: Allegretto – Allegro molto.

Unfortunately, no copy of the original programme for *The Creatures of Prometheus* has survived so the specific action intended for each musical item Beethoven composed cannot be determined with any certainty. 'A handbill for the first performance in the Burgtheater in Vienna on 28 March 1801 provides the following synopsis:

The allegorical ballet is based on the myth of Prometheus. The Greek philosophers who knew him tell the story in the following manner: they depict Prometheus as a lofty spirit who, finding the human beings of his time in a state of ignorance, refined them through art and knowledge and gave them laws of right conduct. In accordance with this source, the ballet presents two animate statues who, by the power of harmony, are made susceptible to all the passions of human existence. Prometheus takes them to Parnassus to receive instruction from Apollo, god of the arts, who commands Amphion, Arion and Orpheus to teach them music, Melpomene and Thalia tragedy and comedy. Terpsichore aids Pan who introduced them to the Pastoral Dance which he has invented, and from Bacchus they learn his invention – the Heroic Dance.<sup>320</sup>

While the ballet was apparently well received by the audience, not everyone was impressed by the music. 'A critic writing in the Viennese magazine *Zeitung für die elegante Welt* on 19 May 1801 commented:

The music did not completely come up to expectation, notwithstanding some uncommon virtues. Whether Herr van Beethoven can achieve what audiences such as those here demand with so uniform, not to say monotonous a subject, I leave undecided. There can scarcely be any doubt, however, that his writing here is too learned for a ballet, and pays too little regard to the dancing.<sup>321</sup>

'In combining three Classical myths – Pygmalion, who brings a statue to life, Orpheus the godlike musician, and Prometheus the bringer of fire – the ballet is an allegorical representation of man's place in the universe. Beethoven may have considered it a secular counterpart to Haydn's oratorio *The Creation* which he had much admired at its premiere in 1798.<sup>322</sup> Years later, Beethoven wrote that 'Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy; it is the wine of a new procreation

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<sup>320</sup> Neil Butterworth, from the sleeve notes to the Helios CD by the *Scottish Chamber Orchestra*, *Beethoven The Creatures of Prometheus*, Helios, 2005, p.4.

<sup>321</sup> Butterworth, p. 3.

<sup>322</sup> Butterworth, p.3.

and I am Bacchus who presses out this glorious wine for men and makes them drunk with the spirit.'<sup>323</sup>

Beethoven's 'version of the myth thus shifts the dramatic emphasis from the defiant martyr to the reception by humankind of the Promethean gift of culture and enlightenment. In the ballet, the cultural gifts of the Titan are not initially understood or appreciated by his two "creatures"; consequently, Prometheus's agony comes to parallel the plight of the misunderstood artist.'<sup>324</sup> Kinderman adds that 'Ultimately, a reconciliation is achieved in the final section of the ballet that has always been understood as a link to the *Eroica* Symphony.'<sup>325</sup> As Hughes does later in *Prometheus On His Crag*, Beethoven used the ballet as a basis for honing his artistic material in the *Eroica* Symphony, in which:

the overall narrative of the progression of the full movements of the symphony outlines a sequence – struggle, death, rebirth, apotheosis [...] What Beethoven explores in the *Eroica* are universal aspects of heroism, centering on the idea of a confrontation with adversity leading ultimately to a renewal of creative possibilities. Variance of this narrative sequence surface again and again in Beethoven's music up to his very last years.<sup>326</sup>

This sequence of 'struggle, death, rebirth, apotheosis' that lies at the heart of much of the work of Beethoven and Hughes is elegantly encapsulated by Jung when he wrote that:

Let a work of art act upon us as it acted upon the artist. To grasp its meaning we must allow it to shape us as it shaped him. Then we also understand the nature of his primordial experience. He has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche, where man is not lost in the isolation of consciousness and its errors and suffering, but where all men are caught in common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole.<sup>327</sup>

At the heart of their exploration of the Prometheus myth, both Beethoven and Hughes are drawing on the archetypal hero's journey, which enjoys strong parallels with their own personal journeys as artists. In their own artistic products (*Creatures of Prometheus* and *Prometheus On His Crag*), Beethoven and Hughes turned their artistic focus on the personal development of the character of Prometheus. Beethoven's *Creatures of Prometheus* is clearly a product of his own historical period,

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<sup>323</sup> Butterworth, p. 3.

<sup>324</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 96.

<sup>325</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 96.

<sup>326</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 96.

<sup>327</sup> Jung, *The Spirit in Man*, p. 105.



most notably the Enlightenment, hence the importance of the fire to the *Urmenschen* and the cycle of death and rebirth of Prometheus. Hughes's approach is different as his historical context is located in a postmodernist age that was deeply affected and shaped by the atrocities of the Second World War. Hughes is also writing at a time of deep personal anguish and pain, which is reflected in the sense of futility and dislocation in the poems. In Hughes's case, there is no sense of unity or completion. His anxiety and personal pain resound in these poems.

Although Beethoven and Hughes shaped their understanding of the myths of Isis and Prometheus in different ways in response to their own artistic visions, both these artists were clearly drawn to these two specific mythic icons. These mythological figures provided them with a solid artistic framework to experiment with different forms so they could find their own unique, artistic voice. This shared interest in Isis and Prometheus is a true reflection of how, as Jung said, these two artists were 'caught in common rhythm' that allowed them as individuals - living and working in completely different eras, at distinct historical periods and using different artistic forms - to communicate their 'feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole'.

## CHAPTER FIVE: 'A BECOMING THAT ADVANCES ONLY THROUGH NEGATION AND CONTRADICTION'<sup>328</sup>

While the interest in Isis and Prometheus common to both Hughes and Beethoven suggests that these two different artists are 'caught in a common rhythm', this 'common rhythm' is also reflected in similar dialectical tensions in the work of Beethoven and Hughes that express their search for meaning between 'the eternal order of being and the temporal chaos of becoming'<sup>329</sup>, which I examine in this final chapter. In this context, it is important to contextualise the philosophical differences that underpin 'Being' and 'Becoming' given the fundamental distinction between these two terms. On the one hand, 'Being' refers to something in its natural, existing state whereas 'Becoming' is an inherently dynamic concept that encompasses change. According to Aristotle, 'Being' is an entirely static concept and nothing is more certain than 'Being' equals 'Being'. In other words, 'Being' is identical to itself and everything is what it is. In direct contrast to this view, Hegel asserts that 'Being' is essentially dynamic because it tends by its very nature to pass over into nothing and then returns to itself in the higher concept through a process called 'Becoming'. To Hegel, 'Being' tends to become its opposite which is nothing and both 'Being' and nothing are united in the concept of 'Becoming'.

To illustrate the differences between these two constructs in a practical manner, Aristotle would argue that the truth about a table is that it is what it is, namely a table. It is similar to a still photograph that captures a particular moment in time. In contrast, Hegel would argue that the table was a tree, is currently a table, and will become ashes. In other words, the table can only properly be understood in its process of 'Becoming'. Therefore, for Hegel, 'Becoming' and not 'Being', is the highest expression of reality and thought because it is only when we have a full understanding of the concept of 'Becoming' and we know what something was, what it is and what it will be, that we have a complete history of its development. In comparison to the static photograph (representing 'Being'), 'Becoming' is more accurately depicted by a moving film that captures the dynamic development of something over a period of time rather than at a particular moment in time. Aristotle, in contrast to Hegel, envisaged 'Being' as superior to 'Becoming' because he was of the view that anything that is still in the process of becoming something else is, by its very nature, imperfect. In the view of Aristotle, God is perfect because God never changes and is therefore eternally complete. God is the ultimate 'Being' and therefore cannot, and doesn't, exist in the process of 'Becoming'.

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<sup>328</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, p. 21.

<sup>329</sup> Stigen-Drangsholt, *Ted Hughes & Romanticism A Poetry of Desolation and Difference*, p. 110.

Beethoven owned 'a volume or two of Hegel and must have regarded him with empathy'.<sup>330</sup> The Beethoven scholar and musicologist, Wilfred Mellers, says that Beethoven's inner existence progressed according to Hegelian patterns and is often reflected in his sonata form:

So Beethoven's life, like Hegel's conception of reality, is a Becoming that advances only through negation and contradiction. His life was a flux, a manifestation of Hegel's *Unruhe*; but its goal was rest, at a point where man, having become aware of the dialectical process within him, has become truly free. The analogy extends to Beethoven's art; there is an obvious parallel between the dialectical triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis which Hegel derived from Fichte, and the exposition, development and recapitulation of the sonata principle.<sup>331</sup>

Mellers says further that Beethoven

seeks, through the dialectical process of his music, the forms of truth [...] Beethoven's forms [...] are discovery: themes and motives become what they are not, on the basis of what they are.<sup>332</sup>

'Process philosophy' (also called the ontology of Becoming) identifies metaphysical reality with change and development. Change is regarded as the cornerstone of reality - the cornerstone of 'Being' but in the process of 'Becoming'. The earliest exponent of this philosophy was Heraclitus who asserted that conflict or strife is the underlying basis of all reality and is defined by change. Writers and philosophers who have been identified with 'Process Philosophy' include Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger and Robert Pirsig. Process philosophy is quintessentially Hegelian as it holds that the concept of truth is 'movement' in and through determinates compared to Aristotelian philosophy which considers these determinates as fixed concepts. Mellers says that:

To discover God becomes a discovery of the Self; the divided spirit seeks, and finds, the Whole. 'God cannot be equated with man, For God is Being, the Totality, and man is not. But the Totality comes actually to know itself in and through the spirit of man. Ultimately this cannot be achieved by thinking about it, only by living it'. The Absolute in itself - Yahveh's 'I am that I am' - is a logical idea which is non-temporal; if we try to conceive of the wholly indeterminate, Being passes into Not-Being. Being and Not-Being each disappears into its opposite; their truth is thus the 'immediate disappearing of the one into the other'. Movement from Being to Not-Being and back is Becoming: which is thus the

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<sup>330</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, p. 22.

<sup>331</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, p. 21.

<sup>332</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, p. 21.

synthesis of Being and Not-Being, their ultimate unity. So the concept of the Absolute as Being is really the concept of the Absolute as Becoming: which is self-development.<sup>333</sup>

There appears to be a strong correlation between Beethoven and Hughes in their approach to their lives and work when considered in the context of this Hegelian paradigm of 'Being' and 'Becoming'. In the first chapter of this thesis, I identified those direct and indirect references to Beethoven in the poetry, plays and prose of Hughes. However, it is important to reiterate that Hughes's reception of, and response to, Beethoven is not expressed in technical or musicological terms. Hughes's kinship with Beethoven is one that is overtly intuitive and Beethoven's life and music forms part of the Muse for Hughes's creative imagination. In this chapter, I explore the Hegelian paradigm of 'Being' and 'Becoming' - that permeates the life and work of Beethoven - to demonstrate that it is equally an intrinsic part of Hughes's life and work.

Janne Stigen-Drangsholt says that 'myth in Hughes is a space that is fundamentally part of the poem while at the same time being an openness to the truth previously processed as rituals and dogma. It is a space through which Heidegger would term Being is brought into language. One of the most profound effects of such an openness is a predominance of process and circulatory'.<sup>334</sup> Stigen-Drangsholt says that the inherent antimony between 'Being' and 'Becoming' is strongly evident in *Wodwo*, Hughes's 1967 collection of forty poems, five pieces of prose and a single play, 'The Wound'. Arguably, this antinomy finds its most acute expression in the last poem from that collection with the same name ('Wodwo').

### **Wodwo**

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over  
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge  
I enter water. What am I to split  
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed  
Of the river above me upside down very clear  
What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find  
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret  
interior and make it my own? Do these weeds  
know me and name me to each other have they  
seen me before, do I fit into their world? I seem  
separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped

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<sup>333</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, p. 16.

<sup>334</sup> Stigen-Drangsholt, *Ted Hughes & Romanticism A Poetry of Desolation and Difference*, p. 110.

out of nothing casually I've no threads  
fastening me to anything I can go anywhere  
I seem to have been given the freedom  
of this place what am I then? And picking  
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me  
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it  
me and doing that have coincided very queerly  
But what shall I be called am I the first  
have I an owner what shape am I what  
shape am I am I huge if I go  
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees  
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me  
for the moment if I sit still how everything  
stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre  
but there's all this what is it roots  
roots roots roots and here's the water  
again very queer but I'll go on looking

The concept of *Wodwo* has its origins in the tale of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Immediately after the contents pages for 'Wodwo', Hughes provides the following extract from lines 720 - 724 of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*:

Sumwhyle wyth wormez he werrez, and wyth wolves als,  
Sumwhyle wyth wodwos, pat woned in be knarrez,  
Bope wyth bullez and berez, and borez operquyle,  
And etaynex, pat hym aneledede of pe heze felle.

This Old English is translated as follows:

Sometimes with serpents he fought, and with wolves also,  
Sometimes with wodwos, that lived in the rocks,  
Both with bulls and bears, and at other times with boars,  
And giants that pursued him on the high fells.<sup>335</sup>

A 'Wodwo' is an uncertain and ambivalent creature. It may be a satyr, troll or wild man of the woods. It could also be a man, beast, monster or goblin. In essence, the very nature of the 'Wodwo',

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<sup>335</sup> Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 98.

its 'Being', is highly unstable. It is neither static nor capable of precise definition and this intrinsic instability and uncertainty is reflected stylistically in the poem, which is written in free flowing verse without much punctuation. Sentences roll into one another and this gives the poem a meandering quality. Hughes uses an interrogative style - there is a constant barrage of existential type questions but no obvious answers. The poem opens dramatically with the existential question 'What am I'. This is the first of eleven different questions in the poem in which the protagonist (Wodwo) finds itself at large in a world inhabited by other creatures which it does not understand. The Wodwo is an alien, an outsider in a strange environment. Yet Wodwo is highly mobile and moves with apparent ease between the air, the water and the land. Ekbert Faas says that Wodwo is

like *homo sapiens* at the dawn of history, it tests and investigates its surroundings, while reformulating man's perennial questions about life with the ingénue precision of a radically pristine empiricism [...] Wodwo's is a language of self erasure which, emulating Nature's own cycles of creation and destruction, persistently obliterates its own traces'.<sup>336</sup>

The incessant questioning coupled with the strong elements of doubt in the poem ('I seem', 'do I fit into their world', 'I suppose') set the foundation for this 'ingénue empiricism'. Wodwo even wonders if he is the archetypal Adam or Eve ('am I the first') and also has egomaniacal tendencies ('I suppose I am the exact centre'). This is supported by the excessive use of the first person pronoun 'I', which is repeated more than twenty-five times in the poem. Yet Wodwo isn't sure why he does things including picking 'bits of bark off this rotten stump' ('it's no use so why do I do it'). The central dialectical theme in this poem (between 'Being' and 'Becoming') is delicately revealed in line 18 'me and doing that have coincided very queerly'. The 'me' here is the 'Being' of Wodwo and the 'doing' its action linked to the process of 'Becoming'. Stigen-Drangsholt suggests that the dialectical patterns in the poem are centred around the quest trope: 'the pattern of the quest is based on a recognition that truth is found in the dynamic process itself [...] the fulfilment of one narrative promise is followed by the promise of further myth-making, allowing the quest to move in a dialectic manner, like a spiral based on the presence of the already and the not-yet'.<sup>337</sup>

The final few words in 'Wodwo' (but I'll go on looking') are reminiscent of the words of T. S. Eliot in 'Little Gidding', the last of the 'Four Quartets':

We shall not cease from exploring  
And the end of our exploring

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<sup>336</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 92.

<sup>337</sup> Stigen-Drangsholt, *Ted Hughes & Romanticism A Poetry of Desolation and Difference*, p. 110.

Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

The idea of incessant searching to unravel the unknown is a theme common to Hughes and Eliot yet the artists' perspectives on the issue are markedly different. For instance, in Eliot's 'Little Gidding', there is an underlying divine presence and a deep sense of awakening and realisation ('And know the place for the first time'). In contrast, there is no finality or closure in Hughes's 'Wodwo', merely a barrage of incessant questions ending with the uncertain conclusion that the creature will 'go on looking'. Keith Sagar says the Wodwo creature 'is a sort of larval Hamlet, questioning everything [...] It occupies the space between the human, animal and spirit world'<sup>338</sup>. It is interesting that Hughes commented in similar vein about the poetic themes of the Serbian poet, Vasco Popa, when he says they:

revolve around the living suffering spirit, capable of happiness, much deluded, too frail, with doubtful and provisional senses, so undefinable as to be almost silly, but palpably existing, and wanting to go on existing [...] homing in tentatively on vital scarcely perceptible signals, making no mistakes, but with no hope of finality, continuing to explore [...] His poems are trying to find out what does exist, and what the conditions really are. The movement of his verse is part of his method of investigating something fearfully apprehended, fearfully discovered. But he will not be frightened into awe'.<sup>339</sup>

Ironically, while Hughes is writing about Popa, this extract is an equally prescient description of the creature 'Wodwo'. It is a poem in which the protagonist is 'continuing to explore [...] trying to find out what does exist, and what the conditions really are'. Wodwo is a 'Being' that neither knows itself nor its environment. Yet, the creature is also a changeling whose only certainty it understands is that it must keep searching ('but I'll go on looking'). This endless search is typical of the way in which Hughes explores the quest trope. Most of the collection in *Wodwo* was written after Hughes's wife, Sylvia Plath, had committed suicide in February 1963 and represents a particularly dark and difficult period in Hughes's personal life. Faas says that 'the poems (with the single exception of "Theology") were all written after the death of Sylvia Plath, and under its impact seem to record the poet's descent into a Bardo of self-destruction. This, it seems to me, is the "single adventure" of *Wodwo*'.<sup>340</sup> In this light, 'Wodwo' becomes a metaphor for Hughes's own existential journey that leads to this endless questioning in which he seeks to understand his own inner self and also find his own place in the world; a difficult journey in the wake of the Plath's tragic suicide. Wodwo is a

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<sup>338</sup> Sagar, *Terror and Exultation*, p. 90.

<sup>339</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 221-3.

<sup>340</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 86.

creature in a complete state of flux, both internally ('What am I?', 'What am I then?') and externally ('What am I doing here in mid-air', 'I suppose I am the exact centre'). It is as if Hughes wants the reader to embrace his own deeply felt sense of anguish and despair about the nature of the Wodwo's 'Being' and the context of its 'Becoming'. There is a strong undercurrent of angst in 'Wodwo' in which the poem itself provides no answers yet contains a majestic rhythm and harmony. Faas expands on this point and says that this poem 'comes close to the absolute naturalness [...] of the poet's ideal of a language transcending words and suggesting meaning beyond understanding'.<sup>341</sup>

This concept of poetry being 'a language transcending words and suggesting meaning beyond understanding' was one that appealed to T. S. Eliot. In drawing a close association between Eliot's *Four Quartets* and Beethoven's music (specifically the late string Quartets), Harvey Gross says that:

The syntactical music of *Four Quartets* represents Eliot's highest technical achievement; hearing Eliot read the *Quartets* is as genuine a musical experience as hearing the Budapest Quartet play Beethoven's Opus 132 [...] Eliot's methods in the *Quartets* are more strictly musical; we find the pervasive repetitions of themes, images and rhythms. We find, in addition, devices Eliot may have absorbed in his listening to Beethoven: variation of theme, inversion, diminution, rhythmic contraction and expansion.<sup>342</sup>

While it is not being suggested that there are similar technical devices at work in Hughes's poetry as in Eliot's,<sup>343</sup> there is evidence to show that Hughes's response to Beethoven's music enjoys close parallels with Eliot's response to Beethoven. For example, in 1994 after watching Peter Brook's theatrical rendition of *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* by Oliver Sacks, Hughes wrote to Brook to express his deep appreciation of the production:

the performance we saw gave the impression of flawless intensity and solidity – like a big dark mysterious jewel showing its facets one by one and finally the full glow of its wholeness [...] Really, the thing itself [...] The 'musical' construction of it, the way episode melted into episode was simply perfect – and at each moment astonishing. Each of the actors, like one of the four necessary elements or one of the instruments in a quartet, gradually became quite overpowering. That sense of accumulative power to effect & signify. Finally entering that holy of holies, those visionary dissolves of the creator & destroyer itself. Literally stunning. I have only ever felt that sensation of being drawn deeper & deeper

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<sup>341</sup> Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 92.

<sup>342</sup> Harvey Gross *T. S. Eliot And The Music of Poetry*, abridged from Chapter VII of *Sound and Form in Modern Poetry*, Michigan University Press, 1964, pp. 208-9.

<sup>343</sup> While not considered in detail in this thesis, this point may be worth further research and consideration.



into some wholly beautiful, wholly terrifying & utterly concentrated state of awareness by Beethoven's late quartets [...] Not the story-but the quality of every moment. With all the other moments behind it.<sup>344</sup>

In this revealing statement, Hughes acknowledges the power and beauty of Brook's production by describing its 'musical' construction' as 'simply perfect' and the performance as having a 'flawless intensity'. This statement also reflects Hughes's deep connection to Beethoven when he says he has 'only ever felt that sensation of being drawn deeper & deeper into some wholly beautiful, wholly terrifying & utterly concentrated state of awareness by Beethoven's late quartets.' Hughes selection of phrases is precise and pits two diagrammatically opposed sensations against each other ('wholly beautiful' and 'wholly terrifying') and yet this contrapuntal position produces an 'utterly concentrated sense of awareness'. In essence, this appears to be what Mellers had in mind in reflecting on Beethoven's life and music, that it is 'a Becoming that advances only through negation and contradiction'. For Hughes, contradiction and negation are a vital part of his work and critical to the notion of self-development. In his poem, 'A Riddle' (from *Cave Birds*, 1978), Hughes explores these contradictions in the form of a riddle.

Who am I?

Just as you are my father  
I am your bride.

As your speech sharpened  
My silence widened.

As your laughter fitted itself  
My dumbness stretched its mouth wider

As you made good progress  
I was torn up and dragged

As you defended yourself  
I collected your blows, I was knocked backward

As you dodged

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<sup>344</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, pp. 670-1. The underlining is by Hughes himself and taken directly from the Letters.

I caught in full

As you counter-attacked

I was under your feet

As you saved yourself

I was lost

And so, when you arrived empty,

I gathered up all you had and left you

Now as you abandon yourself to your death

I hold your life

Just as surely as you are my father

I shall deliver you

My firstborn

Into a changed, unchangeable world

Of wind and of sun, of rock and water

To cry.

This poem is a study in contrasts in which every proposition is presented with an opposing proposition ('speech' versus 'silence', 'laughter' versus 'dumbness', 'saved' versus 'lost' and 'death' versus 'life'). The poem's structure is built around a series of eleven stanzas in the form of couplets bookended by a single line at the beginning and a four line stanza at the end. The opening words are similar to 'Wodwo' ('Who am I?'). Hughes uses this interrogative style to explore the nature of the protagonist's 'Being'. However, that is the only, solitary question and the remainder of the poem is dedicated to set off opposing propositions against each other. The pre-penultimate line of the poem ('a changed, unchangeable world') is an exquisite exploration of the antinomy that Stigen-Drangsholt describes as between 'the eternal order of Being and the temporal chaos of Becoming'. A changed world represents the 'temporal chaos of Becoming' compared with the unchangeable world that represents 'the eternal order of Being'.

Another poignant emanation of this antimony is Hughes's fascination with death and its juxtaposition with life, which is the focal point of the poem 'Life Is Trying to Be Life' (from *Earth-Numb*):

## **Life is Trying to Be Life**

Death also is trying to be life.

Death is in the sperm like the ancient mariner  
With his horrible tale.

Death mews in the blankets – is it a kitten?  
It plays with dolls but cannot get interested.  
It stares at the windowlight and cannot make it out.  
It wears baby clothes and is patient.  
It learns to talk, watching the others' mouths.  
It laughs and shouts and listens to itself numbly.

It stares at people's faces  
And sees their skin like a strange moon, and stares at the grass  
In its position just as yesterday.  
And stares at its fingers and hears: 'Look at that child!'  
Death is a changeling  
Tortured by daisy chains and Sunday bells

It is dragged about like a broken doll  
By little girls playing at mothers and funerals.  
Death only wants to be life. It cannot quite manage.

Weeping it is weeping to be life  
As for a mother it cannot remember.

Death and Death and Death, it whispers  
With eyes closed, trying to feel life

Like the shout in joy  
Like the glare in lightning  
That empties the lonely oak.

And that is the death  
In the antlers of the Irish Elk. It is the death  
In the cave-wife's needle of bone. Yet it still not death –

Or in the shark's fang which is a monument  
Of its lament  
On a headland of life.

The protagonist in this poem is the figure of 'Death', which Hughes capitalises for greater emphasis and to distinguish it from the concept of death itself (or the opposite of life). In this poem, 'Death' is trying to be life, it is trying to take on the forms that give life its essential meaning, its Being. It takes on all the usual characteristics of life; it 'plays', 'stares' and wears baby clothes'. It even 'learns to talk' and 'laughs and shouts'. However, no matter how hard it 'wants to be life', the poet reminds us that 'Death' 'cannot quite manage' to become life. Death is what it is. Even though it is a 'changeling' and tries desperately to 'feel life', it cannot. 'Death' is what its 'Being' demands – it is 'Death'. This conflict between oppositional forces has been described as follows:

This involves the battle of opposites and eventually their reconciliation or fusion, after giving way to death and destruction, be this by fire, tigers, drowning, or devouring snakes. The beauty of fluid fire, the graceful tiger, the subtle and wise reptile, these seem most expressive for the synthetic experience of accepting life as a whole, or better, accepting existence as a whole, life and death included; evil included too, though from a given spiritual perspective it is not experienced as evil any more. Needless to say, the process is essentially religious, and it could even be suspected that every myth presents us one particular aspect of the same experience.<sup>345</sup>

Hughes uses the image of the tiger to explore this 'battle of opposites' and to reach a 'reconciliation or fusion' in his poem written for children called 'Tiger':

At the junction of beauty and danger  
The tiger's scroll becomes legible.  
In relief, he moves through an impotent chaos.  
The Creator is his nearest neighbour.  
The mild, frosty majestic mandala  
Of his face, to spirit hospitable  
As to flesh. With easy latitude  
He composes his mass.  
He exhales benediction,  
Malediction. Privileged

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<sup>345</sup> Michael Harner, *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1973, p. 189-190 as quoted in Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: Terror and Exultation*, p. 108.

At the paradoxical cross-junction  
Of good and evil, and beyond both.  
His own ego is unobtrusive  
Among the jungle babblers,  
His engineering faultlessly secure.  
In a fate like an allegory  
Of God-all-but-forgotten, he balances modestly  
The bloodmarks of his canvas  
And the long-grass dawn beauty  
As the engraved moment of lightning  
On the doomsday skin of the Universe.

In this poem, the tiger is the metaphor or symbol that encapsulates 'Becoming'. The tiger is at the 'junction of beauty and danger', it exhales benediction and malediction. It comfortably embodies polar opposites. It is at the 'paradoxical cross-junction' of 'good and evil' and yet it is also 'beyond both'. In other words, the tiger is able to transcend these oppositional forces, to move beyond the dualism and reach some form of reconciliation, which is the ultimate endgame of 'Becoming'.

The theme of contrasts and opposites that infuses Hughes's work appears to have strong correlations in Beethoven's work as well. Kinderman says that Beethoven's 'use of severe contrasts becomes a means of welding sections or movements into a larger narrative sequence with symbolic implications, as in the last piano sonatas, with their open cadences pointing into the silence beyond'.<sup>346</sup> Solomon says that:

In the openings of certain of his greatest works, Beethoven deliberately eradicates the implication of safe haven. Instead, reckless of his listeners' comfort, he turns from validating the expected to inventing places where no one has ever gone before, in beginnings that suggest heightened, altered, and anxious states. These imply not safety but terror; not the comfort of an earthly pastoral but the remote sublimity of the immeasurable heavens [...] Beethoven has shifted the metaphorical terrain from recognizable locations in nature or society to unplumbed reaches of the universe [...] He does this, for example, in the openings of the Fourth, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies, not to affirm the chaotic and the strange but to demonstrate the importance of overcoming them, in scenarios of desire, estrangement, and humiliation that eventuate in fulfillment, reconciliation, and convalescence.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 10.

<sup>347</sup> Solomon, *Late Beethoven*, p. 15.

The notion of art espoused by Schopenhauer that it ‘presents us with the greatest confusion which yet has the most perfect order as its foundation, with the most vehement conflict which is transformed into the most beautiful harmony’ resonated deeply with Hughes. In describing his poetic process in 1957, Hughes said:

In each poem besides the principal subject [...] is the living and individual element in every poet’s work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto the battleground of that first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented - the poem is finished.<sup>348</sup>

Hughes’s choice of words is precise and intentional - ‘energies’, ‘champions’, ‘battleground’, ‘combatant’ and ‘resolve’. For Hughes, the poetic space is often the product of conflict, which is not only inherent and inevitable; it is a necessary requirement that releases a violent, yet infinitely creative energy. The notion of diagrammatically opposing forces in constant struggle is an important trope in Hughes’s work (as it was to Beethoven). Hughes described the inspiration for his early work as a ‘war between vitality and death’ and one that ‘celebrates the exploits of the warriors on either side’.<sup>349</sup> In his description, Hughes uses traditional masculine imagery: ‘war’, ‘exploits’ and ‘warriors’. The challenge for Hughes is to properly identify these ‘combatants’ or ‘warriors’ (the forces at work) and then to turn them into a ‘bit of music’ which results in a sense of ‘peace’ and contentment. In his acknowledgment to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes thanks Peter Brook (the theatre director) and says ‘I see this book as a continuation of my close association with his [Peter Brook’s] dream (which was also mine) of a theatre simultaneously sacred and profane, simultaneously a revelation of spiritual being and an explosive image of life’s infinite animal power and psychological abundance’.<sup>350</sup> For Hughes, spirituality and primitive animal power necessarily coexist and he uses his art as a vehicle to explore the comingling of the ‘sacred and profane’ (spirituality and life’s animal power). Much of Hughes’s art seeks to harness that ‘infinite animal power and psychological abundance’ which he sees as ‘an uproar’ and turn that ‘into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm’. Hughes takes the energy of each ‘combatant’ and finds that innate musical harmony and balance ‘When all the words’ hear ‘each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress’. Like orchestral harmony, this leads to a sense of holistic

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<sup>348</sup> Faas, *Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 163.

<sup>349</sup> Faas, *Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 197.

<sup>350</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber and Faber, London, 1992, p. xv.

completeness, a peace and the point at which the 'the poem is finished.' In his book, *Winter Pollen Occasional Prose*, Hughes provides a detailed and revealing explanation of his poem<sup>351</sup> 'In the Likeness of a Grasshopper' from *Flowers and Insects* (1986).

A trap

Waits on the field path.

A wicker contraption, with working parts,  
Its spring tensed and set.

So flimsily made, out of grass  
(Out of the stems, the joints, the raspy-dry flags).

Baited with a fur-soft caterpillar,  
A belly of amorous life, pulsing signals.

Along comes a love-sick, perfume-footed  
Music of the wild earth.

The trap, touched by a breath,  
Jars into action, its parts blur –

And music cries out.

A sinewy violin  
Has caught its violinist.

Cloud-fingered summer, the beautiful trapper,  
Picks up the singing cage

And takes out the Song, adds it to the Songs  
With which she robes herself, which are her wealth,

Sets her trap again, a yard further on.

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<sup>351</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 318 -9.

In this poem, Hughes writes about the violin trapping 'the sexual spirit of music in the soul of the violinist who plays it'<sup>352</sup> and explores the complex relationships between the musical instrument (violin) and the musician (violinist). It is as if both are combatants, at war with each other. The violinist tries to control his instrument, to master it and draw out its music. However, in asserting control, the violinist ironically becomes trapped by his own instrument 'which seems to draw the song out of him'. This suggests a complex, dynamic and symbiotic relationship between the living musician and his inanimate instrument, which Hughes describes as 'A tricky both-ways business'. However, while the violinist and the violin are 'combatants', the conflict produces a resultant synthesis, which is the music. On further reflection, however, it is a more complex situation effectively a three way process. This tripartite complexity is alluded to by Hughes himself when he says 'The violinist seeking to control and master his instrument and draw the music out of it'. This suggests an internal musical dialectic to the poem with its three component elements: the violinist (thesis), the violin (antithesis) and the music (synthesis), which reflects the Hegelian triad. To Hughes, the music is the result of the struggle between the two combatants: the musician and his instrument. Likewise, a poem is the resulting synthesis of the battle between the poet (violinist) and the process (violin) by which the poem is created.

This internal musical dialectic is evident in Hughes's poem 'In the Dark Violin of the Valley' (from *River 1983*).

All night a music  
Like a needle sewing body  
And soul together, and sewing soul  
And sky together and sky and earth  
Together and sewing the river to the sea.

In the dark skull of the valley  
A lancing, fathoming music  
Searching the bones, engraving  
On the glassy limits of ghost  
In an entanglement of stars.

In the dark belly of the valley  
A coming and going music  
Cutting the bedrock deeper

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<sup>352</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 319.



To earth-nerve, a scalpel of music

The valley dark rap

Hunched over its river, the night attentive

Bowed over its valley, the river

Crying a violin in a grave

All the dead singing in the river

The river throbbing, the river the aorta

And the hills unconscious with listening.

In this poem, music is presented as a healing force, which has the ability to join spiritual with earthly forces and to bring things together. It is a 'needle' that restores and balances things; that connects disparate elements (body/soul, sky/earth and river/sea) to each other. The music is linked to medical instruments (needle, lance and scalpel) that contains a forensic power to heal but which equally possesses the potential to destroy. The words 'On the glassy limits of ghost' evoke the slow 2<sup>nd</sup> movement (*Largo assai ed espressivo*) from Beethoven's Piano trio (Opus 70, number 1). This movement became known as the 'Ghost Trio'. Carl Czerny, a composer, pianist and student of Beethoven, described the 2<sup>nd</sup> movement of the 'Ghost Trio' as resembling 'an appearance from the underworld. One could think not inappropriately of the first appearance of the ghost in *Hamlet*'.<sup>353</sup> Kinderman writes that 'An uncanny atmosphere invests Beethoven's *Largo*, with its mysterious tremolos, chromatic textures, and powerful dynamic contrasts'.<sup>354</sup> In this poem, the music is presented as omniscient and omnipotent. It cuts deep to the innermost animist core 'To earth-nerve'. The phrase 'a scalpel of music' stands as a turning point in the poem. A scalpel has the capacity to heal for example, by combating disease and excising cancer but also has the potential to cause damage for example, by injuring, maiming and scarring. At this juncture in the poem, the mood changes and darkens. The valley and the night are given anthropomorphic qualities: they are 'rapt' and 'hunched'. The river is a powerful symbol of time (human life progressing inexorably from birth to death) and a bridge (from life to death and from the visible to the invisible, the unknown) and in so doing becomes a powerful symbol for the process of 'Becoming'. Rivers were sacred to the ancient Celts - they associated them with maternal goddesses (*deae matres*) who provided food. In this poem, the river is imbued with blood like qualities that support life: 'throbbing' and 'aorta'. The

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<sup>353</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 157.

<sup>354</sup> Kinderman, *Beethoven*, p. 157.

river, however, is 'Crying a violin in a grave'. The juxtaposition of 'violin' and 'grave' creates a powerful image. The violin symbolises harmony and stability in music and in life. It suggests contentment and joy. It is considered to be one of the most perfect musical instruments ever invented. However, in this poem it is the symbol of perfection that is being buried. The words 'Crying', 'grave' and 'dead' reflect a deep and redolent anxiety that suggests there is no explanation, 'And the hills unconscious with listening', for horrendous events, 'All the dead singing in the river', and moreover there is no compensation. In this way, Hughes suggests there is an inadequacy in the music which undermines its healing and restorative powers. In this poem, music evolves from a source of nurturing and healing to become a symbol of destruction, leaving the reader with a deep sense of dislocation.

In this way, Hughes explores the process of 'Becoming', which to the poet represents a dangerous journey into the unknown. This journey necessarily requires a descent into dark and destructive forces before it can lead to a process of reconciliation and enlightenment. The sense of dislocation in Hughes's poem 'In the Dark Violin of the Valley' is also evident in Hughes's poem, 'Mother-Tongue' (from *Uncollected 1992 - 1997*) in which the poet's intimate umbilical connection he previously enjoyed with the music and his memory of it that was 'shared long ago' 'Is lost, far beyond the event horizon'.

### **Mother-Tongue**

I hear her talking.  
She is trying out a flute.  
Not the flute but the flute's notes.  
Not the flute's notes but the ceilings  
And the floors  
Of the flute's palace.  
And all the winding stairs, a dancing  
To the searching voice in the flute.

Now she sways over a cello.  
The hairs of the bow  
Are the hairs of my body miraculously lengthened.  
She regards them as hers.  
She uses them with abandon, flings her arm  
And the hand holding the bow.

The strings of the cello are the fibres  
Of the umbilicus  
We shared long ago. So long ago  
My memory of our sharing it, in the cave mouth,  
Is lost, far beyond the event horizon,  
In the black hole  
Out of which her music still pours.

The poem opens with the poet hearing a woman ‘talking’ as a young child might remember their mother’s voice. While initially it is unclear who this female protagonist is, it transpires that she is a Goddess of some kind, arguably of Music. Hughes presents her as the ‘Mother-Tongue’, which contains an inherent duality: she is first a ‘Mother’, the source of life; a nurturing, creative force but also, secondly, a ‘Tongue’, which is the source and expression of language, the mechanism which translates sound into language and produces meaning. Of course, our mother-tongue is also the language into which we are born and by which we articulate our first sounds. It also has a distinct sense of the primitive. However, the voice of the Music Goddess is not simply a language. The Goddess of Music talks through musical instruments, first the flute and then the cello. She tries out the flute and its notes until the music becomes more expansive as it embraces the floors, the stairs and the ceilings of the palace. The music becomes ‘the searching voice in the flute’. The line ‘Now she sways over a cello’ leaves the reader with the beautiful image of Jacqueline du Pré, the renowned British cellist, who had a distinctively engrossing style in which she swayed over her cello as she played almost as if she was captive to the music and the Music Goddess.<sup>355</sup>

In the next two lines, Hughes fuses the poet and the Goddess of Music by suggesting the hairs of his body are the hairs of the bow which the female protagonist ‘regards ... as hers’. Hughes develops a deeper connection between the poet and the Goddess of Music. The ‘strings of the cello are the fibres’ of the birth bond (‘the umbilicus’) that they shared ‘long ago’ ‘in the cave mouth’. The ‘cave mouth’ is the source of the Music Goddess’ musical creations, her *fons et origo*. It is the ‘black hole’, ‘out of which her music still pours’. The cave is a potent mythological symbol. It is associated with the womb, the mysterious depths of the earth and primordial telluric powers. The cave is regarded as a doorway leading to the hereafter, to another unknown world. A cave is also used as a dwelling, a place of refuge and caves are also temples, mystical and hallowed places where humans came into direct contact with the primordial energies and forces of the earth. Caves in the Bible are usually burial sites.

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<sup>355</sup> There is no evidence known to the author that Hughes had ever seen Jacqueline du Pré live in concert; hence it is the author’s own interpretation of these words from the poem. However, du Pré did perform, record and film Beethoven’s Ghost Trio with Daniel Barenboim (piano) and Pinchas Zukerman (violin).

The most common symbolic cave is Plato's cave in which shackled prisoners sit with their backs to the openings. They never see the sunlight and the fire in the mouth of the cave casts shadows of passing things and people against the cave's inner wall, which is all that the prisoners see. This image of an epistemological darkness contributes to Blake's image of the human skull as a cave in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. According to Blake, in the modern age 'man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern'. Yet caves might also suggest a depth of thought and perception. Byron says 'thought seeks refuge in lone caves' and Shelley calls 'the dim caves of human thought' 'prophetic caves' 'from which our bright future shall come'.<sup>356</sup> In 'Mother-Tongue', it was 'So long ago' that the poet's memory of the music and 'sharing it' is tragically 'lost'. The loss is so great that it is 'far beyond the event horizon'. An 'event horizon' is the point of no return at which the gravitational pull becomes so great that escape is impossible. The most common case of an event horizon is that surrounding a black hole. Light emitted from beyond the horizon can never reach the observer. However, notwithstanding this tragedy, the music of the Goddess 'still pours' out of the 'black hole'. The 'hole' is 'black' because it absorbs all the light that hits the horizon, reflecting nothing. The poem ends on an ambivalent note: while the poet no longer has the memory of the shared music, the music itself continues ('still pours') for those who can hear it. However, the poet himself cannot hear it - he has become disconnected from the music, the source of life and meaning. In 'Opus 131', Hughes had reached that same spiritual nadir when he says 'Beethoven had broken down' and 'Was trying to repair [...] The huge constellations of his silence'. However, 'Mother-Tongue' leaves the reader with a sense that the music continues to pour forth if only the reader/listener is able to connect with it. Through this connection, the reader/listener is 'sharing it' and can find the 'searching voice' of the 'lifeline music' that offers 'consolation, prayer, transcendence' and that has the capacity to selectively disconnect 'the pain centre' (from Hughes's 'Opus 131').

To Hughes, the 'lifeline music' is an emanation of the Goddess (the sacred), in which Hughes draws on the influence upon him of *The White Goddess*, by Graves.<sup>357</sup> Hughes believes it is vital that humans connect with this source and Hughes explores this connection through the act of writing poetry and fishing. Fishing to Hughes was a religious experience and a life without fishing to Hughes would have been 'an artificially diminished life'<sup>358</sup>. He says that 'If I were deprived of that kind of live, intimate, interactive existence – allowing myself to be possessed by and possessing this sort of world through fishing, through that whole corridor back into the world that made us what we are – it

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<sup>356</sup> Ferber, *A Dictionary of Literary Symbols*, p. 40.

<sup>357</sup> Hughes, *Letters*, p. 273.

<sup>358</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, p. 253.

would be as though I had some great, vital part of me amputated.’<sup>359</sup> Furthermore, rivers are the ‘very bloodstream of the goddess’. ‘In the Dark Violin of the Valley’, Hughes refers to ‘The river throbbing, the river the aorta’.

Sagar says that for Hughes ‘Hooking a big fish felt like plugging in to the power circuit of the world. The fish being hooked by the man is simultaneously the man being hooked by the river.’<sup>360</sup> This is a remarkable echo of Hughes’s explanation of the violin and the violinist in his poem ‘In the Likeness of a Grasshopper’ when he says ‘As if a violin’ [...] should [...] trap the sexual spirit of music in the soul of the violinist who plays it [...] As the violinist, while he pounces on the violin, to draw the sexual vitality (the music) out of it, is trapped by and battles with his instrument - which seems to draw the song out of him’. Hughes said that ‘When I am fishing alone, as I come out of it, if I have to speak properly, I can’t form words. The words sort of come out backwards, tumbled. It takes time to readjust, as if I’d been into some part of myself that predates language’.<sup>361</sup> Sagar says ‘The human participant is humbled, feels ghostly, and loses all sense of his own centrality and omnipotence as a lord of language. The waters wash away his sense of identity. He merges with ‘the stuff of the Earth [...] the whole of life [...] It’s an extension of your whole organism into the whole environment that created you’. It’s a recovery of your “biological inheritance”’.<sup>362</sup>

In Hughes’s poem ‘Go Fishing’ (from *River* (1983)), the poet invites the reader to wade in and immerse oneself in the river and essentially become one with the river.

Join water, wade in underbeing  
Let brain mist into moist earth  
Ghost loosen away downstream  
Gulp river and gravity

Lose words  
Cease  
Be assumed into glistenings of lymph  
As if creation were a wound  
As if this flow were all plasm healing  
Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles  
By sudden rainbow monster-structures  
That materialize in suspension gulping

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<sup>359</sup> Ehor Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts: In the Wild with Ted Hughes*, Douglas & McIntyre, Vancouver, 2009, pp. 187-8.

<sup>360</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: ‘Terror and Exultation’*, p. 255.

<sup>361</sup> Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts*, pp. 188-9.

<sup>362</sup> Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature Terror and Exultation*, p. 255.

And dematerialize under pressure of the eye

Be cleft by the sliding prow

Displaced by the hull of light and shadow

Dissolved in earth-wave, the soft sun-shock,

Dismembered in sun-melt

Become translucent – one untangling drift

Of water-mesh, and a weight of earth-taste light

Mangled by wing-shadows

Everything circling and flowing and hover-still

Crawl out over roots, new and nameless

Search for face, harden into limbs

Let the world come back, like a white hospital

Busy with urgency words

Try to speak and nearly succeed

Heal into time and other people

By becoming one with the river, the protagonist in this poem undergoes a complete metamorphosis: 'Ghost loosen away', 'brain mist into moist earth', 'Be supplanted', 'Become translucent'. Hughes's literary techniques in this poem are visually powerful and highly effective: the alliteration in 'Join water, wade'; 'mist into moist'; 'gulp river and gravity', 'new and nameless' and the multiple use, similar to that by Gerald Manley Hopkins, of conjoined words (suggesting fusion and reconciliation): 'monster-structures', 'sun-shock', 'sun-melt', 'earth-taste', 'wing-shadows' and 'hover-still'. There is a sensuous musical fluidity in this poem. Hughes makes highly effective use of alliterative repetition: 'Displaced', 'Dissolved' and 'Dismembered'. To emerge from the water, the poet must 'crawl out over roots, new and nameless'. This is in direct contrast to the creature in 'Wodwo' who cannot understand the roots and says:

but there's all this what is it roots

roots roots roots and here's the water

again very queer but I'll go on looking

In contrast to the redolent angst in 'Wodwo', the river in 'Go Fishing' has enormous capacity to heal, regenerate and renew:

As if this flow were all plasm healing  
[...]  
Try to speak and nearly succeed  
Heal into time and other people

In 'Go Fishing' and the other poems in *River* generally, Hughes alludes to the fact that he has reached an end point or synthesis to his journey. There is a deep felt sense of synthesis, of reconciliation and peace. This is elegantly reflected in the poem 'That Morning' in which the end of the journey is reached among creatures of light:

So we found the end of our journey.  
So we stood, alive in the river of light  
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.

According to Hughes though, this end point or synthesis is not, however, to be found in *something* but rather the *process* itself (the 'Becoming'), that is the joining in, the wading, the letting go and becoming one with natural forces including those forces within oneself. This is the moment of resolution when Hughes turns 'the whole uproar' including all the various antimonies and conflicts into a 'formal and balanced [...] figure of melody and rhythm' and 'When all the words are hearing each other clearly'. Mellers writes that:

Goethe's Faust exclaims 'From desire I rush to satisfaction; and in satisfaction I yearn after desire'; this Faustian duality embraces the aspirational and inspirational 'two selves' within Beethoven, wherein the most violent contradictions could co-exist [...] Beethoven's acceptance of his two selves makes him the supreme composer who, without evasion, confronts chaos. Hegel speaks of 'an underground source in the inner spirit whose content is hidden and which has not yet broken through the surface of actual existence, but which strikes against the outer world as against a shell and cracks it because such a shell is unsuited to such a kernel' [...] Beethoven's themes and motives [...] are consciousness coming to birth, obliterating the opposites in recognizing that the Other is in me.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>363</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, pp. 17 and 22.

In remarkably similar vein, Hughes had written about these two worlds that Hegel calls an inner spirit and an outer world and which Hughes similarly described as the inner world and the outer world:

the real problem comes from the fact that outer world and inner world are interdependent at every moment. We are simply the locus of their collision [...] The character of great works is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled to the full presence of the outer world. And in them we see that the laws of these two worlds are not contradictory at all; they are one all-inclusive system [...] They are the laws, simply, of human nature [...] they are the formula that reconciles everything, and balances every imbalance.<sup>364</sup>

In *Winter Pollen*, Hughes wrote that:

The balm of great art [...] seems to be drawn from the depths of an elemental grisliness, a ground of echoless cosmic horror. The mystery of music opens this horror as often as we properly hear it. Perhaps music holds the key to it. If, as we are told, mathematical law is the tree of the original gulf, rooted outside the psychological sphere, outside the human event-horizon, and if music is a sort of nest, the consoling-shaped soul-nest, that we feathery and hairy ones weave out of the twigs of that tree (audial nerve sunk in the mingling chorales of the body's chemistry), then the horror which wells up out of music is also the sap of mathematical law, a secretion of the gulf itself – the organizing and creative energy itself.<sup>365</sup>

Hughes believed that great art is drawn from 'an elemental grisliness' which he describes as 'a ground of echoless cosmic horror'. It is the transformative development or evolution of this horror (the 'elemental grisliness') that generates 'the organizing and creative energy itself' and which is required for great art. The artist must take the journey into this 'elemental grisliness' so that he/she can return with the 'creative energy'. In essence, this is the process of 'Becoming' which to Hughes (and Beethoven) takes the form of a journey, a descent into this horror so that they can emerge anew with a message for their reader/listener. For Hughes and Beethoven, the 'mystery of music opens this horror'. As time passes, Hughes's presence 'reasserts itself at a deeper level, to an audience that is surprised to find itself more chastened, more astonished, more humble, where the whole task of understanding can seem more and more like King Lear endlessly trying to fathom the

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<sup>364</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 150.

<sup>365</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 91-92.



unspeaking mystery of Cordelia'.<sup>366</sup> Peter Brook's eloquent tribute to Hughes reaches out to the poet's 'unspeaking mystery':

One day, when we were working together on *Orghast*, Ted Hughes explained to me how he found the words in the new language he was inventing for us. 'I listen,' he said, 'to the patterns that arise in the deep level of the brain, when impulses become sounds and syllables – and before they shape themselves into recognizable words.' This capacity to be in touch with the vast complex of movements that underline all human existence is what made Ted, Ted. Whether it was in bird life, the animal world, mythology, personal relations, literature or Shakespeare, Ted, like a neurosurgeon, saw straight through to the essential fibres. For this reason, logical language can never encapsulate him. To find Ted, we must pause and listen to the powerful music behind the simple name Ted Hughes...<sup>367</sup>

It is evident that there is a 'powerful music' in the art of both Hughes and Beethoven. Both artists shared the unique quality of being able to see 'straight through to the essential fibres'. By digging down to the bottom of Hughes's strata in this thesis, the name and works of Beethoven resonate clearly as it was the composer who provided Hughes with 'coherence' for his imagination that enabled the poet to 'be in touch with the vast complex of movements that underline all human existence'. The notion of life as a quest which the artist must pursue lies at the core of the life and work of Beethoven and Hughes. For them, 'the pattern of the quest is based on a recognition that truth is found in the dynamic process itself'. Becoming is this 'dynamic process' which Hughes and Beethoven both embraced and which is reflected in their lives and work.

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<sup>366</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 319 (from the tribute by Hughes to T. S. Eliot).

<sup>367</sup> Nick Gammage, *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes*, edited by Nick Gammage, Faber and Faber, London, 1999, p. 154.

## CONCLUSION

The genesis of this thesis emerged from the Faas interview of Hughes in 1970 when Hughes said that he would find the names and works of Blake and Beethoven if he dug to the bottom of his strata. This response from Hughes arose in the context of a persistent line of questioning by Faas about the writers who had influenced the poet. Hughes responded that 'It's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered [...] the whole business of influence is mysterious [...] Then again the influences that really count are most likely not literary at all'.<sup>368</sup> The journey to the bottom of Hughes's strata began with a consideration of the influence upon him of his English schoolteacher, John Fisher. Fisher inspired Hughes in two critical ways. Firstly, he gave Hughes a copy of *The White Goddess* by Robert Graves as a school leaving present. This book became, as Hughes later described in a letter to Graves, the 'chief holy book' of his 'poetic conscience'. Secondly, and arguably more significantly, Fisher introduced Hughes to Beethoven and, from that moment on, the German composer infiltrated Hughes's life and provided coherence for his imagination. At different times throughout his life and career, Hughes refers to Beethoven and his music. Hughes specifically refers and alludes to the composer in his poetry, plays and prose, and this is documented in the first chapter of the thesis. Given that Blake and Beethoven are considered to be leading artists of the Romantic Movement, the thesis then examines the three key elements of Romanticism in the context of Hughes and Beethoven: imagination, Nature and myth. In the second chapter, the Romantic imagination at work in these two artists is considered. What emerges is that Hughes is drawn to the creative vision of the Romantics and their ideas in his personal quest to engage in 'negotiations with whatever happens to be out there'. Early on in his quest, Hughes appreciated and understood the importance of Jung's theory of the 'collective unconscious' and the significance of the storehouse of symbols, archetypes and myths. In similar vein to Beethoven, Hughes exploited these to plunge (as Jung described) 'into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche [...] where all men are caught in common rhythm which allows the individual to communicate his feelings and strivings to mankind as a whole'.<sup>369</sup>

Like Beethoven, Hughes takes his role as an artist seriously and believes it requires he confront 'the elemental grisliness', the 'cosmic horror' to reach a better understanding of his natural environment and thereby his own human nature. It is a lonely and arduous journey which takes the form of the hero's quest, yet it is essential for the proper development of the artist. Hughes sees

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<sup>368</sup> Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 203.

<sup>369</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1972, p. 105. The various connections that link Hughes to Jung are explored in greater detail in chapter four of the thesis.

himself as a Wodwo in all his work constantly questioning and challenging so that he'll 'go on looking'. Throughout his poetry and prose, Hughes never fails to surprise the reader. As a student of Nature growing up in Yorkshire, Hughes turned his attention, in microscopic detail, onto Nature to try to penetrate its veil and understand it for what it is. The fascination for Nature shared by Hughes and Beethoven and their desire to understand their own human nature is the subject of the third chapter. In this chapter, while there appears to be strong correlations and points of confluence between these two artists, the German composer and the British poet part company for reasons chiefly to do with historical specificity. Hughes's career begins after the Second World War and he started writing at a time when poetry (and the role of poets) seemed irrelevant in the aftermath of the horror of that war and the earlier events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet Hughes persisted because he believed he had no choice. He was driven by a force greater than himself: 'And we only did what Poetry told us to do'. In his quest, though, Hughes turned to a number of extrinsic sources including Classical, Renaissance Neoplatonism, Romanticism, Kabbalah and his own Celtic origins. In this regard, Hughes and Beethoven were drawn to certain myths and two of these specific mythic figures, Isis and Prometheus, are considered in the fourth chapter. What emerges is further evidence that both artists had a shared fascination for these iconic figures and that there are remarkably strong correlations between these two artists in their focus on the myths of Prometheus and Isis. In the final chapter, the philosophical notions of 'Being' and 'Becoming' are examined in the context of the artistic development of the German composer and the British poet. While both artists experienced significant personal pain and anguish during their lives that deeply affected their artistic journeys and as both struggled to understand their natural environment and the various forces in opposition, they both emerged at the end of their journey with a synthesis, a form of resolution.

This is because 'Nature's continued existence' and indeed our very own continued existence 'depends ultimately on the kind of consciousness we bring to bear on it'<sup>370</sup>, as Jung says:

As a matter of fact we have actually known everything all along: for all these things are always there, only we are not there for them. The possibility of the deepest insight existed at all times, but we were always too far from it. What we call development or progress is going round and round a central point in order to get gradually closer to it.<sup>371</sup>

What emerges strongly from this thesis is that, for Beethoven and Hughes, the artist is a holy man, a priest or shaman who receives a call to undertake a dangerous journey for the sake of their art. Thus

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<sup>370</sup> Baring and Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess*, p. 681.

<sup>371</sup> Jung, Carl Gustav, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, Bollingen Series XX, Princeton, N.J. Princeton University Press, 1972.

begins the hero's journey, the search for the unknown, often called the sacred. The journey is a lonely one and fraught with danger. Hughes says it is 'the underworld of strange goings on that we call poetic imagination. Everybody who gets into that underworld has to find their own way.'<sup>372</sup> The challenge for the artist is to return renewed and reinvigorated with a message for others. Joseph Campbell says that:

The two – the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found – are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known [...] The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release of the flow of life into the body of the world.'<sup>373</sup>

This journey is accurately represented as the dynamic process of 'Becoming' in which the artists undertake a painful journey with attendant suffering so that they can discover themselves and then return to inspire others with their discovery be it in the form of sublime music (Beethoven) or poetry (Hughes). This is the 'inaudible music' Hughes talks about that 'moves along in our bodies' and which finds expression in words that make out the 'vital signature of a human being'. As Sagar explains, Hughes's language is the instrument for probing relentlessly towards the centre and his search for liberation through knowledge stands as his main creative effort. Both Hughes and Beethoven return from their hero's journey inspired and enlightened ready to express 'something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely what we are'. Their respective artistic legacy has been to unlock and release 'the flow of life into the body of the world' at different historical junctures, through different art forms yet in their own unique style and with equal profundity.

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<sup>372</sup> Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>373</sup> Campbell, Joseph, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Fontana Press, London, 1993, p. 40.

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