

Curtin University

**The Making of a Masterpiece and the Power of Poetry:
“An October Salmon” by Ted Hughes**

Michael John McCall

**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy
of
Curtin University**

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Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgment has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

Signature:

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Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Declaration | 2 |
| Acknowledgements | 3 |
| Notes | 6 |
| Permissions | 7 |
| Abstract..... | 9 |
| Introduction Overview | 11 |
| From my knowing..... | 11 |
| My questions as signposts | 14 |
| Poets, poetry and what it might mean to be human | 15 |
| Intentionality | 17 |
| An October Salmon by Ted Hughes | 23 |
| Chapter One Philosophy, Literature and Poetry | 27 |
| In the machinery of heaven. [60]..... | 27 |
| ...the savage amazement of life, [46]..... | 29 |
| In Search of Paradise | 37 |
| Chapter Two A Self Divided..... | 44 |
| This was inscribed in his egg. [49]..... | 44 |
| Body simply the armature of energy [45] | 55 |
| Chapter Three Making Sense..... | 63 |
| The flow will not let up for a minute. [30]..... | 63 |
| The salt mouthful of actual existence [47] | 68 |
| Post Card from Perth Zoo..... | 78 |
| He haunts his own staring vigil [36]..... | 88 |
| The construction of the poem..... | 91 |
| This is its deconstruction: Notes and sub-text..... | 92 |
| Chapter Four The Power of Poetry | 102 |
| With strength like light--- [48] | 102 |
| And that is how it is, [39] | 107 |
| Chapter Five Respect for Self, Others and the World..... | 120 |
| ... this uneasy channel of minnows [52]..... | 120 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| If boys see him they will try to kill him. [56] | 129 |
| Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles [53] | 135 |
| Conclusion The Making of a Masterpiece | 141 |
| Review | 141 |
| Beginnings, Middles, and Ends | 146 |
| Into Light and Darkness..... | 150 |
| The Making of a Masterpiece | 153 |
| Epilogue..... | 157 |
| An October Salmon, by Ted Hughes | 160 |
| References | 163 |

Notes

To avoid possible confusion when reading this work, it is worth noting at the outset the following important points.

I make references to the titles of poems using quotation marks. “An October Salmon,” is an example of the stylistic form of referencing I use whenever I refer to poems by their title.

I reference volumes or books or collections by citing their titles too, but in *italics*. For example, the poem “An October Salmon” was first published in the collection of poems by Ted Hughes in 1983 called *River*. *River* was later revised and republished in 1991 as part of a collection of poems Hughes titled *Three Books*. That collection also contains, for example, another poem of importance in the context of this work titled “That Morning.”

It should also be noted that virtually all references to the specific poem “An October Salmon,” is referred to by Ted Hughes’ many literary critics by the title “October Salmon.” This title is used in every collection of Hughes’ poetry except one, the collection in which I first read and felt my first immediate, strong and enduring connection to Hughes’ work and to his poem “An October Salmon.”

The collection of poems I refer to is the Faber and Faber collection, *Ted Hughes. Selected Poems 1957-1981*, first published in 1982, the year before *River* was first published and subsequently reprinted in 1984, 1985 and 1986. I prefer to use the original title of the poem, “An October Salmon” not only because it sounds grammatically more correct but it is the title I first came to know and love it by, and first loves, as many would know, can leave the deepest most lasting impressions.

I use square brackets enclosing a number only. I number each line of the poem “An October Salmon,” so that when I make particular references to phrases from a specific

line or lines from the poem throughout the body of this work, the reference denotes the importance and relevance of the line(s) to the point I make.

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As you might think from the title, I will be a very strong advocate for Hughes' poetry and prose in this work, particularly in the context of its educational value to students, like myself, but also to the larger public, in terms of its power to move and inspire its readers with the same sense of dramatic wonder and awe that inspired its creator.

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Abstract

My proposed research relates to the field of Human Science and is philosophical in its outlook, dialogical in its nature, and interpretive in its method. It takes the form of a philosophical reflection and narrative dialogue, based on my lived experiences and on my engagement with the poetry of the English poet Ted (Edward James) Hughes (1930-1998), with specific reference to, and emphasis on, his poem – “An October Salmon.”

The title of this work is: *The Making of a Masterpiece and the Power of Poetry: “An October Salmon” by Ted Hughes.*

This work is structured into several chapters, preceded by an introduction and followed by a conclusion. Its central ideas are contained in the title, but because its focus also involves philosophical reflections on my lived experiences, with the intention of understanding at a deeper level what it might mean to live a more fully human life, this work’s overall stance might also be described as phenomenological. It illustrates too, in terms of its narrative structures and research methodology, attributes or characteristics associated with autoethnography.

Because of my extensive use of poetry throughout this work, including my own, as a primary means of reflecting philosophically on some of life’s preoccupations, such as love, life, death, God and nature, this work is also a deeply personal and an original reflection on life and its meaning.

For me, human beings are the evolving masterpieces of their own lives. Incomplete and imperfect, they are works in progress that are never complete or completed. It is this sense of incompleteness, or feeling of disconnection, I suggest, that gives rise to the human condition, or to what might be called the tragedy of human experience and existence.

My central assumptions in the work that follows are that human lives have a narrative arc - a life story - and while every arc is different in its trajectory, length, magnitude and shape, all lives hold in common the essential elements of all life stories: a beginning, middle, and an end. I also believe that human life is essentially poetic at its core.

And it is from that belief that I come to put forward the proposition, later in the work, that because language is a defining characteristic of what it means to be “human”, poetry, in particular, which involves the poet’s inherent respect and care for words and language, is ideally placed, and has within it a certain power to help students become more fully respectful and “human” in terms of their general education and development.

By focusing on the power of language and poetry in particular, I have aimed to demonstrate its potential usefulness in an educational context, as an appropriate and powerful way of teaching, promoting and facilitating respect in its various forms and manifestations; and to demonstrate the need to teach and restore respect for self, others and the world. In my view, these aims are not only of great importance and significance, but reflect a real and ongoing need in what appears to be an increasingly troubled world.

These ideas are a direct result of my deep reflections on the poetry of Ted Hughes, and, in particular, his tragic but beautiful poem and masterpiece, “An October Salmon.”

Introduction

Overview

The unexamined life is not worth living. (Socrates)

Fifty seven years old at the time of writing, and now semi-retired, I have strong and continuing academic interests in the fields of literature, philosophy, and human science. I also have a strong belief in the importance and value of education in the context of a question that, for me, has, and continues to have, enduring importance and relevance. That question is, “What does it mean to be human?” The following work is a reflection of my interests and beliefs and is, in part at least, a considered response to that timeless and ever-evolving question.

From my knowing

Before embarking on this work, it is useful for my readers to get a more complete sense of who I am and what I value and believe, at the time of writing at least, in order to make more complete sense of what follows.

I make no assumptions about the level of familiarity, likes or dislikes my readers may or may not have in relation to the chosen subjects of this dissertation, other than that they are likely to be people with similar interests, if not cultural backgrounds, to my own, given they are reading this work, and are readers of English, whether or not English is their first or other language.

It is also important to point out that while the question central to this work, one that informed my interest in creating it, namely, “What does it mean to be human?” might suggest that, like the French humanist, Michele De Montaigne, the sixteenth century philosopher whose ideas are possibly closest to my own, I do not consider myself to be a humanist at all. If anything, I might be described as a materialist, although one of a peculiar and specific cast, the meaning of which will be made clearer later in this work.

Of the big questions like, “Does God Exist?” “What is the meaning and purpose of life?” “Where did we come from?” “How should we live?” and so on, I find myself, in many respects, thinking very much like Professor Robert Winston, author of the book *The Story of God*, in which he states,

I am not an atheist. I do not pretend to understand the nature of God; I do not know whether our moral code is a human construct, a piece of genetic programming or a God-given gift; I do not fully understand the concept of a soul and I have no idea if there is an afterlife – but I am prepared to accept that God may exist. (2005, p.27)

This articulates more distinctly and economically than I could my own leanings toward God, morality, and religion. As for life’s purpose and the reason why we might be here, if indeed a reason could ever be found or proved, perhaps the only reason that counts, and that has no need of proof, one way or the other, is that we are here for each other, and if that is all there is to it, that is enough to be getting on with.

In terms of expressing more broadly what I value and believe philosophically, and to circumvent what could become a grim taxonomy of seemingly endless and unsupported views and opinions, what might be said usefully about what I have come to believe is something like this. Knowledge can be derived through reason and experience. I could be rational and empirical. I cannot stop believing in both mind and matter, while suspecting that matter may be the source of all consciousness. I could be dualist, an odd kind of idealist, and materialist. I believe appearance and reality are two very different things and that I - a unique and sentient being - experience the world as a filtering, interpreting, embodied being. I could have a phenomenological attitude. I believe that the choices we all make help to shape our identities, define our characters, and give us a sense of who and what we are. In this sense, I could be existential.

To the extent that I am all these things in general, and none in particular, that I think and feel and am free to wonder whether I am free at all, or to question whether there is a God or a purpose and a meaning to my life, or the lives of others, I am a human being.

I believe that the German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, was right to propose in his essay *The Artwork in Word and Image: "So True, So Full of Being"* (Palmer, 2007, pp. 213-215) that beauty in art is a kind of deep truth and a means to achieving a deeper understanding of the world, each other, and ourselves, and that human beings are essentially interpreting beings in this regard. Parker J. Palmer points out "the hermeneutical character of Gadamer's thinking" and reveals that is in the interpretation of art that art has its being (2007, p. 193).

Gadamer himself states in the introduction to his treatise on the subject of art, *Truth and Method* (1989, pp. xx-xxi), that the phenomenon of understanding,

pervades all human relations to the world...and it resists any attempt to reinterpret it in terms of scientific method...Hence the human sciences are connected to modes of experience that lie outside science: with the experiences of philosophy, of art, and of history itself. These are all modes of experience in which a truth is communicated that cannot be verified by the methodological means proper to science.

Gadamer's ideas accord well with the thinking of the American phenomenologist, Robert Sokolowski, whose views, like those of Gadamer, have come to influence my own, which should become apparent throughout this work, particularly in Chapter Three. Sokolowski said this of phenomenology and the important philosophical subject of "appearances."

The issue of appearances has been part of the human question from the beginning of philosophy...phenomenology in its classical form, insists that parts are only understood against the background of appropriate wholes, that manifolds of appearance harbor identities, and that absences make no sense except as played off against the presences that can be achieved through them. Phenomenology insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things...not only can we think the things given to us in experience; we can also understand ourselves as thinking them. Phenomenology is precisely this sort of understanding: *phenomenology is reason's self-discovery in the presence of intelligible objects*...Many philosophers have claimed that we must learn to live without "truth" and "rationality,"

but...we can and must exercise responsibility and truthfulness if we are to be human. (2000, p. 3)

I have written two short stories which articulate more completely, my values, beliefs and epistemological leanings, *In Search of Paradise* (1985) and *Post Card From Perth Zoo* (2007), with which I intend to deepen my readers' understanding of my work, and to demonstrate that ideas of a philosophical nature tend to be enduring in the minds of those preoccupied by them, or who are, like me, philosophically inclined. I have included them to provide the means necessary, should it be required in the absence of any scientifically provable quantitative means, to establish that the voice used in this work is my own and authentic.

Within and beyond all of the foregoing are the great and powerful mysteries of life and death. Both life and death have the power and the potential to create in and through each and every one of us attitudes, beliefs and feelings of terror, awe, wonder, ugliness and great beauty. Life and death come to shape our personal life stories, or what I like to think of as our living narratives, and we in turn shape them, in terms of how we respond to them, through the choices we make and the responsibilities we choose to accept, or are made to endure.

My questions as signposts

The research method I have used in this work is reasonably conventional but almost entirely qualitative in nature. This work also has a traditional structure or form.

The key questions that both provide the structural framework for my dissertation and help to shape its narrative arc are itemised below. They appear again at the beginning of each chapter.

- What has most affected or influenced my life and the way I have chosen or come to live it?
- Why have philosophy, literature, and poetry in particular, become such an important part of my life?
- How might philosophy, literature and poetry help others to make sense of their lives, themselves and others?

- What power might poetry, in particular, possess to help us live a more fully human, meaningful and valuable life?
- If poetry is, in part, about respecting and caring for language, can it play a part in the development of self-respect, respect for others and the world we live in?

My questions serve as chapter markers or signposts and overlap one another to some extent so that this work's discourse or narrative might have continuity and might not become too disjointed. My questions are sufficiently different to enable the narrative arc of my work to take shape. From Chapter Two onwards, the poetry of Hughes and his poem "An October Salmon," in particular, provide a backdrop to the work and serve to ground it.

Poets, poetry and what it might mean to be human

The question of what it means to be human has been of enduring interest to me since becoming an adult human being. My objective in this work is to explore the question of what it means to be human throughout, including my own poetry and in particular the poetry of Hughes, with special attention to what I choose to refer to as his masterpiece, "An October Salmon." Why I have come to think of this particular poem as his masterpiece, when he wrote so many important and powerful poems, I will make clear in my study's conclusion.

By looking at the work of a particular poet, and a particular poem by that poet, I seek to raise the importance and value of poets and poetry, generally, and to suggest how the power of poetry might be put to practical, meaningful, and significant use in an educational context—to take human language which makes a human being human, as distinct from any other living species of creature or animal, and use the power of poetry, as I believe it is human language in highest form, to help teach our youngest students the meaning and value of respect for self, others, and the world.

Implicit in this view is my belief that there has been a decline in respect for self, others and the world in recent years and that respect itself is ultimately very important when it comes to considering more fully what it means to be a human being.

In short, I believe poetry has the power within it to help humanise, more deeply, our students from an early age and help restore respect into the world. Encouraging the use of poetry to help teach the critically important notion of respect to students, from an early age and beyond, is a primary and long-term motivation for my work.

As mentioned previously, this work has a traditional structure or form. Following the Abstract, is this introduction, providing relevant background information and an overview of this work.

Following my introduction, are five chapters that make up the body of my work. Chapter One, *Philosophy, Literature and Poetry*, refers to my very early life and to the factors that influenced, shaped, and transformed me into a young adult. This leads to Chapter Two, *A Self Divided*, which shows how and why the twentieth century English poet, and poet Laureate, Ted Hughes came to have such a profound and enduring effect on my life and on my attitudes and beliefs in relation to life's big issues—life itself, God, religion, love, sex, violence, time, and death. Hughes' poem, "An October Salmon," allows me to discuss facets of each of these important life and death issues in a contained or focussed way.

I consider myself to be a philosopher and a poet but make no assertions about the quality with which I perform either role. That is for others to say. What I would claim for myself is that I think deeply and like to record my observations and reflections in a creative way and from a variety of perspectives. This brings me to Chapter Three, *Making Sense*, in which I seek to show, with Hughes' help and the help of Sokolowski and Gadamer, not only differences between philosophy and poetry, but also important and significant similarities. The similarities between poetry and phenomenology in particular will become highly significant in the context of my previously stated aims and objectives.

The tentative suggestions I make in Chapter Four, *The Power of Poetry*, concerning the importance and power of language, and the language of poetry in particular, as critical elements in propositions about what it might mean to be human, lead me to propose in Chapter Five, *Respect for Self, Others and The World*, that emphasis on poetry in our

educational institutions and classrooms might bid well for humanising students more deeply, more roundly and from an early age.

This is not to suggest, of course, that children are not human, although I feel sure some parents, and, yes, even teachers, might be inclined to think so from time to time. Rather, being human can be intensified or made a deeper or more complete phenomenon in a world where some people can sometimes appear to be frighteningly less than human - even inhuman - in their treatment of other people, animals or the environment.

I seek to portray in Chapter Five my reasons for believing that there has been a decline in the levels of respect for self, others and the world within and across societies, generally, and why it is critically important to try and revive, restore, and champion its presence in the world. I return again to a teaching of poetry that might prove effective in helping to achieve this task.

What follows then, broadly speaking, is the story of how a poem, “An October Salmon,” and its author, Ted Hughes, a Yorkshire born farmer, fisherman, critic, and Poet Laureate, came to have such a powerful influence on my way of thinking, seeing, and understanding the inner world of my lived experience and imagination and the outer world that continues to intimidate, provoke, inspire, and sustain it.

My story also seeks to explain how and why I have come to view the poem “An October Salmon” as a masterpiece in the context of its author’s prodigious output. It is, after all, just one of an extraordinary number of extraordinary poems by an extraordinary poet.

Intentionality

Before turning to the poem “An October Salmon,” it is important to discuss my intentions, in-so-far as they can be fully disclosed or known, even to their possessor.

The first thing to note about this work as a whole is that is deeply phenomenological in its origins, its creation and in its character. As a result my readers might be expecting a work bristling with the kind of technical vocabulary generally associated with the subject

of phenomenology, an extensive reference to a vocabulary developed by philosophers like Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and others associated with the field broadly referred to as phenomenology. But they will be disabused, hopefully not disappointed, to find very few references in this work to the plethora of technical and other terms associated with the subject.

My work, although attempting to display some knowledge and understanding of phenomenology as a subject worthy of investigation, attempts to do so by being phenomenological rather than by paraphrasing the vocabulary of others whose theoretical understanding of the subject is greater than my own. I therefore eschew using technical terms used by Husserl, such as “*Noesis*” and “*Noema*” (Russell, 2006, p. 84) in favour of more direct language. *Noesis* refers simply to perception or to the act of consciousness. While *noema* refers to objects as they are perceived. In the vocabulary of phenomenology, it is important to point out here that objects that are perceived are also referred to as “intentional objects.”

The word “intentionality” itself, in phenomenological terms, therefore has a distinct and quite separate meaning to that assigned to the term I have used to introduce this particular section of the work. What I intend in the context of this particular part of my narrative bears no relation whatsoever to what is signified by the phrase “intentional object” in its phenomenological context or meaning. Sokolowski helps to make this clear in his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000, p. 8) when he states,

The core doctrine in phenomenology is the teaching that every act of consciousness we perform, every experience that we have, is intentional: it is essentially “consciousness of” or an “experience of something or other. All our awareness is directed towards objects...Every act of consciousness, every experience, is correlated with an object. Every intending has its intended object.

Because phenomenology, as envisaged by philosophers like Husserl and others with a similar outlook, has its roots in this notion of intentionality, virtually all phenomenologists tend to agree that the basic task of philosophy is to “answer the question concerning the ‘meaning and Being’ of beings” (Audi, 1999, p. 665). It is also, as Sokolowski observes (p. 8),

a philosophy that considers intuition and imagination as important elements and eschews, to some extent at least, philosophical rationalism of the kind that sees consciousness as something distinct from the body and internal to the human mind—a place where thoughts and ideas are generated or created in isolation from the objects that we experience through the processes of perception.

Philosophies like Logical Positivism, with their heavy reliance on rationalistic or evidence-based explanations of events in terms of their causes and effects alone is considered by phenomenologists to be too mechanistic, narrow or incomplete when it comes to interpreting or understanding or coming to terms with human experience and what it means to be human.

Essentially, phenomenology, to put it very simply and in a way that accords to the nature and scope of this work, is a kind of attentiveness involving reflections that allow for the disclosure of lived experience in a more humanly satisfying and holistic way.

For me, at least, writing phenomenologically is like talking about one's self not in the first person but in the third person—writing about one's own experience as if telling the story of somebody else. This involves a kind of dislocation of the self. My second chapter is entitled *A Self Divided*, not just because it discusses dualism and dualities, but for this very reason.

Dualism itself, however, also provides the opportunity to write in a phenomenological way, quite apart from raising philosophical problems that are intensely interesting and challenging, allowing deep personal reflections involving questions of identity and consciousness, in short, opportunities for phenomenological reflection, disclosures, and discoveries.

The other artefacts from my lived experience, the various poems and short stories included throughout this work, can be read in a didactic sense as well as in an interpretive and disclosing sense, as exemplars of a phenomenological method, as heuristic or interpretative pieces, and simply as moments of deep reflection and attentiveness held fast by the language that captured the ideas at the time of writing, where an “agent of truth” or “human person” has sought to disclose in a more

permanent or fixed way his lived experience through acts of reflection and attentiveness in order to be true to the Socratic ideal of making his life more worthy for having examined it.

Phenomenology is a philosophy that, for me at least, has also proved itself to be worthy of such an examination.

The research presented in this work is entirely qualitative in nature, and there is much in it that is largely autobiographical. By that I mean that the accounts relating to my life are about my life and are recounted by me as the author of this work, from a variety of perspectives and in a variety of forms.

It is therefore important to acknowledge several important factors in relation to a work that purports to be “research” but research that is necessarily highly subjective in its character, as opposed to a more traditional work of scientific research that is often quantitative in its outlook - research that is often regarded, especially in scientific circles, as objective rather than subjective.

While I would suggest that, as researchers, human beings cannot hope to escape the subjective world of their interpreted experiences, any more than they can be neutrally detached and omniscient observers of the worlds they inhabit as interpreting beings, it is important to acknowledge some of the potential limitations, and strengths, of my chosen approach to research as it relates to the field of human science.

Memories of one’s own life, especially of one’s early life, can be, and often are, unreliable. As are the memories of others whose impressions might be called upon to corroborate or validate them. What is disagreeable about a life story can also be overlooked or cast in more agreeable terms, to protect reputations or to give a more favourable account of actions or events. In short, much that is recounted as non-fiction in autobiographies can in fact be pure fiction.

I have provided examples of writing recounting events in my life that affords the reader of this work the opportunity to consider whether or not the narrative is authentic or true to the ideas and values of its author. In other words, verisimilitude is an essential

component of my writing, in terms of grounding it in a way that renders an evaluation of it possible - despite its obvious subjective qualities and character.

There is too, however, the point made by Robert McKee in his book *Story* (1998) to consider, when he talks about autobiographical films lacking the very virtue they promise – self-knowledge. He states (p. 84) “while it’s true that the unexamined life is not worth living, it’s also the case that the un-lived life isn’t worth examining.”

Isn’t every life valuable and extraordinary and worth knowing about? Certainly, many lives are short, and many lives are miserable, mean, small, petty, shallow or blighted - in all kinds of ways and for all kinds of reasons. What I am proposing here, however, is that when people are given the opportunity to become literate and educated, and are equipped to recount the experiences and meaning of their lives in writing, then what should become apparent or evident is that every human life is very much an ongoing work in progress. Every life is a masterpiece in the making but one that is never entirely finished or complete.

And that, for me at least, is at the heart of what we might properly refer to as “the human condition.”

I have mentioned some of the obvious limitations of my approach to research in the field of human science, but in terms of talking about a subject one knows well enough to learn from, in the context of self-knowledge, or for others to learn from, in the context of shared knowledge and experience, then one’s own story or experiences, when recounted in narrative forms (that is, in writing), can provide an invaluable resource to advance our knowledge of what it means to be “human.”

My research then, in a nutshell, involves *inquiry through writing*, and in that context it goes beyond autobiography and enters the realm of *Autoethnography* or *Narrative ethnography*. Autoethnography is defined by Carol Ellis (University of Western Ontario, n.d.) as:

A "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" [Ellis, 2004. p. 24]. This method explores the writer's point of view and experiences of life in an analytical way. It is a subjective form of writing and research and differs from [ethnography](#) in

this regard. The writer is the primary participant or subject of the research and writing.

In terms of research then, this is essentially my method. What is important to note is that through my research, I seek to explore and raise questions rather than arrive at definitive answers that remove the opportunity to go on raising even better questions - questions that encourage personal growth and learning.

Lives that are lived and that are examined raise more questions than answers, but that's as it should be. As subjectively aware and interpreting human beings, we are, each and every one, the masterpieces of our extraordinary lives.

I mentioned earlier that the work that follows is ostensibly about a poem called "An October Salmon." The poem is presented in this work without immediate analysis or even extensive commentary. My references to it throughout are also relatively infrequent or brief, and either take the form of signposts that refer to the poem indirectly or as direct commentaries but only when the narrative supports it. There is no in-depth analysis of the poem at any point within this work.

This choice was made consciously and deliberately. I had no desire to perform a lobotomy on something that, for me, has always lived or come alive in me whenever I felt the need to read it. It had a profound effect on me from the moment I first read it, and it continues to affect me to this very day. I would no more try to pick at it or pull it apart, to see what made it tick, than I would dismantle a stained-glass window in a cathedral, as if studying the lead and glass and colours used might help me to appreciate better the object as a whole when it engages with, or interacts with, something as vital, and as mysterious and as beautiful as light.

Readers expecting to find a complete and thorough analysis of the poem "An October Salmon" will therefore not find it in this work. What they will and can expect to find is the story of a life lived and a life influenced deeply by others; but in particular by a fellow traveller and poet, Ted Hughes and one of his most memorable poems.

What I hope to achieve in this work is to present "An October Salmon" without commentary, then provide a phenomenological exposition of my lived experience, and

then provide the reader with the opportunity to read the poem again, but this time with insights gained from exposition provided that should greatly enhance and deepen the reader's understanding and appreciation of the poem I have called Hughes' masterpiece. It's a big claim, but one I believe is and can be justified.

It will of course be for the reader to decide if that is even remotely true, and to decide if I have been successful in achieving that aim.

There are, of course, other aims associated this work, for example, the aim of providing a possible way of teaching respect by using poetry, philosophy and literature in educational settings is a subject of Chapter Five of this work.

But I have said enough to this point to give some guidance to my readers about to embark on the relatively short journey that now lies before them.

What follows then is the poem by Hughes, "An October Salmon" and I ask my readers to reserve their final judgement concerning the poem until they have had the chance to encounter it again – repeated in its entirety - at the conclusion of this work.

The poem is provided here, in full, complete with bracketed line reference numbers for referencing purposes throughout this work. When the poem is repeated at the conclusion of this work, it will be in the hope and expectation that my readers will come to a new and deeper understanding and appreciation of its beauty, meaning, power and significance.

An October Salmon by Ted Hughes

He's lying in poor water, a yard or so depth of poor safety, [1]
Maybe only two feet under the no-protection of an outleaning
small oak, [2]
Half under a tangle of brambles. [3]

After his two thousand miles, he rests, [4]

Breathing in that lap of easy current [5]

In his graveyard pool. [6]

About six pounds weight, [7]

Four years old at most, and a bare winter at sea--- [8]

But already a veteran, [9]

Already a death-patched hero. So quickly it's over! [10]

So briefly he roamed the gallery of marvels! [11]

Such sweet months, so richly embroidered into earth's beauty-
dress, [12]

Her life-robe--- [13]

Now worn out with her tirelessness, her insatiable quest, [14]

Hangs in the flow, a frayed scarf--- [15]

An Autumnal pod of his flower, [16]

The mere hull of his prime, shrunk at shoulder and flank, [17]

With the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power--- [18]

The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary--- [19]

Ripened to muddy dregs, [20]

The river reclaiming his sea-metals. [21]

In the October light [22]

He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths. [23]

Death has already dressed him [24]

In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations, [25]

Mapping the completion of his service, [26]

His face a ghoul-mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body [27]

A fungoid anemone of canker--- [28]

Can the caress of water ease him? [29]

The flow will not let up for a minute. [30]

What a change! From that covenant of Polar Light [31]

To this shroud in a gutter! [32]

What a death-in-life---to be his own spectre! [33]

His living body become death's puppet! [34]

Dolled by death in her crude paints and drapes [35]

He haunts his own staring vigil [36]

And suffers the subjection, and the dumbness, [37]

And the humiliation of the role! [38]

And that is how it is, [39]

That is what is going on there, under the scrubby oak tree, hour
after hour, [40]

That is what the splendour of the sea has come down to, [41]

And the eye of ravenous joy---king of infinite liberty [42]

In the flashing expanse, the bloom of sea-life, [43]

On the surge-ride of energy, weightless, [44]

Body simply the armature of energy [45]

In that earliest sea-freedom, the savage amazement of life, [46]

The salt mouthful of actual existence [47]

With strength like light--- [48]

Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg. [49]

This chamber of horrors is also home. [50]

He was probably hatched in this very pool. [51]

And this was the only mother he ever had, this uneasy channel of
minnows [52]

Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles [53]

And sunk sheets of corrugated iron. [54]

People walking their dogs trail their evening shadows across him. [55]

If boys see him they will try to kill him. [56]

All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness, [57]

The epic poise [58]

That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so

patient [59]

In the machinery of heaven. [60]

Chapter One **Philosophy, Literature and Poetry**

A word is its own little solar system of meanings. Yet we are wanting it to carry some part of our meaning, of the meaning of our experience, and the meaning of our experience is finally unfathomable, it reaches into our toes and back to before we were born and into the atom, with vague shadows and changing features, and elements that no expression of any kind can take hold of.

(Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, 1994, p. 19)

In the machinery of heaven. [60]

Apart from my parents, Fred and Helen McCall, who gave me the really important early lessons in life, like how to share, to be nice to others, to treat everyone, especially women, with respect, to never be cruel or cause intentional harm to anyone or anything, and a multitude of other skills, values, and behaviours, my first real teacher, and I think possibly my greatest, was my brother William (Bill), or Billy as we called him when we were all much younger.

What made him a great teacher relates to all great teachers. He was patient and engaging. He cared about me, listened to what I had to say, loved his subjects - he was both passionate and knowledgeable about them - and was willing to question himself and to learn from others—even me. He drew heavily on his own life experiences, modelled good behaviour, was respectful, responsible, motivational, took risks, showed courage, and was, at times, simply inspiring. It sounds a bit like hero worship but is that not what our most memorable and cherished teachers are to us? Heroes?

While growing up my two younger siblings, Annette and Julie, taught me outdoor games, like hopscotch, jumping elastic and ropes, and a host of others, but it was Billy, my older brother, who fired my imagination the most and encouraged me to love nature as much as he did. Nature was our biggest and most fascinating subject. It was everywhere around us and within us, a constant source of wonder, delight, beauty, terror

and awe. It was also the teacher we looked to most, apart from our parents, for the important lessons in life.

But even with all that in mind, it must be said that after much reflection, and to my very great surprise, the most lasting and profound influence on my life, in so many ways, has been my religious upbringing.

At the outset, I must stress that I am not a “religious” person in the sense that I continue to go to Church, or follow the religious teachings and doctrines of my early Church life. I stopped attending Church regularly at the age of sixteen. Prior to that, I attended The Methodist Church Sunday School in Springfield, Tasmania, from quite an early age, right up until the age of my confirmation into the Methodist Church at the age of fourteen in 1969.

Why religion became such an important influence on my life came about for a number of reasons, but clearly the lessons one learns during the formative years of life are long-lasting, even if many of them later prove to be less than useful or occasionally even harmful.

It was at the age of fourteen that the first major collision occurred between my love of nature and the teachings of my Methodist religion. I recall quite vividly becoming aware of my own mortality and the mortality of others while still quite young. Living on a farm and in the bush with my family at the time meant that I was exposed to the deaths of animals on an almost daily basis. Living off the land nature provided was necessary for survival, although my childhood memories are not about being poor or living hand-to-mouth, but rather of happy times spent living with a loving family that wanted for very little that really mattered.

My religious upbringing also strongly supported the notion that human beings had a right to kill and harvest animals for their own ends. Human kind was depicted as divine and quite distinct from other animals. In fact, I gathered that human beings were not animals at all, but divine beings with souls created by God and in his image. Because human beings had souls, only they had free will. Animals had neither. That, at least, was what I was taught by those who had for years been taught the same thing by others with

the same belief, it was, in short, a tradition as well as a religion that was being passed on from generation to generation.

It was my great love and interest in the animal world, and the world of nature more generally, encouraged and fuelled by my brother's undoubted influence as a talented story-teller, that made me think that the view of nature as expressed in the Bible and in the religious teachings of my instructors every Sunday at Sunday School, was somehow incomplete and at times even baffling and perplexing. If I was a divine being and not an animal, what became of the animals I loved as much as I loved other people? Did animals go to Heaven if they had no souls? And why weren't human beings animals too, just like other animals? If that was true, and human beings really did have souls and free will, wouldn't that mean animals would have souls too and have a place in Heaven when they died? But if that was true, by what right did we as human beings have to harvest and kill other animals for our own needs if they were as fundamentally divine as we were?

These questions may appear to have been naïve, but they were significant to me as a fourteen year old and the truth is that they remain significant to me now. My interest and fascination with the idea of the soul – that part of us that we are most in fear of losing forever – has continued unabated to this day, but my interest in the idea of the soul has become decidedly more philosophical than religious as the years have gone by, although my early lessons in life, and those delivered earnestly and by well-meaning adults in my little Springfield Sunday School in Tasmania, have stayed with me.

...the savage amazement of life, [46]

The second real schism of any consequence to happen in my relatively stable and happy childhood happened when I was sixteen. I began to read, with limited understanding, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*. The creationist view of the world and nature that my religious instructors had so earnestly imparted came into direct conflict with the scientific view of nature as an evolutionary process, and the reverberations from that collision, together with my brother's influence on my own thinking, have continued ever since in the form of an inner dialogue and debate that has taken many forms as I have grown older.

Throughout this work I provide several such forms, including short stories and poems, to illustrate the ideas and preoccupations that drive my study. Darwin's account of nature in his famous treatise, at the time of first reading it, shook me as much as it must have shaken many people of Darwin's own time. It gave an account of nature quite unlike anything portrayed in The Bible - it was effectively denying me the truth of God's word and giving me an account of nature that seemed to be without design and purpose and which instead seemed to suggest to me that nature evolved by chance and circumstance - that animals and plants were involved in a constant arms race, where only the fittest survived and where an ability to adapt to changing environments determined which species of life lived and which died.

Nature truly was "red in tooth and claw" and a creator God with an intelligent purpose in mind, who had a personal stake in His creation, a creation that put human kind at its centre of the universe and at the top of an earthly hierarchy where human kind had dominion over all other living things, was about as far from evolutionary theory as you could get. What about the human soul and the hope of an afterlife? What about God-given free will? Were human beings just like other living creatures, part of the same blindly evolving world of nature? And what were the implications of that for animal rights as well as human rights, if both had souls or both did not?

Such was the influence of my early religious education and Darwin's evolutionary and revolutionary ideas that both have continued to fuel the dialogue or argument I still have with myself to this very day.

Despite the influence on my thinking that my Methodist upbringing has undoubtedly had, I am, on reflection, grateful to my parents for taking the view that their children should be taught not so much what to think but simply be given the opportunity to think about something that was not denied to them but about which they could instead make up their own minds later, having been exposed to it. My parents believed in God but were not zealous or even disciplined church goers. They were how I might describe myself, spiritually aware rather than religiously dogmatic.

In this respect, I believe that protagonists of scientific method and thinking, like Professor Richard Dawkins, while highly credible and articulate when championing the

benefits of a sceptical scientific approach to the acquisition of knowledge, have been a little too damning when claiming that parents are irresponsible when they teach religion to their children. In his book, *The God Delusion* (2006, p. 237), for instance, he berates parents in the following terms,

If they [parents] grow up and decide that the Bible is literally true or that the movement of the planets rule their lives, that is their privilege. The important point is that it is their [children's] privilege to decide what they shall think, and not their parents' privilege to impose it by *force majeure*.

I remain, none-the-less, grateful to my parents, despite the fact that I share with Dawkins a strong belief in much of what Darwin's theory of evolution has to tell us about the evolution of life on Earth. I am grateful because my parents, as responsible parents, needed to tell me from time to time what to think and how to behave as part of simply helping me to grow up with some shared and learned values. Learning Methodism was one way to receive instruction about how to distinguish right from wrong in a way that was acceptable not just to my parents but to the wider community of which they were a part. They did not shirk that responsibility.

I am grateful too for having been given the opportunity to learn about religion, the Bible, and God. Religion has enriched, enhanced, and extended my experience of life, particularly my experience of life through literature, the words and writings of others. My later reading of African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiongo and Bessie Head, themselves writing about the effects of colonialism and religious indoctrination, would, for instance, have been greatly diminished without the common ground of our Christian upbringing, common ground that then allowed me to share with these writers greater knowledge and understanding of their own particular cultural traditions and customs and their reactions to religious teachings and great works of religious literature, like John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, that they, like me, were being exposed to as part of their education and upbringing.

My religious upbringing, if I can call it that, has undoubtedly influenced the whole of my life. It instilled in me the desire to read literature more widely and to appreciate the Bible and other religious texts as works of great literature in their own right. And while I initially turned to science in my later teenage years for answers to questions about life

and its meaning, it soon became apparent to me that while religion and science both gave accounts, to various extents, and with varying degrees of success and satisfaction, many questions, particularly in the case of science, related to how things are rather than to why things are. It was the big questions of life and death that went beyond the reach of both science and the teachings of Methodism that fascinated me the most—the metaphysical and philosophical questions. “Why are we here?” “What is life’s ultimate purpose?” “Does life have a meaning?” “Is there such a thing as an ultimate purpose to which all things are directed?” “Is there such a thing as a soul?” “Is there life after death?” “Do we have free will and is it God given?” “And if we have free will, why wouldn’t other animals have it too, if we are animals too, just like them?”

This helps to explain why I turned towards literature, poetry and philosophy as guides, pillars, or supports for my thinking and emotional life. It was not that I turned away from science. I simply began to value literature and philosophy more highly because they engaged me more fully as a questioning and interpreting human being.

Great literature and great works of philosophy had the potential to extend, enhance, enrich, and deepen my experience and understanding of the world by allowing me to enter into, and share with others, their imaginative worlds, their experience, knowledge, insights, and understandings, and to appreciate and value those critically important others who ultimately help free us from the prisons of our own minds and shape us as human beings.

James Gleeson, one of Australia’s pre-eminent artists, and my favourite painter, in an interview with Lou Klepac (1987, p. 12), shared a similar view to my own when he said this in response to the question, “How important have poetry and literature been to you as a painter?”

I believe literature has played an important part in shaping the way I feel and think. You expand yourself through what you read. The written word encapsulates the experience of others and in reading them you are yourself enhanced.

Literature helps to open many doors into the minds and imaginations of others. The simple act of reading has the power to create in the reader a preparedness for openness,

reasonableness, thoughtfulness, tolerance, respect, critical thinking and engagement. And through story-telling, in all its forms, including poetry, I believe we become more fully situated and integrated within the world of others. We become morally and ethically habituated and rounded, through the simple habit of reading. This is why I am strongly supportive of teaching literature and philosophy in schools.

If philosophy is about anything it is about thinking, and “no other human capacity is so vulnerable...it is in fact far easier to act under conditions of tyranny than it is to think.” So said Hannah Arendt, the German born American philosopher and political theorist in her book *The Human Condition* (1998, p. 324). Which is why I believe that encouraging students to think and to question for themselves is one of the greatest gifts we can give them.

Philosophy has become a particularly important part of my life. So much so, that it is not simply a study discipline or a subject of interest but a way of living a meaningful life - a way of being in the world - a way of living, as Socrates put it, “an examined life.” For Socrates, an unexamined life was not worth living, and I feel the same way. For me, philosophy is much more satisfying than religion in that respect—not because it provides answers, but because it raises questions that are worth asking, and because it helps to maintain the sense of wonder and awe that I feel whenever I look into the night sky or contemplate the terror and the beauty of nature.

Philosophy has also shown me that the seemingly small or insignificant questions it considers can often lead to bigger ones, the questions we ask are every bit as important as the answers we seek, all things are connected, and the world of my experience is vastly more complex, perplexing, mystifying, and wondrous than I could ever have imagined or supposed. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” (Ratcliffe, 2003, p. 372) as William Shakespeare put it in perhaps his most philosophical and famous play, *Hamlet*.

This is why I have also come to think that teaching philosophy and literature in a systematic or methodological way in our schools might provide the basis of a sound ethical education for students. For me, being moral, without being moralising and being ethical in our dealings with others are the hallmarks of being genuinely human. In this

work, I later go on to consider some specific areas of education that might benefit from the adoption of some particular teaching practices.

For example, when we write a story or a poem of any complexity where human beings are involved, deconstructing or evaluating such stories and poems can reveal or expose moral traits, assumptions, attitudes and beliefs, values, choices, prejudices and dilemmas of their authors. This arises because life, and education in particular, are, for most human beings, at least, unavoidably moral.

This is by no means an original idea. Plato, in *The Republic*, (Lee, 1955, pp. 114-115) argued that education is both for the mind as well as for the “character” of a person, and children should be taught those things they ought to possess when they grow up to become adults. Similarly, Aristotle, in Book Six of his *Nicomachean Ethics* (1996, pp. 149-51) linked “prudence” to “moral virtue” and moral virtue to “wisdom” as the core of philosophy and an essential aim of education. The influence of Plato and Aristotle, in particular, on education in the Western World can hardly be overstated, and is seen in the work of educationalists to this very day.

One such educationalist is Dr Tim Sprod, who claimed in his published doctoral dissertation, *Philosophical Discussion in Moral Education, The community of ethical enquiry*, (2001, p. 1), “Schools cannot avoid influencing the moral development of their students.” A key question in his work was “How can schools ensure that their (inevitable) influence on their students’ moral development is both positive and effective?”

Morality then, can be seen to be almost unavoidably ubiquitous in human affairs, and a close reading of my own stories, *In Search of Paradise*, which completes this chapter and *Post Card from Perth Zoo*, which completes Chapter Five also serve to illustrate this idea.

When I deconstruct my poem “Hamlet Revisited” in Chapter Three, I provide a worked example of the kind of deconstructive practice that I refer to in relation to deconstructing, in this instance, a poem. In this chapter I provide a list of poems I have selected carefully that might subject themselves to a similar kind of deconstruction in an educational context. My aim is to show in Chapters Four and Five of this work a new

and valuable way for teachers to approach the subjects of death (Chapter Four) and respect (Chapter Five), as subjects not only worthy of being taught, but ones that fundamentally need to be taught.

Ultimately I hope that the poem that begins and ends this work, “An October Salmon,” on a second reading, reveals or discloses itself more fully to my readers’ understanding. I hope that the many claims that I put forward in this work and that, at first glance, might seem to have little if anything at all to do with the poem that inspired it, will find justice in my readers’ deepening understanding of Hughes’ poem.

It might be worth reminding the reader at this point, however, that “An October Salmon” has religious overtones, for example, “What a change! From that covenant of Polar Light” [31] and “In the machinery of heaven” [60]. The poem clearly identifies closely with the natural world and human kind’s role and place in it—several fundamentally important elements in the way my world view was, has, and continues to be shaped and influenced to this very day.

My short story *In Search of Paradise* ends this chapter on what might seem an odd note. It was something I wrote more than twenty five years ago now. It provides a snapshot of my thinking at a time when I was about to be introduced to the works of the poet who wrote “An October Salmon.” I had been exposed to the works of another great poet, William Blake, a poet I now associate strongly with Hughes himself, because of his originality, his powerful voice, his visionary capacity to create his own mythology, and the spiritual, healing and cathartic power the best of his poetry is capable of releasing. The influence of William Blake, Hughes’ precursor, in my view, is obvious and, I admit, heavy-handed.

In Search of Paradise was my personal search for meaning at a time when I had started to study for an Arts degree and was struggling to come to terms with my father’s death. It was, looking back, decidedly self-conscious, but it involves a number of elements - my interest in animals, nature, science, philosophy, and technology - that were to surface much later, and in the context of being consciously self-conscious rather than unconsciously self-conscious, in my story *Post Card from Perth Zoo* (Chapter Five), which was written in 2007 while on a visit to Curtin University.

These stories serve a number of purposes in this work. Firstly they demonstrate that ideas that are intrinsically philosophical tend to be enduring over time. They also serve to demonstrate, in the context of this work as qualitative research rather than quantitative research, the paradigm most strongly associated with research that purports to be scientific research, that the voice and ideas expressed throughout it are indeed my own, and that the ideas being put forward that are meant to be relevant to the field of the human sciences, particularly from the perspective of phenomenology in its philosophical as well as its poetic aspects, are also my own. I ask my readers to read *In Search of Paradise*, which follows shortly.

Positing two such accounts from an identifiable author that can be shown to have been produced at very different stages of the author's life - *Post Card from Perth Zoo* was read to a group of fellow researchers in the presence of our academic supervisors soon after it was written in 2007 for feedback on its merits or faults as a research paper in the context of the researcher as an ethical observer - provides what I like to think of as a qualitative benchmark, one that tests for verisimilitude, amongst other things, in the absence of what might be considered harder or more objectively scientific data, data that often doesn't always come easily in the context of research in the field of human science as opposed to the psychological or even the more explicitly sociological areas of scientific research.

What, for instance, does poetry have to do with human science? In the context of the education of students on the vitally important subjects of death, which is also to say life, and respect, which is also to say the way we might choose to live our lives, I propose that poetry is not just relevant, but that it has the potential to be extremely useful, effective and powerful.

Returning to the idea that my early religious upbringing led me to interests later in my life that have been extremely valuable and important to shaping that life in a meaningful way, in terms then of our own uniquely held conceptions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of our lives, as autonomous individuals and human beings, they are almost inevitably - and as Professor Robert Winston points out in his book, *The Story of God* (2005, p. 65) - determined (no pun or irony intended) by how we view our freedom to

act. This is to some extent, at least, going to be bound up in whether or not we believe in God and the possibility of an afterlife.

Believing in whether or not there is a life to come, and what the nature of such a life might be, must, to some extent, to paraphrase Winston further, influence how we come to live our lives in this life. Accepting freedom and taking responsibility for our actions speaks to our innermost but often unarticulated beliefs about who we are, what we believe, and what we might yet become. Here then is a moment from an earlier version of myself, before my first encounter with Hughes and with what I like to refer to as his own unique masterpiece—his own search for meaning.

The following story has been retyped for the purpose of this work in a revised format, but the story has not been altered by even one word to maintain its authenticity and integrity (as an artefact from my past, originally written on a type writer) and as evidence to support the suggestion that problems or issues of a philosophical nature tend to be enduring and to have lasting effects.

In Search of Paradise

A Short Story by M. McCall. (Circa 1985: Age 30)

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

William Blake

There was no wind below Ouse Bridge. The air was warm, the Ouse still, and contented sheep cropped the verdant meadow, which gently rolled and dipped to the lucid water's edge. A distant yapping of dogs came on a current of air, as though the sound itself had stirred the trees, and the river blushed momentarily, for things whispered in a conspiracy of leaves. The sheep paused to consider the sound, their mouths still busy with grass.

Nearby, on the river's edge, Will Blakely too considered the approaching sound of excited dogs, while eating a ham roll that seemed to improve in taste, for being eaten in the country air. Indeed, the quality of air had affected other users of the reserve that day. Road weary travellers had entered the park to issue from their cars in patterns of predictability. Children would spill out to revel in the open field. Fathers, their chests expanding, would stretch new life into stiff limbs. While mothers, mindful of the need to repel insect borders, busied themselves with picnic preparations. For the moment, however, Will and the sheep were the reserve's only occupants.

The sound of barking dogs was joined by that of shouting men. It was becoming clear that a sheep drive was in progress. Columns of sheep were being herded through the town towards the bridge. Flanking dogs ran backwards and forwards barking their master's instructions to the orderly flock, alert for misbehaviour. Meanwhile, the escapees of a previous drive began to mill about nervously below the bridge, seeking, as was their custom, a leader to follow. It appeared to Will Blakely that confusion itself had assumed that duty.

William Blakely, Will to his intimates, was an unprepossessing individual – thirty years old and free of any physical trait that might have distinguished him from the run of ordinary men. He was, however, as was generally agreed by those who knew him, a man with an unusually active mind – a fact viewed ambivalently as both a virtue and a vice. He was one given to considering questions thought to be essentially unanswerable, and in that respect some saw him as something of a philosopher. Because he actually seemed to expect answers to such questions, others simply thought him a fool.

Activity was not the only hallmark of the Blakely mind. His was a mind possessed by doubt and need; the need to know a thing with a certainty, and a capacity to doubt what any normal person could accept without question. That he existed at all, though never seriously doubted, was a fact which altered his view of the world in a way that prevented him from simply accepting and enjoying life. For, in the absence of any reason for his being, life had become something to be scrutinised under the prevailing light of his personal experience, in the hope that some purpose might be discerned.

The mind which regards life as a mystery to be solved, is as much a part of the mystery as that which it contemplates. And, left too much alone with its own ideas, the Blakely mind, it could be said, was perilously close to madness. What had kept it from that awful precipice was an imagination which, unlike his capacity to reason, held no barriers to impede the free flow of his thought. It was into this domain of relative freedom that intractable thoughts, like animals pursued by a relentless hunter, would take flight – an avenue of escape sometimes used unaided by volition. It was such a mind, amused by the spectacle of leaderless sheep that was to undergo a remarkable change. Even by the peculiar standards of its possessor, Will Blakely.

He had risen early that morning, determined to enjoy a country outing. The passing of an hour saw him at Hamilton travelling towards Ouse, a favoured resting place. Bach's Brandenburg Concerto No.4 issued from the rear car speakers to mingle with the conditioned air of the cabin, and he wondered what a genius like Bach would make of the modern world.

Johann Sebastian Bach suddenly occupied the passenger seat in mute astonishment. He was horrified by the unnatural speed of the glass-metal chariot, that seemed to draw the landscape towards itself, only to fling it behind with the other scenes passes. But the sensations of motion were quickly replaced by a feeling of amazement. It was his music playing! So clear, and yet utterly impossible. It was as though the ghosts of unknown musicians shared the alien space of the chariot. Music, emanating out of time, out of air, out of nothing. How could that be?

Summoned from centuries past by Will's mind, the imagined Bach reflected his own incomprehension for the miracles of a modern age, and not for the first time, he felt strangely out of step with his own time. Ouse appeared astride the blue-metal ribbon of progress and Bach vanished, leaving Will free to negotiate the gridded entrance of the reserve.

It was now mid morning and most of the sheep had traversed the river. But it was the sheep below the bridge the held Will's attention, and he began to think – Had they escaped once more the journey of their kind, and where would that journey lead? Perhaps to new pasture. Perhaps a shearing yard. Or was it to slaughter? Man's use of animals was a source of irony in Will's mind, and it began to seek an answer to a dilemma that had already formed in his subconscious – a dilemma inspired by the dull stare of a sheep's eyes.

A delicatessen was established in the city that catered for the dogs and cats of caring owners. Roo, beef, and chicken were the principal items offered for sale, and many a pet lover vouched their freshness and quality. It seemed odd that people openly devoted to one kind of animal felt no compunction, to see the remains of another wrapped in grease proof paper. Animals possessed of intelligence, or those attributed with personality, were often spared the indifference shown to others – for what were these sheep to men? Little more than crops. Cultivated for harvest.

Will considered the remnants of his roll and the shadow of hypocrisy touched his reason. It was need, he thought. The way of all things. Nature. Who would deny the tiger its prey? The hunter, the hunted? And yet the feeling persisted – a feeling that there was something corrupt about Nature itself, in which perpetual death guaranteed survival. For a moment he felt shame for his own flesh, its interminable needs and appetites, and if desire alone could ensure action, he thought that he could shrug his body off like a dirty robe. The moment passed, and the deceit made him smile. Desire, it seemed, was not so easily shed.

The marriage of desires culminates in an experience of inexplicable origin and irresistible purpose. From it life emerges, brittle and new – and with it, perhaps that most miraculous of all events, the rise of consciousness. It was consciousness and its self-regarding quality that informed William Blakely's vision of the world. He had, early in life, come to associate it with mind, and in turn, spirit. That he possessed a soul was something he knew with the certainty of intuitive belief – a belief affirmed by the religious education of his formative years. God the creator was the author of life, and the force behind an ordered universe. If evil existed in the world it was simply part of

a design too vast for mortal comprehension, and therefore beyond question. To be thus, sustained by faith, would have ensured the peace Will had come to lose, between his childhood and maturity.

A desire for knowledge had always been a strong drive in his life. Natural curiosity, and an aversion to mediocrity, meant continuing his education to the limits of his intellect. But the acquisition of knowledge had been a process of spiritual erosion. The more he learned about the world the less he knew about himself. Men in white coats, the protagonists of technology and science, had demonstrated that man – *Homo sapiens* – was an animal. To talk of souls was at best speculative, and at worst naïve. The tree of knowledge had merged with the tree of an ape-like ancestor, and God had become enigmatic – a force that drew men upright on their frames of bone, some million years past – no longer an object of faith, but of unfathomable mystery. The death of his father was a trauma that served only to exacerbate the mental conflicts that disturbed his peace at unlikely times, and unlikely places – as in Ouse, where the dilemma had surfaced in his mind like a berg, its bulk hidden from view.

Thought had tired him. Useless, unresolved thought: It told him that sheep were soulless creatures. Animals. But he too was an animal. Distinguished by a larger brain and a capacity to reason, but an animal nonetheless. The possibility, however, that he too had no soul was repellent for one in whom the soul had become an *idée fixe* – a continuing hope, that death was somehow transcended by spirit. The soul for him made love indestructible, and the only thing that could make death a tolerable burden. Yet the notion that animals also possessed souls had proved an equally undesirable alternative. If they too were sentient beings, like human kind, then not only was man's use of animals cause for moral concern, but again drew Nature and her author into question.

If there was much in Nature that was both beautiful and ugly, there seemed little or no hint of any moral purpose in its design. Morals, it appeared, were exclusively man's. The latter thought reminded him of something the poet Yeats had written, Nor dread nor hope attend a dying animal; A man awaits his end dreading and hoping all... Man has created death. Perhaps that was true, but Will felt no inclination to ponder further. He felt immensely tired, and though it was only just afternoon, decided to rest awhile, and clear

the fog from his mind. He lay back in the seat of his car, the sun warm against his skin, and slept.

He opened his eyes, surprised that it was no longer day but night. Normally, such a gross loss of time would have necessitated a hurried departure. But he felt no need to hurry anywhere. Feeling relaxed, revived in body and spirit, he decided instead to take a walk by the river. The night was absolutely still, and no leaf stirred, Stars shone in the heavens with unnatural brilliance, and the moon, almost full, had the aspect of a sphere.

Arriving at the water's edge, he was stunned to see the heavens at his feet. So still was the face of the water. In that inner world of light, between water and air, the moon and stars had taken on another existence. The moon was close enough to make him think one step would take him there, but the awe that usually accompanied a contemplation of space was quickly replaced by vertigo, rising in his throat. Staring down into the night sky, instead of up, had given a false sensation – of standing at the very edge of a flat world - a feeling that if he fell he would never stop.

He wanted to break the spell, so bending down he cupped his hand to receive water, and was appalled by what he saw. The head of a large tiger stared back from the reflection that should have been his own. He froze, unable to believe the evidence of his eyes. But what his eyes could doubt his other senses could not. The hot breath of its panting had hit him square in his face. He tried to move, but terror kept him there, and then the moon erupted in a shower of light, as the tiger the tiger pounced...

The scream rattled out of silence and he found himself confronted in the glass of his rear view mirror, sweat dripping from his face. The face in the glass appeared to scream long after he himself had stopped, and he waited for the image of reality to merge with his own perceived actions – not yet aware that he had escaped the dream. His heart fluttered wildly in its cage like a frightened bird, but his breathing gradually eased into its normal rhythm, and at last he knew where he was. It was still day and children were playing happily at the opposite end of the meadow.

The hounds of logic and reason had pursued thought into a dark and unfamiliar forest – the forest of the imagination. There they encountered a quarry they had not expected to find, and the hunters had become the hunted. When Will Blakely had finally driven home that day, it was therefore with an altered sense of who he was, and what he might yet become. The warning had been clear. A return to the edge that marked the end of reality, and the beginning of a fearful void, could lead to a fall from sanity itself, with no return. He knew well enough, that whichever tree had stood as the fountain-head of man's existence in the world, man had left it long ago, in search of better fruit to pick. Perhaps his own search had been different, only in that it represented a return to forbidden fruit – knowledge that was never his to own.

The End.

The question of what it means to be a human being has been one of abiding and enduring interest ever since I first came to be in enough possession of the idea that I am a human being myself, and was able to question for myself if what I understood about this idea had the same meaning for others. And every other question linked to life's possible purpose or meaning have been on my mind, in one form or another, from the moment I first began to study philosophy and literature in earnest.

Together with the undoubted influence of religion on my life, particularly on my early life, the answers to the questions posed in the introductions to the first two chapters of this work, "What has most affected or influenced my life and the way I have chosen or come to live it?" and "Why has philosophy, literature, and poetry in particular, become such an important part of my life?" have now been answered.

More can and should be said, however, to explain why science, business, music, or a host of other interests, interests that have also featured significantly in my life, have not been as important to the way I have chosen to live my life. Without doubt, the answer to that particular question came when I was introduced to the poetry and prose of Ted Hughes for the first time – in the first years of my undergraduate studies.

Ted Hughes was born in Mytholmroyd in West Yorkshire in 1930. He initially read English at Cambridge University but later changed to Anthropology. He was famously married to Sylvia Plath, the American poet - and infamously linked by feminists to her suicide in 1963 - and was England's Poet Laureate before his death in 1998. He was a prolific writer who achieved many things during his lifetime, far too many to mention here, but a link to a useful chronology of the milestone achievements of his life can be found on a number of websites. In terms of Hughes' published works, *Earth-Moon: A Ted Hughes Website* (http://www.earth-moon.org/th_publications.html) is particularly useful for scholars, students and general readers of his work alike. It also contains useful and interesting biographical links and links to works of criticism by Hughes himself and by critics and scholars of his prodigious poetic and prose output.

Why Hughes became such an influence on my own life and its future direction is answered in part by the following quote from Peter Goldsworthy's novel *Maestro* (1989, pp. x-xi). It echoes the quotation used to introduce this chapter,

The central debate in *Maestro* – which is an age-old debate about the role of Art, a debate that goes back to Plato’s Dialogues – is essentially a debate within myself. The conflicts in books are often internal conflicts within the writer, which are externalised – given names and bodies to wear, if you like. ... My work is always about debates, dualities [sense and intellect, child/adult/places].

The first thing I’d like to note about this is that Hughes was to become my Maestro, in much the same way that Goldworthy’s piano teacher (the Maestro of his novel) was to become his.

It is important to note here that I didn’t just aspire to be more like Ted Hughes, in terms of becoming a better poet and writer myself. I was, in many ways already like him—although very much a pale shadow or like version of someone who loomed impossibly large on my psyche.

I felt that Hughes and I shared similarities in our sensibilities, if not in our personalities, which might seem an odd thing to claim, given the two are so often strong reflections of each other. The following table provides a comparative profile, of a kind, that goes some way towards explaining why I might have thought this way, and still do, and why I was instantly attracted to Hughes as a poet, as a writer, as a person, and as a thinker, and to emphasise the point that I am very much his “pale shadow” in so many ways.

Hughes’ Life

He had an older brother and sister.

He and his family attended a Methodist church when he was young.

There were few books in the Hughes household but his mother made up stories to tell him.

My Life

I have an older brother and two younger sisters.

Until the age of fourteen, I attended a Methodist Church regularly with my family.

There were few books in my home, but my brother made up stories to tell me.

An early book for Hughes was one on nature and a few others later included old encyclopedias.

An early book, won at a Sunday School competition, was a nature book. It was greatly loved by my brother and by me. We also had a few old encyclopedias and a large Old Testament Bible with colour pictures to look at that later helped to encourage an interest in further reading.

As a young boy living in the country (Pennines Valley in Yorkshire), he loved (and feared) the outdoors and nature.

As a young boy, I lived in the country and loved (and feared) the outdoors and nature.

Hughes first began fishing for salmon in the creek that ran behind the house where he was born and lived as a young boy in West Yorkshire; the village/town of Mytholmroyd.

I first began fishing for trout in Sorell Creek, near the place where I lived as a young boy; the small country community of Glenlusk in Tasmania.

He collected living creatures, including owls, magpies, rabbits, weasels, rats and curlews.

I collected mainly dead creatures, rocks and fossils, but over time the family amassed a considerable collection of pets and other animals, including: a ferret, dogs, cats (dumped near our house – 21 at one stage), aviary birds, and aquarium fish.

His brother taught him to fish, shoot, and trap.

My brother taught me to fish, shoot and trap (mainly rabbits and hares for the family to eat).

A book from his grammar school days that influenced Hughes' later literary interests was Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Hughes was to become a passionate reader as well as a writer throughout his life.

The film version of Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, which I saw as a youngster at a drive-in, had a powerful effect on my imagination, and it encouraged me, in my high school years, to read Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, the book that inspired my interest in literature and that lead directly to a life-long passion for reading.

A particular influence on him early in his life was reading *Tarka the Otter*, by Henry Williamson. Like Williamson, Hughes had an enduring interest in nature and the effects of World War One on those around him. Hughes sought to understand or make sense of conflict and violence, in nature and in the warring world of humankind.

Hughes came to develop a greater interest in poetry than prose and went on to read Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge, D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, Hopkins and Yeats (among many others).

Hughes was a sensitive and quiet person who came to believe in the healing power of poetry, particularly as a response to life's hardships and realities and as a vehicle for expressing and containing its often, violent energies.

Hughes had a passion for sex and was therefore passionate about women but his relationships with them were often troubled and difficult.

Hughes was a major poet and writer with strong philosophical as well as anthropological interests. He is a poet who raised many questions in a variety of contexts, across a range of literary forms, and through a variety of media. He had strong scholarly or academic interests, but was a poet first and foremost, and, in my view a very major poet and one for the ages yet to come.

A particular influence on me was the Kipling story my brother told me about the valiant young mongoose, *Rikki-Tikki-Tavi* and his fight with *Nag*, a big, black cobra. I have always disliked and feared conflict and violence (particularly in war) and have sought to try and understand it or to make sense of it for most of my life: Hughes' work has had a profound influence on my thinking in this respect.

I came to develop a greater interest in poetry than in prose, and in particular the poetry of Hughes himself, as well as of Shakespeare, Blake, T. S. Eliot, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Dylan Thomas, Gwen Harwood, Kenneth Slessor, Les Murray and Philip Larkin (among many others).

I am undeniably introverted and perhaps an overly sensitive person who believes strongly in the magical power poems can possess and release in their writers and in their readers when encountered at the right place and time.

I became preoccupied with sex from an early age, but my few relationships with women were all trouble and ill-fated. I never developed what I would consider to be an "adult" view of sexual or even non-sexual human relationships. I am simply immature in that aspect of life and am likely to remain so until the day I die.

I am a philosopher first (albeit a poor one) and an insignificant minor poet second. Poetry that raises questions (Hughes' in particular) has had a strong influence or effect on me, precisely because my first love is philosophy. Literature (poetry included) comes a very close second, but my general interests could be described as being primarily scholarly and academic.

Suicide played an extremely significant part in Hughes' life, with both his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath, and his mistress, Assia Wevill, asphyxiating themselves using gas ovens. Hughes' second child to Assia, Alexandra (Shura), (their first child together was aborted) died alongside her mother under the influence of the sleeping pill mixture she had been given before her mother gassed them both. Hughes' son to Sylvia Plath, Nicholas, suffered, like his mother, from bouts of deep depression, and he too took his own life at the age of 47.

Hughes wrote one of his greatest and darkest collections of poetry, *Crow*, largely in direct response to the loss by suicide of his first wife, Sylvia Plath, and the later loss of his mistress, Assia Wevill and their daughter Shura. He never recovered from his losses. Hughes' infamous infidelities are believed to have played a part in the suicides of his wife and mistress, which seems highly likely. Hughes finally came to be in a stable and loving relationship with Carol Orchard until his death.

Hughes was possibly best known for his nature poems or poems about nature, which were also just as much about being human in the world of nature. And the dominant impulses behind his poems, or that motivated and moved them were, as Hughes observed himself, terror and awe.

Suicide has played a significant part in my life. My brother's wife died of a deliberate overdose of sleeping pills, and my first cousin, who I grew up with and knew well, took his life while still in his teens by gassing himself with fumes from the exhaust pipe of his father's car. I have also been suicidal in the past and have suffered from depression over the course of my life. I have written poems on suicide in an effort to come to terms with the loss of loved ones who have taken their own lives, and to help me get through the dark times that depression can bring.

I turned to writing poetry as a way of dealing with the grief of losing my wife through her infidelity to another man. It is a grief I still feel deeply to this day, but having a daughter of my own (Lisa), outside of marriage, (but to another person) has given my life a true sense of meaning and purpose; something I would not have thought possible before that happy event. In that respect, my life has come to have greater meaning and value than it might otherwise have had, and for that I am very grateful.

Terror and awe are the cornerstones of my own view of nature and of the physical world. I see in nature intelligence, design, order, chaos, vitality, violence, life, death, blood, unspeakable cruelty and unassailable beauty. I see in it too, the everyday ordinariness of existence, survival, and the habituation of all living things to their environments and their often, predictable lives.

A fox that appeared to Hughes in a dream had a potent and lasting effect on Hughes as a poet. His famous and highly regarded poem “The Thought Fox” was thought to be the outward manifestation of the decision Hughes had made, at a psychological level, to turn away from the study of English at Cambridge and towards his study of Anthropology; a study that clearly informs a number of his anthropological and mythological poems and collections, especially *Lupercal* (1960), *Wodwo* (1967), *Crow* (1970), *Gaudete* (1977), and *Cave Birds* (1978).

An encounter with a fox in 2004, the year I travelled to England and had a chance meeting with Ted Hughes’ daughter, Frieda at a reading of her poetry in the National Portrait Museum in London, and the opportunity to see (again by chance) a Hughes exhibition based on his work *Crow* (1970), at The British Library, had a potent effect on my aesthetic and moral appreciation of the natural world. It has become, as a result of these several influences, much more in tune with Hughes’ own. It’s an aesthetic I have come to think of now as a moral aesthetic, where morality and beauty have merged into an aesthetic view of life that approximates to the aesthetic view of several early Greek philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle.

To say I was and still am a devotee of Hughes might be pushing it, but not, I admit, by much (as the table provided might suggest). But whatever the merits or otherwise of any such comparisons may be, I will say that I fell in love, first and foremost, with Hughes’ powerful use of language, more on this in Chapter Four, and with his way of writing about the worlds of words and experience, and how these two worlds can be brought together to great effect through the writing of prose and poetry.

Hughes also drew my attention to the notion that the world of nature and the world of human beings are too often separated artificially by certain aspects of human culture and religion. But to my own way of thinking, they are also inevitably separated by what it means to be a human being, which is intimately connected to what Hughes himself might have referred to as the “cultural accretions” that come about from human culture, tradition and endeavour.

Many authorities and critics of Hughes’ work write about it as if he were just a nature poet, but the majority of his works are about – either directly or indirectly – what it means to be a human being. Another reason why I find his work compelling and of enduring personal interest.

Hughes' poem "An October Salmon," is a case in point. *Prima-facie* it is about the life and death of a salmon, but scratch the surface - even a little - and it soon becomes apparent that the poem is so much more than just a nature poem by a nature poet.

"An October Salmon" is a rich and complex poem, one that is at once a nature poem, a poem of atonement, a search for meaning, a drama of unresolved internal dualities and tensions, as well as a dark, ugly, and yet impossibly beautiful poem of great lyricism and dramatic power. It is also an ecologically aware poem that could be described, in terms of its language and the imagery, and the reverence it engenders for the salmon's plight and heroic journey, as a "religious" poem. It is also a poem that places human beings squarely at its heart – as this work will continue to reveal.

Returning though, for the moment, to Goldsworthy's observation about his own work (1989, x-xi) , it is almost impossible to read the works of Hughes without being struck by their relevance to Goldsworthy's own unique body of work. What Goldsworthy said about his work could have been said by Hughes about his own. The fact that Hughes' work so often involves dualities reflects the similarities with Goldsworthy's work. His epic narrative poem, "Gaudete" (1977), for example, is explicitly about a *doppelgänger* priest he calls Lumb, who is divided literally, as well as metaphorically and symbolically, against and from himself, in a quest to understand life's purpose, meaning or truth.

Not just "Gaudete," but virtually every major collection of Hughes' poetic and literary *oeuvre* or output is redolent with some aspect of the poet's inner conflicts and the emotional turmoils that the many dualities his works inspire. And this reveals an artist alive to the tensions within himself, and it's yet another reason I was instantly attracted to Hughes' work, being, as I was, riven and conflicted myself by the dualities that were becoming prominent in my own life.

There is, for example, a major tension or duality in "An October Salmon" which isn't particularly obvious without a broader knowledge and understanding of Hughes' work. It is a tension that came to dominate Hughes' poetry and prose and it has come to dominate mine. Like Goldsworthy's piano teacher, mentor and font, Hughes has come to have a powerful influence on my own world-view.

Like Hughes, I am keen to explore – in myself and in others – the whole notion of what it means to be connected and disconnected, at a personal level, with and from others, and to the natural world and its environment. Indeed, one of the reasons I believe “An October Salmon” is one of Hughes’ greatest achievements, is that it explores the themes of connection and disconnection - important themes for humanity - so completely, effectively and efficiently.

A more direct example of what I am talking about here is a poem called “Table for Two,” which I wrote shortly after being introduced to Hughes’ work. I offer it here to provide some insight into the kind of ideas that were preoccupying me at the time and to illustrate the point that, like Hughes, who was quickly becoming my own muse and Maestro, dualities were a preoccupation or predisposition in terms of my thinking and my own tentative attempts to create art.

TABLE FOR TWO

Primeval, the pack round on a falling beast
Tearing its entrails out.
Brought to ground, it turns its head
And witnesses the feast . . .

'We've come a long way,' he began to say
'From that strange and savage time,
When men were simple animals,
Coarse and unrefined.'

He ate a steak between the talk
Of man's sophistication,
Indicating with his fork

The course mankind had taken.

'Who,' he asked 'knew right from wrong,
Distinguished good from bad,
With reason, that great gift from God,
Who alone but man.'

'And reason,' he claimed with some disdain,

'Kept passion in its place
And gave mankind a destiny
Peculiar to its race;

A natural right to make a choice
To govern history,

The chance to bring Justice to his world
With Truth and Liberty.'

He drank some wine to curb the thirst
Induced by his dissertation,
So I pondered on the state of man's
Divine administration.

I thought of limbs made gaunt and thin
For want of our repast,

Or torn in war to bloody shreds
For a Just and noble end

(All the while his steak diminished,
Fresh, rare and red)

And I wondered if a divine spark
Had ever touched man's head.

'Truth,' he said 'unlike our clothes,
Is not a thing of taste,
Passion, or what our minds dispose,
To change as will dictates;

That man alone discerns the truth
Is proof of higher grace,'

And on that point the waiter came
To clear away our plates.

From infant time the pack divine
Grew to walk and talk,

The beast became a fatted steer,
The spear a knife and fork.

Justice, Truth, man's noble robes,
Cloak his nakedness,

Against the legacy lingering still
He struggles to redress;

And when the spring which bears his Love
Becomes the torrent, Hate,

Remote, alone, a witness sits,
And quietly contemplates.

— M. McCALL

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My poem was inspired by the Triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, "The Garden of Earthly Delights," and by the poem by Ted Hughes called "Hawk Roosting," an early poem from his first major collection of published poems called *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). It

was a poem that created a stir at the time of its publication amongst critics who thought that Hughes' hawk was too violent and symbolic of something arrogant and even malevolent in Hughes' own nature. Of his hawk though, Hughes said,

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 because 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. (Faas, 1980, p.199)

Religion was clearly a big influence on Hughes' thinking from the very beginning, and the religious overtones in his later poem, "An October Salmon," is evidence of his continuing preoccupation with religion in his poetic response to the world, as it has been with me. I also intend to show in Chapter Five why the quote just referred to, about religion - Christianity in particular - is fundamental to understanding so much of Hughes' poetry and prose, especially his more opaque and myth-based creations.

"An October Salmon" illustrates a task I believe Hughes set himself from the very beginning of his life as a published poet—to restore nature to the world of religion and to the world of human kind. It was a task that was inscribed, to borrow a phrase, in the poet's egg.

It is also worth noting, in this respect, that in an interview conducted with Hughes by Keith Sagar, one of his preeminent and closest critics - he was to become a confident and close personal friend of Hughes and someone whom I have corresponded with myself in recent years about the major themes and developments in Hughes' work - Hughes said,

If its [civilization] is still here, it's still here by grace of pure inertia and chance...one had better have one's spirit invested in something that will not vanish. And this is a shifting of your foundation to a completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse. (1981, p. 33)

Sadly, for Hughes scholars everywhere Sagar passed away only recently, and his loss will be felt keenly by those – myself included – who respected his insights highly and who admired his writings for their literary as well as their scholarly qualities.

Body simply the armature of energy [45]

Here then was not just a poet who shared my own terror and awe of nature, but one who was deeply affected by religion. He was also philosophical in his thinking, and, in this respect, I believe that Hughes came close to being a philosopher as well as a poet.

I say this for two reasons. Another well-known and respected critic of Hughes' work, Terry Gifford, observed (2011, p. 10), "in an always changing body of poetic work, and in a range of other literary modes, Hughes sought to raise questions for readers."

And on Hughes' poetic development, Neil Roberts, together with Gifford (1981, p. 11) noted, that he was "a poet who developed from an early reliance on external nature to a greater metaphysical assurance and the creation of a distinctive imaginative world." They also observed that in terms of his development he was a poet who had "neither overturned his imaginative world nor written himself out but has gone on finding new strategies for remaining true to a consistent inspiration" (p. 12).

It was Hughes' persistent return, in various poetic guises - as an anthropological poet, a mythmaker, a shaman, and an alchemist - to the same, recurring major themes of his work - life, death, religion and nature - and his ability to go on raising significant questions about them in a variety of forms, that brought his poetry into the realms not just of literature and art but of philosophy too. In this respect, Hughes is many different people and writers in one body, a source of energy devoted to returning, again and again, to the well-spring of his inspiration, and this is why the phrases "nature poet," "myth maker," "orientalist," "occidentalists," "spiritualist," "religious," "philosophical," and even "environmental" are employed by critics of his work to his various writings. Indeed, a close reading of his poem "An October Salmon" reveals aspects of each and every one of these terms, which is just one of a number of reasons why I consider this particular poem a true hallmark of Hughes' art, and is indeed, a masterpiece.

I have already observed that Hughes' work so often deals with dualities and "An October Salmon" provides an immediate case in point. It presents its readers with a number of dualities, some that are readily apparent, and others more subtle in their complexities.

The line "Body simply the armature of energy" [45], for example, brings to mind a problem in philosophy known as "the mind/body problem." It was a problem brought into sharp focus by the seventeenth century French philosopher, Rene Descartes, who distinguished between two essentially different substances, "mind" and "body" – a distinction that is made, maintained, and referred to in almost every aspect of modern life today, and it is constantly reflected in our daily use of language. As John Cottingham, a scholar of Descartes' work, has pointed out,

Descartes' 'dualistic' division of reality into two fundamentally distinct kinds of entity – thinking stuff and extended stuff – bequeathed a massive conundrum for philosophy that has been with us ever since: what exactly is the nature of consciousness, and what is its relationship to the physical world?...All agree that the 'mind-body' problem, as it has come to be known, is a philosophical-cum-scientific puzzle of enormous importance. (1997, p. 6)

Dualism gets into the very fabric of language itself - an idea I will discuss briefly in Chapter Three - but Hughes was very aware, not just in "An October Salmon," but in many of his poems, of the kind of distinction Descartes was making. It is reflected in his thinking when he talks about a body being the armature of energy. And while one does not immediately think of a salmon as having a soul, there is little doubt that Hughes, the poet, by making use of the pathetic fallacy in his poem – a literary device that attributes human characteristics and emotions to animals, nature, or objects for the purpose of creating empathy or to alter perspectives and understandings - is thinking about his own mortality in terms of the plight of a creature that he is empathising with or through.

It is, as Goldsworthy says, that conflicts in books, in this case a poem, are often internal conflicts within the writer that are externalised, and in "An October Salmon" the poet's own mortality is being examined through the life and death of a salmon.

So, just as Goldsworthy's works are about debates and dualities, Hughes' works too are almost always about debates and dualities.

As for debate in Hughes' writings, the debate in "An October Salmon" can be heard, for instance, "And yet this was always with him" [49]. Its almost as if everything that was written before this line brings the poet to a moment of recognition, a breakthrough moment in his own internal argument with himself, which elevates the salmon's plight as tragic but heroic to something even more profound—a moment of deep understanding or epiphany.

The dualities of tragedy and heroism, life and death, male and female, beauty and ugliness present in "An October Salmon" spring naturally from Hughes' poetic sensibilities. And this is also reflected in what remains as an unresolved tension in "An October Salmon." In what sense is Hughes' salmon heroic when it has no choice but to be the salmon it was always going to become? If all that the salmon's heroic journey is about was "always with him / This was inscribed in his egg" [49], how does Hughes' portrayal of his salmon as a hero make sense when presented in such a seemingly determined portrayal of nature? It is a tension that is accentuated at the very conclusion of the poem in the lingering and enigmatic line, "In the machinery of heaven" [60].

This raises, as I am convinced Hughes intended, some important philosophical questions. I will return to these later in Chapter Three, but for Leonard M. Scigaj there are other dualities to be considered in this poem, a poem that is ostensibly about a salmon,

The central tension in "October Salmon" derives from the opposition between the river and its flow, and the aging skin of the salmon, his "death-patched" embroidery. The river represents both the moment-to-moment flow of the phenomenal experience, and a "she"- the White Goddess as the poetic and spiritual possibilities within the phenomenal flow. Though the salmon's skin shows the dignity of age, "The flow will not let up for a minute." The river tires out the hero as his skin becomes ever more wizened and pitiable -"patched with leper cloths," the "clownish regimentals" of death, his "whole body/A fungoid anemone of canker." (1986, p. 312)

Hughes, in his prose collection, *Winter Pollen* (Scammell, 1994, pp. 150-1) also made this observation,

The inner world, separated from the outer world, is a place of demons. The outer world, separated from the inner world, is a place of meaningless objects and machines. The faculty that makes the human being out of these two worlds is called divine. That is only a way of saying that it is the faculty without which humanity cannot really exist. It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.

This is just one of the reasons I consider “An October Salmon” to be one of the great examples of this vision from Hughes’ poetic *oeuvre*, and Scigaj (1991, p. 141) points out that his use of the Animal Master myth in “An October Salmon” serves as a means “to mediate and resolve the contradictions of mortality for humans as well as the salmon.” He goes on to say that the concluding salmon poems of *River* (1983) have the power to “open a cathedral for the spirit and reveal the presence of the eternal in the temporal.” And this too, is why I have come to see the poem as a religious poem, amongst other things.

It is also worth mentioning that the word temporal is significant, in the context of Hughes’ poetic output. The temporal processes of change, decay, and mortality, for instance, are recurring themes, and are often at the heart of Hughes’ greatest poetic achievements and his poem “Coming Down Through Somerset,” from his collection *Moortown* (1979), is a fine example and another poem I would consider a masterpiece.

For now, I would like to turn my attention to a significant duality that has always been uppermost in terms of my own poetic and philosophical sensibilities: the distinctions we make between what is animal and what is human. I think it is worth reviewing, briefly, the kind of claims that appear often to take the form that only humans use tools, make war; lie, kill for sport, murder; take medicine, farm and cultivate, know death, use language, solve problem, have free will, are responsible, make promises, think about thinking, or, are truly intelligent.

Such claims suggest, in somewhat negative terms, in some instances, those things that are meant to set humans apart from other animal, not in terms of degrees of difference but in substantively different ways, which purports or implies that human beings are somehow unique and therefore in a position of privilege or superiority when compared to other animals. For example, we could take each human trait above and juxtapose similar animal traits.

Humans use tools. Monkeys make tools with which to capture ants, crack nuts, and kill (in the case of chimpanzees) other monkeys.

Humans make war. Ants make raids on other ants and enslave them. Plants and some primates also use warlike strategies to gain territorial advantage.

Humans lie. If camouflage is deception with intent, and lying is deception with intent, there are many liars in the natural world.

Humans kill for sport. Cats, including domestic cats, can kill without eating what they have killed. It would be anthropomorphic to suggest this is sport but the possibility remains open. Killer whales, or Orcas, for instance, also appear to play with their food but they do invariably eat what they kill, something human beings, like cats, may not do.

Humans murder. Chimpanzees have been filmed torturing and killing other monkeys without any discernable reason, is this murder?

Humans take medicines. Elephants and parrots visit favourite locations regularly to apply and eat dirt and mud for what appear to be solely medical reasons. Domestic dogs and cats also eat grass it seems, to medicate themselves.

Humans farm and cultivate. Ants capture aphids and milk them in their ant nurseries. The aphids are protected and fed by the ants. Some termites cultivate (tend, store and harvest) food with which to feed themselves and their young. Bees also make and store food for later use, and Royal Jelly for their future queens.

Humans know death. While there can be little doubt that human beings know long before death that they are mortal, there seems to be little doubt that animals can sense death before they die. Some animals, including elephants and cats, show definite signs of this kind of foreknowledge or awareness.

Humans are more intelligent. A peach, it might be argued, is intelligent in as much as it surrounds its kernel with fleshy fruit that encourages animals to ingest, transport, and excrete it somewhere with a ready source of fertiliser. Rationalisation, intelligent design, evidence of something else or evidence of nothing at all? The speed of memory recall in some monkeys has been shown to be more advanced than in humans, and memory is strongly linked to intelligence and to learning ability.

Humans use language. Is language not about communication? Animals communicate. Their modes are many and varied. Who can say that human language is superior to any such mode?

Humans are rational, they solve problems. The African Grey Parrot can identify objects by colour, number, shape and size, giving correct one word responses, orally, in response to questions put to them concerning these categories. Dolphins, primates, octopi, squirrels, and ravens have also demonstrated substantial problem-solving abilities.

Humans have free will. This is genuinely problematic, in the sense that I cannot say with absolute knowledge that human beings themselves have this facility. What I can say is that if human beings are animals and have free will, why wouldn't other animals have this facility as well? (If we accept that humans are animals too, of course.)

Humans are responsible. Many animal species show a remarkable degree of parental care and responsibility for their young, but just like humans, not all animals take responsibility for the ongoing needs of their offspring.

Humans make promises. Is the care some animals show towards their young a promise of nature itself to commit to their future?

Humans question. Animals question in their own unique ways – is not the head tilt of a dog a form of inquiry?

Humans think about thinking. Human beings think about thinking and seek meaning or purpose from their experience of life. Higher primates appear to be capable of this faculty, although further studies might eventually substantiate this possibility.

Many of these examples have been demonstrated in television documentaries and digital video recordings by David Attenborough over an extensive period of time, filmed by the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) Natural History Unit including, [Life on Earth](#) (1979), [The Living Planet](#) (1984), [Lost Worlds, Vanished Lives](#) (1989), [The Trials of Life](#) (1990), [Life in the Freezer](#) & [The Private Lives of Plants](#) (1995), [The Life of Birds](#) (1998), [State of the Planet](#) (2000), [The Blue Planet](#) (2001), [The Life of Mammals](#) (2002), [Life in the Undergrowth](#) (2005), [Planet Earth](#) (2006), [Sharing Planet Earth](#) (2007), and [Life in Cold Blood](#) (2008).

“From the beginning,” as Sagar noted,

[Hughes'] main concern has been with the relation between the human and the non-human worlds, or, more recently with the denial of any such distinction...Thus his animal poems, for example, are both wonderfully accurate observations of real animals and also symbols of deep psychic and spiritual realities. (1981, p. 1)

In this respect, I believe that Hughes has much in common with another visionary but much earlier English poet, William Blake. Blake, whose poem, “Tyger, Tyger,” is very much in the same vein as a number of Hughes' so-called animal poems.

Such dualities then, that are prevalent in Hughes' work, are an intrinsic part of the poet's art, and they help to create the imaginative and dramatic tensions that are waiting to be resolved like discordant notes of music into a more pure and melodic moment of harmony – understanding - or single, pure, and memorable note - epiphany. “An October Salmon,” for me at least, is an example of such art, although the note the poem ends with is neither single nor pure—but the poem remains the more remarkable for it and entirely memorable.

In the next chapter, I go on to consider how philosophy, literature, and poetry might help, as they have helped me, to make sense of our lives, ourselves, the dualities and other complex issues that life presents us with, and the lives of others.

Chapter Three Making Sense

Time that is moved by little fidget wheels
Is not my Time, the flood that does not flow.
(From “Five Bells” by Kenneth Slessor)

The flow will not let up for a minute. [30]

In Chapter One I relate the story of how I came to value philosophy and literature, and how philosophy, in particular, with its emphases on the meaning of things, and its usefulness in raising and addressing issues of enduring and abiding interest to me came to be the path I chose to follow in terms of trying to live a meaningful – and examined – life. The flow of life has indeed not let up - not for one minute – from the moment it began, itself a subject of intense debate, which brings me to this chapter, which asks the question “How might philosophy, literature, and poetry help others to make sense of their lives, themselves and others?” The chapter is entitled “Making Sense” for good reason, because philosophy, literature and poetry have become for me, principal means for making sense of a sometimes seemingly senseless and meaningless world.

I intend to demonstrate the ways I do this a little later in this chapter, when I come to discuss a piece of prose I wrote called *Postcard at Perth Zoo*, and following that, I deconstruct some poetry of my own making to show the usefulness of doing just that as one way of making sense of some of life’s more intransigent and resistant issues and dilemmas, and to show how that might be a useful thing for others to do in educational settings.

The fundamental though simple, and possibly flawed, assumption behind such an approach is, that if something has worked well for me in the past, in terms of making sense of often difficult moral or ethical or philosophical problems, then perhaps the same approach might work well for others. That, of course, remains to be seen or proven.

Making sense of things, when it can be achieved, or at least attempted, is in all probability a better alternative to not trying to make sense of things at all. There are the

clichés like “Ignorance is bliss” and “Ignorance is strength” to contend with. I think the majority of reasonable people would rather simply agree at the outset that it is better to make sense of life than to make nonsense of it – if that makes sense - notwithstanding the pure delight a little bit of nonsense can undoubtedly afford from time to time.

This brings me to the question of time itself and to the quote used to begin this chapter, “Time that is moved by little fidget wheels is not my time, the flood that does not flow.” This line comes from a favourite poem of mine by the Australian poet Kenneth Slessor called “Five Bells.” It was poem he wrote in memory of a friend who drowned, and the following lines from the poem (Heseltine, 1982, p. 158) show the link the poet perceives between memory and time when recalling to mind his absent friend.

Where have you gone? The tide is over you,
The turn of midnight water’s over you,
As Time is over you, and mystery,
And memory, the flood that does not flow.

Slessor suggests that memories, vivid as they may be, are like a flood that should by definition “flow” but cannot. Memories can never quite replace the actual reality of a person’s presence in time, or the whole and total experience or fullness of such a consciously apprehended moment—even if the memory of such a moment can be held up in store to be called upon again later by a mind in an act of memory that seeks to flood the parched landscape of its thirsty imagination.

The enigmatic nature of transient or ephemeral things like time, space, light, being, freedom and consciousness - things that may or may not be things in their own right at all but co-dependencies - reminds me that science, in trying to explain how things work often fails to come to terms with the fullness and seamlessness of things as they appear to be to human beings with a particular way of seeing, interpreting, and understanding the phenomenal world of their experience—with that ordinary, and extraordinary, way that human beings reconcile the inner world of their subjective experience with the outer world that stimulates and feeds and nourishes it.

In describing how things work or are, and often in the language familiar to students versed in the language and enduring spirit of logical positivism, science often commits

acts of reductionism that do little to explain either how or why things are as they are in meaningful ways to those who are not themselves scientists and versed in the ways of science or the language of science.

While this might appear not to be such a big problem in many respects, one might note that things as they appear to be to us can begin to lose their meaning as more of that meaning is appropriated by the languages of physics, mathematics, chemistry, biology, and so on, to the point that mechanical and causal explanations involving processes of cause and effect become both meaningful and meaningless; meaningful in terms of their capacity to help scientists predict future outcomes but meaningless in their ability to reflect the fullness or seamlessness of our conscious experience.

And this can have serious implications for every human being, as the neuroscientist Professor Susan Greenfield points out in her book, *Tomorrow's People. How 21st Century Technology is Changing the Way We Think and Feel* (2003, p. 237).

In general, we will have to confront the big issue of whether science has made us less accountable for our actions, whether the apparent determinism suggested by various scientific observations is indeed real.

This is why art, as well as science, although each has much in common with the other in terms of their reliance on observation and interpretation, remains of vital interest and concern to human beings, scientists, of course, included. And it is also why, for me at least, the poetic self is not just an artist but is in a very real sense a scientist of the soul as well.

Author, Bill Bryson, expresses the contradictions inherent in the often, mechanistic explanations of scientific or objective reductionism or logical positivism in the following way.

To begin with, for you to be here now trillions of drifting atoms had somehow to assemble in an intricate and curiously obliging manner to create you...Why atoms take this trouble is a bit of a puzzle...For all their devoted attention, your atoms don't actually care about you...It is a slightly arresting notion that if you were to pick yourself apart with tweezers, one atom at a

time, you would produce a mound of fine atomic dust, none of which had ever been alive but all of which had once been you. (2003, p. 1)

What I refer to as the fullness or seamlessness of our conscious experience brings to mind alternate theoretical views of the phenomenon we call light. Like time, light can and has been described in terms of discrete parts, time that is moved by little fidget wheels - particles or packages of energy or photons - and alternatively as wave energy—the flood that flows.

When I think about consciousness, I often wonder what “being in the moment” is meant to convey. Is it the notion of being more aware of being conscious, or of being so engrossed in a creative act, for example, as to become completely unaware of being conscious? But isn't being focussed or completely immersed, or being given over to a task - be it mathematical or musical or poetic - something that requires us to be more rather than less conscious of what we are doing?

In Chapter Two, I talk about the importance of dualities in my way of seeing the world, so it is hardly surprising that they should come so readily to the surface again here, when I am trying to make sense of such complete, seamless, yet complex things as time, light and consciousness. I am becoming increasingly aware that many dualities appear to emerge from what might be thought of as singularities.

Another way of expressing this idea is to suggest that dualities can be seen as aspects of a single entity, in the same way that a single coin has two sides. The same idea can be applied to individual words and their opposing meanings, or even to states of being. Pride can become hubris, for example, virtues vices and vices virtues, and so on.

John F. Haught presents an alternative view to naturalism in his book *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*. Nature is a purposeless universe. He challenges the kind of reductionist views presented to us most commonly by behavioural scientists, psychologists, and philosophers who are often fundamentally determinists.

Natural occurrences, not to mention human creativity, become intelligible only if one does more than just take note of the causal history that leads up to them, or of the atomic constituents ingredient in them. To appreciate the

full reality of emergent phenomena it is necessary to attend also to their present openness to future transformation. Everything in nature, as recently chastened physics now has to admit, is open to future outcomes that defy scientific prediction on the basis of what has already occurred in the realm of the earlier and simpler. This freedom from absolute determination by the past is part of their identity just as it is part of my own. Why, ultimately, nature has this general openness to possibility the natural sciences do not say. (2006, p. 210)

Howard Gardner in his book *Truth, Beauty and Goodness Reframed: Educating for the Virtues in the 21st Century* makes this salient observation.

One of the most alarming aspects of reductionism - whether of the natural scientific (evolutionary theory) or social scientific (economic analyses) varieties – is the sometime implication that humanistic study is expendable...Only through philosophy can one begin to think about the nature of statements and claims that invoke the terms true, beautiful, and good, and the territories where these statements (often highhandedly) obtain. (2011, pp. 202-3)

I wish to suggest that life, at its core, at least from a human perspective, is essentially poetic. While aspects of life can be recalled through memory as a series of discrete moments of greater or lesser significance, be they associations brought about by sights, sounds, smells, touch and taste, or by other associations, whether mental or physical, memories too can approach, in rare moments of concentrated purity, something of the fullness of a lived experience that ultimately defies and defeats all efforts to analyse that kind of reality or to pin it down. Or as T.S. Eliot put it in his famous poem “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,”

And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall, / Then how should I begin / to spit out all the butt-ends of my days and ways? (Kermode & Hollander, 1973, p. 1974)

Hughes expresses a similar viewpoint in his prose work *Winter Pollen* (1994), where he states (p.151),

The word 'divine,' with its relatives, can never be more than a convenient finger-post pointing towards those orders of experience which mankind goes on stumbling into, in terror and awe, even while he argues about them in terms of brain rhythms and brain chemistry.

The salt mouthful of actual existence [47]

What I refer to then as the fullness or seamlessness of our lived experience of life, and its resistance to the kind of reductionist accounts I have been referring to, is what leads me to think of life as being essentially poetic, which is, I now have to acknowledge, redolent with irony, because poetry, by its very nature, and with music being the only other art form in my experience that comes closest to getting to the heart of life's emotional meaning for human beings, is an artificial construct and one that condenses experience in a concentrated refocused way. It overtly strives to say more with less or to express something of the ineffable with words, sounds, and the rhythmical patterns arranged or composed to achieve a particular and meaningful effect.

In that sense, poetry and prose is a kind of reductionist expression of our lived experienced or "the salt mouthful of actual experience," as Hughes puts it in his poem "An October Salmon." Poetry, while artifice and craftsmanship, when it speaks to us directly, can however be profound, moving, meaningful, truthful and beautiful.

Words and language, despite being changeable and arbitrary signifiers of meaning, can still manage to capture our deepest and most profound feelings in a concentrated way in a way that opens out or invites rather than closes down or excludes the meaning of our actual experience and, when in the moment of capturing a poetic idea and expressing it, we may not even be aware of having captured anything at all, until after the poetic moment has passed and some sense can be made of what has been caught or discovered in the trap set by our open and freed imaginations. These are ideas I will explore later in this chapter when I come to demonstrate them by using examples of my own prose and poetry.

Before doing so, I should point out here, however, that prose and poetry, or more broadly, literature, are often intimately concerned with the world not only as it appears to be but the world as we think or perceive it to be, and in that respect phenomenology and poetry might be considered, if not siblings - in the way music and poetry can

reasonably be imagined - then first cousins would not be stretching the point beyond the reach of credibility.

What exactly is phenomenology and why do I claim any kind of connection at all between it and literature, and poetry in particular? I hope to show in this chapter, why phenomenology and literature can be powerful allies in the pursuit of human knowledge and understanding of ourselves, of others, and of the world we all share.

Firstly phenomenology is the study of how things appear, not how we think they appear, and, to be more specific, how things appear to human consciousness. To use a simple example, the image of a stick half immersed in water gives us - or our comprehending consciousness - the impression that the stick is bent.

Appearance on the surface, or *prima facie*, can immediately be seen to be misleading once the stick is removed from the water. What we think we have seen is a bent object, what we learn by removing the stick from water is how the stick appears in reality. But even then, the question of reality itself raises certain questions about what we can know about the real nature of the world around us and external to us when what we know is necessarily constructed through our language and reason and derived through the interpreting filters of our minds, bodies and their various senses whenever they experience themselves, others and the world.

In the example of the stick, science tells us that the refraction of light is what makes the stick look bent as light waves pass through the different mediums of air and water. Understanding what is real and what isn't, by getting below the surface of mere appearance alone provides an important lesson that how things appear to be and how they are in a more objectified reality can be, and often are, very different things indeed.

Such considerations are at the heart of what philosophers refer to as phenomenology. It is, of course, important to recognise what is real from what appears to be real, and not just to philosophers and scientists. Just ask an Aboriginal, for instance, who is relying on spearing a fish for his family to eat, why he needs to allow for something a scientist calls refraction when taking aim at the fish he is hoping to spear. He may, or may not know what refraction means, but his lived experience tells him to ignore what he appears to

see and to concentrate on what his mind tells him about where to aim his spear. It is a lesson he has learned from both reason and experience as a sensing and interpreting being.

Of course, one of the problems this kind of scenario sets up, in philosophical terms, is that there can be endless arguments about what is real and what isn't, particularly when appearances can be so deceptive, misleading, or false guides to the way things are or how they work. This in turn has created frustration among many approaching philosophy for the first time expecting to find answers to some of life's more difficult questions, not realising that philosophy is often more about finding better questions to ask than it is about finding definitive answers to enduring and possibly intransigent questions.

This problematising of philosophy is in part reflected in how philosophers have come to view phenomenology itself. For example, the short answer to the question, "What is phenomenology?" can become, in the hands of philosophers themselves, a matter of seemingly endless debate. Indeed, it appears that there are almost as many explanations of what phenomenology is, or what it means, as there have been philosophers who have sought to declare themselves as phenomenologists.

Nicholas Joll in his book *Philosophy & The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* provides some helpful insights into this potentially vexing phenomenon, by citing the work of a prominent early figure in the field of philosophy, who today is widely considered by some to be not only the founder of phenomenology but also of twentieth century philosophy.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938)...made a procedure he called 'bracketing' central to his philosophy. The procedure meant to shift one's perspective away from what Husserl called 'the natural attitude' and towards a distinctively unnatural perspective (which Husserl called 'phenomenological') whereby one perceives things solely in the manner in which they appear – and thus in an entirely presuppositionless way. For example: to perceive a cloud (or a tree, or a computer, or what have you) in that phenomenological way is to make no assumptions about the kind of

being it is, about what causes it, and even about whether or not it really exists. (2012, pp. 247-8)

The choice of Joll as a reference in relation to Edmund Husserl may seem an odd one, so it is worth commenting on it before going too much further, as I have relied on Joll's insights to develop my own ideas in this chapter.

I was first attracted to Joll's book not because of its commentary on Husserl, but simply because of my love for philosophy and for the literature of Douglas Adams, in particular his most famous work *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Science fiction, to which Adams' work is closely aligned, has always appealed to me. Writers and poets use shifts in perspective to distance themselves from their subjects in order to bring them into a more objectified relationship with their creators and with the readers, as it helps to bring human behaviour more sharply into focus.

For the same reason, the science fiction or alien genre of storytelling has the same appeal for me when it comes to film or cinema. *The Terminator* films, for example, which draw on the human fear of becoming less human by becoming more machine-like or robotic, provides the dramatic backdrop for films that ironically explore what happens when machines or robots become more like humans. For me, this is like observing animals in zoos. By observing and learning about the behaviour of other animals - or machines and aliens - we come to learn more about our own behaviours and what it is that helps to make us human.

Writers like Adams and Hughes make use of what Husserl came to refer to as the "phenomenological" perspective.

Joll's insights concerning Husserl and the subject of phenomenology have been far more direct, accessible, and comprehensible than virtually any other source or reference I have encountered thus far. And for that reason alone, Joll, while a curious choice in all probability, can at least be seen to be an entirely understandable one.

To paraphrase Joll's insights further, what Husserl developed in his perspectival shift (in philosophical terms) was a new way of observing consciousness itself at work. He was

attempting to stand outside himself, or to step back from himself, in order to observe his own consciousness at work.

This is the same distinctly unnatural perspective that I attempted to use, without being aware at the time of writing it, when I composed my early poem “Table for Two,” which I refer to in Chapter Two of this work. It is one I also used in the short story *Post Card from Perth Zoo*, which will follow shortly in this chapter, to highlight some of the features of phenomenology that literature and poetry, and as “An October Salmon” itself, serves to demonstrate, are well suited to exploiting or making use of when being overtly or covertly philosophical as well as literary.

Husserl believed, as did Descartes before him, that consciousness was the key to understanding reality. Indeed, Descartes’ method of doubt was appropriated by Husserl in the method he developed and referred to as “bracketing” when he used the technique to avoid preconceptions about the phenomena he was studying. He also made use of Emmanuel Kant’s philosophy that reality was to some extent determined by the way we interpret or experience the world.

Husserl thought that consciousness itself was shaped by the mind and how it works, although it also worth noting that some philosophers, myself included, believe that there is no distinction to be made between what we call consciousness and what we call the mind. But it is worth remembering, for later, that phenomenology - because of its focus on such things as intentionality, consciousness and being - belongs to the branch of philosophy commonly referred to by philosophers themselves as the Philosophy of Mind.

Husserl believed that clocks had nothing at all to do with the real nature of time, which recalls the quote I used to introduce this chapter: “Time that is moved by little fidget wheels is not my time/The flood that does not flow.” For Husserl, human beings experience time as an eternal now and space and time, while experienced in the same way by others, is personal to each and every consciousness that experiences the here and the now.

For my own part, and to make some sense of what I will claim later in the context of my own particular view of phenomenology, the past and future can only exist in what we call our memories and imaginations, both of which remain in a continuous and fluid moment of consciousness and unconsciousness throughout time that can only ever be experienced in the here and now. One of the consequences of this particular view of time is that while dying itself can be experienced, death itself cannot – any more than our own conceptions can be experienced.

In his book, *I Am A Strange Loop* Douglas R. Hofstadter explicitly associates and links poetry and the poetic with phenomena and phenomenology in a telling way. He helps to explain why psychologists and academics, including well established writers like Irvin D. Yalom, Steven Pinker, and David Lodge are increasingly using literature, narration, and story-telling to help develop, explore, and apply their own academic and scientific ideas in fields that are becoming increasingly removed from the confines and restrictions that their own particular paradigms or disciplines once imposed.

In the end, we self-perceiving, self-inventing, locked-in mirages and little miracles of self-reference...Poised midway between the unvisualizable cosmic vastness of curved spacetime and the dubious, shadowy flickerings of charged quanta, we human beings, more like rainbows and mirages than like raindrops or boulders, are unpredictable self-writing poems --- vague, metaphorical, ambiguous, and sometimes exceedingly beautiful. / To see ourselves this way is probably not as comforting as believing in ineffable other-worldly wisps endowed with eternal existence, but it has its compensations...what one acquires is an appreciation of how tenuous we are at our cores, and how wildly different we are from what we seem to be. As Kurt Gödel with his unexpected strange loops gave us a deeper and subtler vision of what mathematics is all about, so the strange loop characterization of our essences gives us a deeper and subtler vision of what it is to be human. (2007, p. 363)

This passage comes close to expressing another link that exists between poetry and phenomenology, and the implication of what that might be in the context of attempting to answer the perennially relevant question of “What does it mean to be a human being?”

It shows that phenomenology and poetry can be partners as they bring forth new perspectives or ways of seeing, observing, interpreting and understanding ourselves, others, and the world—to portray human worlds of beauty and appearance.

When writing about Adams, Joll notes,

I like the aspects [of his book] which turn the telescope round ... letting you stand so far outside of things [that you can] see them from a totally different perspective...I like it when it enables you to do fairly radical reinterpretations of human experience just to show all the different interpretations that can be put on apparently fairly simple and commonplace events. (pp. 246-7)

“This viewing of events,” Joll observes “from a new and strange perspective is something, then, that unites Adams’ fiction with traditional...SF [science fiction]. But such perspective shifts are common in philosophy, too” (p. 247).

Joll goes on to cite some philosophers who have brought a new perspective to philosophy, including, for example, David Hume and his scepticism, which stipulated we could never know that anything causes anything else because such truths were always contingent on things actually happening (like the sun rising each day).

The examples from philosophy of such shifts in perspective are many and varied, including, for example, philosophical pragmatism, which looks at truths from the perspective of their usefulness. Truths are true because they are useful—it is their very usefulness that makes them true. But herein lies a very great similarity with poetry.

Poetry, like philosophy, involves thinking in a concentrated way. It focuses the attention of the thinker in terms of the subject of a poem and the form used to construct it. Both the subject and the form of a poem represent a kind of “bracketing” (to borrow Husserl’s term) in their own right. I would suggest, where the bracketing necessarily involves an exclusion or inclusion of common elements, that it bears some similarity too with the way mathematicians work numbers and sets. (Husserl was a mathematician before he became interested in philosophy.) What is inside the brackets, so to speak, for a poet, is a set of related commonalities and what is outside the brackets - what is

excluded - is anything that detracts from the potency the poet is striving to achieve when composing poetry. Saying more with less is part of the poet's art and craft and involves something I consider to be closely allied with Husserl's early phenomenological technique.

Poets and philosophers share the interest, care and considered use of language when choosing words to convey meaning. They have respect for language that is heightened to an unusual degree. In the case of philosophy, that respect helps philosophers to make meanings clear and less ambiguous, to aid thinking and facilitate understanding. This is essentially what makes philosophy itself such a valuable subject to teach in its own right and for students to learn in classrooms and other educational settings.

Poets seek and select those words they consider to be the most meaningful in the settings where they are used and in the contexts of the meanings that are to be attributed to them, even when meaning itself remains necessarily obscure or elusive.

And then there is the additional benefit to be had, and as noted earlier by Joll, of deliberately altering one's perspective in order to see and understand things anew, in ways outside the normal or expected or natural way of seeing the world—in order to make new discoveries about ourselves, others and the world.

Robert Sokolowski, in his book *Introduction to Phenomenology* says,

Phenomenology insists that identity and intelligibility are available in things, and that we ourselves are defined as the ones to whom such identities and intelligibilities are given. We can evidence the way things are; when we do so, we discover objects, but we also discover ourselves, precisely as datives of disclosure, as those to whom things appear. Not only can we think the things given to us in experience, we can also understand ourselves as thinking them. Phenomenology is precisely this sort of understanding; phenomenology is reason's self-discovery in the presence of intelligible objects...Many philosophers have claimed that we must learn to live without "truth" and "rationality," but...we can and must exercise responsibility and truthfulness if we are to be human. (2000, p. 4)

This is the most important element that speaks to me from phenomenology. It leads me in Chapters Four and Five to consider what poetry and philosophy might contribute to teaching school students to be responsible and respectful and to lean towards truthfulness with empathy and compassion for human kind and for the struggle that being human requires.

In “An October Salmon” Hughes identifies strongly with the plight of a fish. By ascribing to it human characteristics and attributes, he shows that a particular poem can function in just this special kind of way. It is a poem that allows us to feel the kind of empathy for the plight of another creature that encourages us to understand and appreciate, more fully, not just its mortality but our own.

“An October Salmon” is a concise example of phenomenology expressed in art, somewhat along the lines of Sokolowski above. The poem reveals the power and the mystery and the challenge that a life cycle represents, depicting, as it does, life and death as necessarily interdependent and inescapable forces. This cycle is one in which all life is implicated, and one that shapes us as human beings and that is fundamental to what we call the human condition.

One of the things Hughes’ poem “An October Salmon” has helped me to realise is that the subject of death itself is something that is sorely in need of deeper and more meaningful discussions in our classrooms - particularly in our secular classrooms - where the subject is not addressed in a particularly deep, consistent, challenging, or meaningful way, and as it so often is in schools that are overtly directing their culture in the context of a religious tradition. But at this point, however, and as tempting as it now is, a digression into that particular subject, no matter how inviting, would constitute an entirely new dissertation or thesis – and that will just have to be one for another place and time – important though I now seriously believe such a digression to be.

In terms though of making sense of myself, others and the world, I have now illustrated what I consider to be aspects of philosophy and literature that make them subjects ideally suited for just such a purpose. I have also begun to articulate the role they can play in helping to create empathy and the role that in turn can have in encouraging, promoting and instilling respect for ourselves, each other, and the world.

The importance or significance that respect for language, and the way that we use it, has for the teaching of respect as a subject worthy of attention in its own right, is something I intend to consider more fully in Chapter Five of this work. But for now, I think it would be useful to demonstrate, in a practical way, what I like to think of as examples of practical phenomenology—writing that demonstrates the kind of perspectival shift that Joll referred to when talking about Husserl, writing that demonstrates a heightened care in the choice of words and language used, and writing (poetry) that seeks to bracket phenomena in order to capture, discover, and to see its subjects anew and in a particular way, phenomenologically.

The following story, *Postcard from Perth Zoo*, unpublished except here, came to me in the earlier stages of my philosophical studies. Fellow students read and discussed it with me. Perspective itself was an important feature or element of the narrative prose style I was intentionally trying to develop. I invite my reader now to consider the ways language used reflects a respectful posture or attitude towards the things it describes and to consider also whether or not respect for language itself plays a role in promoting respect for others, human beings and animals. The story intends to raise questions about ethics and morality. May I ask my reader to consider the importance of appearance, or the way things appear to the narrator of the story - in terms of the story's human dimension or impact?

What I hope to demonstrate in sharing *Postcard form Perth Zoo* is what a phenomenologically intended piece of writing might look like, and how such writing about lived experience, if encouraged amongst students, might help them too, to make sense of the kind of ethical and moral issues they might face in the context of their own lives, and to realise the importance and place respect has in the context of living a worthy, responsible, and meaningful human life.

The degree of complexity and sophistication students' narratives might convey will necessarily be a reflection of the literacy skills already acquired by students and on the life experiences they have been exposed to and acquired. But the methodology itself or intention involved in writing such stories or narratives, of adopting a particular and perhaps even unnatural perspective, a phenomenological perspective, toward the

subjects being written about, is one that potentially encourages and facilitates the engagement of empathy. And one that in the care and attention one puts into the writing itself fosters respect for things other than writing itself.

This is the opportunity that phenomenologically intended writing, that is writing to give meaning to human lived experiences, can provide, and I hope the examples I use from my own writing clarify what I come to understand through them.

What follows next then is my first example, in prose.

Post Card from Perth Zoo

Opening time - Sunday the 13th of May 2007 - and already there is a long line of people waiting to go in and do what visitors to zoos the world over go into zoos to do - to watch other animals watching them.

But I am here on a slightly different mission; to watch the watchers watching the watched, and the watched watching the watchers.

There is something special about being an observer, something almost clandestine about it; there's a feeling that you are, perhaps, being slightly unethical about watching others without their permission, or knowledge. It is a guilty pleasure, this watching the watchers business.

But don't we do it every day? We look at each other on the street, in our cars, at home and at work: watching is what we do. Why, then, should this be any different? Why should I feel even remotely guilty about watching others watching others?

Zoos are special places – they are made for watching.

I visited Perth Zoo for the first time many years ago now, in 1981. Back then, many of the larger animals were exhibited in concrete pens and behind bars. Today, the zoo is a centre of conservation and education, and the animals kept here are well cared for and given room to move in

surroundings more in keeping with their natures. There has been a huge change for the better.

People's attitudes, then, have clearly changed too, but, in some ways, it seems, we have changed very little. Just as before, all those years ago, some young children (and even younger adults) immediately surrounded the monkey enclosure to ape their primate cousins.

It struck me again, as it did then. Who was aping who here? The monkeys were so intent on watching their watchers that, for a brief hilarious moment, it appeared the monkeys had been let in to watch the antics of their human cousins. But it wasn't long before the hooting and the hollering of the crowd was matched, and then surpassed, by the monkeys.

But, again, who was entertaining who? From my point of view, it was the crowd and not the monkeys who won this contest.

Others who came to the zoo today did what I had seen them do before. Within five minutes of being admitted, at least half of their number had already found their way to the kiosks and canteens and coffee shops, seemingly spent from all the excitement and in dire need of sustenance. For them, it seemed, a day at the zoo was all about feeding time. How many of the zoo's other inmates, I wondered, felt the same way?

Passing the reptile house gave me cause to consider this question from a different perspective. A sign above a large display window indicated that the occupant, if you dared to look inside, was a Boa Constrictor. I am usually not averse to looking at snakes. Having lived in the Tasmanian bush for many years, I think tiger snakes, and copperhead snakes, in particular, are really rather beautiful animals.

My opinion of the boa constrictor, however, has been tainted (perhaps unreasonably) by a documentary I once saw on television. It explained, in gruesome detail, and with graphic imagery, how the snake kills its prey by using the coils of its body to constrict its prey's breathing. Each time the prey breathes out the snake tightens its grip, and it repeats this process until, finally, its prey can no longer take even a single breath. Imagine that - if you can. It is a remorseless, terrible death.

It is strange that we can watch, with a kind of sick fascination, the workings of nature: whether it is the snake, the shark, the spider, or the countless other candidates for the most gruesome consumers we might find ourselves watching with disgusted interest; on TV, at the zoo, or anywhere else, for that matter. Surely, humankind must rank among the candidates too, somewhere, if only we could see ourselves as other animals see us.

Eating and being eaten was a necessary part of nature, I reminded myself. But I was always glad, whenever I saw nature at its most grisly, that it wasn't me having the life squeezed, ripped or sucked from my body. So, naturally, after that small but significant moment of reflection, I dared to look into the boa's display, a little afraid for what I might see.

There, at the very back of the display, the constrictor laid coiled. Unbelievably thick, sinuous, and deathly still, its small black diamond shaped unblinking eyes stared at me while its tongue tasted the air. I shivered. Thank God, I thought, it was not feeding time.

Some animals kept in captivity can only eat live prey. I recall seeing a small rodent once in a similar exhibit in another zoo, in another time. It sat happily eating its own small meal while its predator slept off its last meal a small distance away. The ethics of this appalled me at the time, but I considered this again, now, from the snake's point of view. Surely, if it was to be kept in this way, whether for conservation, preservation, or simply education, it still needed to be fed. It was that simple.

This made me think how complicated us human beings tend to make things, with our ethical concerns for the rights of others, including other animals; if they could be said to have rights, that is (an interesting question for later, perhaps). There was, after all, the ethics of putting, for example, a live rodent in with a snake. This needed to be balanced with the ethics of keeping the snake in the first place. So both these things could be looked at in terms of the ethics of having zoos at all.

As it was, I didn't linger too long to find out just how the boa was being maintained, and I was happy to move quickly on. Besides, I was feeling

peckish myself by this time, and I was sure I had passed a hamburger stand somewhere nearby.

Watching the watchers and the watched throughout the day, it soon became apparent to me that some animals welcomed the attention of others watching them while others did not; another very human trait you might say. Rhinos were decidedly in the latter cohort of such animals. Their diffidence to the camera crazed clan of excited snap-happy observers was evinced by a strategy that I am convinced was deliberate, and much to their credit.

They seemed to shun the interest of their observers by simply presenting them with an excellent view of their ample posteriors, and no amount of jostling for a better photo opportunity from the observation platform presented the chance to catch them side-on. After the patience of most of the visitors in the cluster I found myself in had been tested (it took all of one minute), and they had moved on to the Cape Hunting Dog enclosure, I lingered on to test my theory.

For twenty minutes, or more, I moved from one side of the observation deck to the other, like a great white hunter stalking his prey; my camera poised and ready for the critical side-on shot. I moved stealthily to the left. There was a subtle re-alignment, an almost imperceptible shuffle by the great beasts, and their big, beautiful bovine bottoms appeared once more through the viewer of my camera. I moved quickly to the right, only to find the same grey posterior view. It was a game!

I repeated this strategy several times, and, each time, the great beasts thwarted my attempts to capture the all-important image. I couldn't believe it was happening. These beasts seemed somehow intent on keeping their precious side-on image to themselves. It was pure coincidence, of course. I mean, surely, this was anthropomorphism and not a deliberate ploy on their part.

In any event, it delights me to think that there are people who visited the zoo today, from all around the country, sharing their photo albums with others, earnestly trying to convince them that there really were rhinos at Perth Zoo; their only evidence being the grainy, haphazard, unfocused, or

poorly composed close ups of what surely must appear to be immense, grey backsides.

The same diffidence to the attention of others, though, could not be claimed by some of the local birds, who seemed to have taken up residence within the botanical splendour of the zoo's eclectic grounds and gardens.

There was one particular bird, about the size of our Starling, and of similar colouring, but with a white-tipped tail that seemed disproportionately large for its small body. It seemed to take great pleasure and delight in swishing its tail, at varying speeds, from side to side; and, when on the ground, it jumped erratically like an exotic and quirky jack-jumper.

I saw one such bird sitting on the top rung of a park bench, not two feet from a man sitting on the same bench. They were facing each other at eye level. The man was taking its picture. He adjusted the zoom of his camera several times: the camera whirred and the shutter clicked. And it whirred and clicked, again and again.

Each time, and for a brief moment, the golden reflection of the camera's flash lit up the little bird's breast, throat and face. The bird appeared to be completely untroubled by all the attention it was receiving. In fact, between each shot, it appeared to prepare itself for an even more flattering pose than the one before, announcing its readiness with a deft swish of its tail feathers. Like a professional model, it posed for the camera, as though expecting to see itself on the front cover of the next issue of *Birds Illustrated*.

Of course, it was probably just the flash of the camera the bird found so interesting, although I can't help feeling that vanity was in there somewhere; human beings, vain though we often can be, are animals too, after all. Are we not?

Seeing the intimate byplay between the cameraman and the bird, between the admirer and the admired (and could I really tell them apart?) it truly amazed me what can happen over time, between people and animals, when they share each other's space in a spirit of mutual consideration, care, peace and - above all - trust and respect.

Lions, though, it must be said, are an altogether different kettle of fish (if you will excuse the appallingly mixed metaphor). I had bypassed the main observation point for viewing the king of beasts because it was already packed with onlookers, all eager to see, close up, an animal worthy of their attention. So I found myself in a quieter place towards the back of the lions' enclosure, not even looking for a lion, when I suddenly found myself about twenty feet from a male lion and two lionesses.

They were all lying in thick grass on a mound some five feet above my eye line. A thick transparent barrier wall separated us, which was the only reason I did not need to change my trousers that very instant. (I must, I remember thinking, pack brown corduroy trousers for my next visit.) Vile though the idea of expiring in the coils of a massive boa constrictor might be, to me personally, I actually think I would prefer it to being savagely mauled and then being eaten alive by a pride of lions. (I know - I really have been watching far too many nature documentaries.)

I stood perfectly still and waited for the adrenaline in my body caused by the shock of being suddenly and unexpectedly confronted by a pride of lions to subside and for the instant chill the shock had caused to leave the pit of my stomach. But it really wasn't too much longer before I actually composed myself and began to enjoy the moment.

The female lions appeared to be dozing, but the male was resting on his belly and was looking at me over the tips of the grass that concealed most of his body. Even so, and with only his incredible head and shockingly male mane of hair visible above the grass, he seemed immensely powerful, and he held me with a gaze that was somehow electric but difficult to describe. There was no real intensity in his look at all.

I imagined, briefly, he might be trying to stare me down, to assert his power, but all he was doing was simply looking. He did not need to stare to put me in my place. There was no evil or malevolence in his gaze, not even interest or curiosity, it was something else again - something I still cannot quite capture in words, other than to say that he gave me a long, unblinking and direct look.

And then, for no reason I could think of at that immediate time, I suddenly felt privileged, privileged to be there, sharing this moment with him, privileged, simply to be alive and in his presence.

We continued to look at one another for what seemed a very, very long time, before another cluster of onlookers suddenly ran up behind me shouting with excitement. They had found my lions, and the cameras had already begun to click and whirr; click and whirr. The magic had been broken. I left my lions, a little sadly, to their noisy new audience, in search of a quiet place to sit, think, and recover.

A lion's roar is like nothing else once you have heard it. It begins with a kind of low peremptory cough, which quickly becomes a guttural rumble, and finally, a mouth-wide, gut-clenching, thunderous, yawning snarl.

It seems I wasn't the only one who suddenly craved a quiet place away from the crowds, to simply sit and ruminate.

So why, after taking time to think about it, and after such a brief communion with the lions, animals I genuinely fear, did I suddenly feel privileged?

I can only say that it is an arresting experience to feel that you are in the presence of an animal that, under other circumstances, could quite literally tear you apart and eat you. But I was received with a kind of good grace - a kind of inexplicable acceptance.

We humans see ourselves, or so we think, at the top of the food chain; comfortable in the knowledge that it is we who have the means to create places like zoos for animals such as these: animals that might otherwise kill us with ease in their own world – the world of nature. A few quick bites from one of my lions would be more than enough to cleave the marrow from my bones. How much easier, then, for them to overcome the thin and brittle veneer of my squeamish ethics and hubris; it took, after all, just one look and I was completely humbled.

To be taught such an important lesson, and by so worthy an animal, was, to me, an inestimable privilege.

There is so much more I could say about Perth Zoo, and Perth itself. I have now been fortunate enough to visit all the major capital cities in Australia, and I can honestly say that Perth must be Australia's best kept secret. It is a clean and vibrant city, and its people are friendly.

I thoroughly recommend it to you, and you could do far worse than visit Perth Zoo in South Perth, there is much to see there. And, if you look closely enough, you might just catch yourself in the act of watching the watcher - watching the watched - watching the watcher.

Observing the behaviour of other animals and people in my story provided me with an opportunity to learn about my own behaviour as well as that of others. I began to see myself as just another animal in the zoo and yet, at the same time, very differently. Morality and ethics seemed to set me apart from other animals, but I was filled with a sense that nature itself was somehow moral in its purpose, assuming survival was its ultimate purpose, although hardly ethical. The fact it did not require ethics in the way that I and other human beings needed it made me question my own place in the natural world and the responsibilities I and other human beings had for all the living creatures we chose to care for and exhibit in what is, after all, an artificial and unnatural setting.

Writing my story ethically did not disclose the full dimensions of my ethicality, so to speak, but it was revealed to me after I had written it and had a chance to reflect upon it more philosophically. It also provided me with an opportunity to show my respect for the animals and people who became the subjects of my observations, although as unwitting subjects the word ethically could be challenged.

This too raises an important question, especially for science. In order to observe things as they are naturally is it sometimes necessary to make observations that breach the privacy of those being observed? And those being observed are human beings who could be, and are in all likelihood going to be, affected by the knowledge that they are in fact either being observed or about to be. This issue is particularly problematic in terms of research into human behaviour and often has legal as well as scientific implications.

This is just one of a number of possible questions that could usefully come from a story of lived experience and reflection in the context of a classroom discussion, even if the questions themselves were not part of the reason for creating the story itself. Discoveries can be made in art as they are in science, especially when we go in one particular direction in search of something only to discover something quite expected while we are at it.

Because I have been stressing somewhat the role and importance of poetry, based on its overt interest in and special regard for words, it is worth sharing my prose story in order to illustrate that prose, written with care and intent, like poetry, lends itself naturally, and I would suggest ideally, to participation by students in creating their own resources for use in later discussions and contributing to lesson plans on any number of subjects, including the subject of respect.

My prose story allows me to reinforce a number of observations about phenomenology made by Sokolowski in his *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000). He points out, for instance, that when, as I did in both my poem “Table for Two” (Chapter Two), and in my story *Post Card from Perth Zoo*, we move from what he calls the natural attitude (the perceiving, intending, and describing of things) to the phenomenological attitude or phenomenological reduction (p. 49) or the restraining or bracketing of judgements about the things that appear to us until the evidence is clear (as in the case of the bent stick) that “we become something like detached observers of the passing scene, or like spectators at a game” (p. 48). My playful moment with the rhinos also comes to mind.

Sokolowski refers to the notion of displacement of the self,

The formal structure of displacement, in which I here and now can imagine myself or remember myself or anticipate myself into a situation somewhere and sometime else, thus allows us to live in the future and the past as well as in the no-man’s-land of free imagination. These displaced forms of consciousness are derivative of perception, which gives the raw material and content for them. It is not the case, moreover, that we first of all live simply in perception, then at some moments decide to plunge into displacements;

rather the perceiving and the displaced selves are always being played off against one another. (2000, p.74)

In my poem and in my story, displacing myself gave way to the raw material I was to transform into poem and prose. Past and present are always involved in now, where memories of the past and dreams of the future come together in an invisible and ever moving present. This is why at the beginning of this chapter I stressed the fullness or unbroken nature of our conscious lives, our conscious life experiences. Sokolowski refers to remembering things from the past in our present phenomenologically as recognising “the special kind of presence that the absent past has for us” (p. 76).

In the same way, for instance, that Slessor recalled the loss of his friend Joe in *Five Bells* as a kind of absence from the present flood of his conscious experience, in his moment of remembering, his reflections of his past friendship were none-the-less still part of the very same flow that Joe was to become present in once more, but this time as an even more keenly felt absence from that present, in that moment of remembering. Hughes’ poem, “An October Salmon” has a heightened pathos and grief about it too, for like reasons.

“Time is over you,” wrote, Slessor, as if Time itself had finished with his tiresome friend, and was already well and truly over him - in more ways than one. But in the ever-moving and invisible present – the now - all things are either absences or presences and must be perceived in just that way, until Time itself (and Being) become, as Jean-Paul Sartre wittily observed in his masterwork, matters of *Being and Nothingness*, where nothingness is (or rather are) no things or the no things of nothingness; the absence of those things or objects that once helped to shape and define who we were by revealing to us our very existence in the presence of other existences.

As an aside, it is perhaps worth mentioning that the major middle works or collections of poetry from Hughes’ career, *Wodwo* (1967), *Crow* (1970), *Gaudete* (1977) and *Cave Birds* (1978), in particular, are very much concerned with the phenomenological aspects of presence and absence. Presence and absence become motifs in a large number of the poems in these collections that are intimately linked to his anthropological, mythological and shamanistic interests.

In terms of a displaced self, Hughes may well have, as Hadley (2010) has suggested, been taking his own cue in “An October Salmon” from “nature’s objectivity” in order to maintain a necessary distance from the subject of his poem. What Hadley may be suggesting is that Hughes, as the poet-narrator of his poem, was able to make conscious use of the displacement of himself as the narrator of his poem to identify strongly with the salmon of his poem through his intentionally anthropomorphic treatment of the salmon’s journey and plight.

This capacity to not only feel empathy but to provoke it in others, something Hughes is particularly adept at doing, is akin to Sokolowski’s idea of the displaced self, and even other animals have appeared, albeit rarely, to demonstrate this ability or capacity to project their own feelings or ideas about how they might react in situations experienced by other beings. Empathy is an important element worthy of further consideration later in the context of Chapter Five, which is largely about respect, especially respect for others, including non-human others and the world we all must share.

Empathy is an important element of most of my stories and poems, and while I consciously played with the whole idea of the artist and scientist as ethical/non-ethical observers in “Table for Two” and in *Post Card from Perth Zoo*, the fact that I distanced or displaced myself as the narrator/witness/observer in each case, helped me achieve a heightened sense of empathy for the subjects – objects - of my subjective observations. This too, as I have indicated, is what Hughes managed to achieve in his own poem, “An October Salmon.”

He haunts his own staring vigil [36]

While I do not presume to know precisely what was or wasn’t in Hughes’ mind when he wrote “An October Salmon,” I can say that I do know with some personal authority what was in my own mind when I wrote much of my own poetry, at least at the time of composing it.

What I would like to talk about now, in the context of what phenomenology together with poetry might offer in terms of being useful in an educational setting, are some

poems of my own making. To begin, I would like to consider a poem that I constructed and later deconstructed.

What I mean by deconstruction becomes apparent in the example that follows. The artefact I offer here, to help disclose certain similarities between phenomenology and poetry that might help us make sense of ourselves, others and the world, is a poem I wrote as part of a completely different exercise some time ago now. This poem came directly out of a philosophical reflection of a problem I was contemplating at the time—the mind/body problem that philosophers inexorably encounter.

The mind/body problem is a troubling duality amongst those referred to in Chapter Two. It poses the question, that if the mind and the body are essentially made of two different kinds of things or stuff - the body being physical, and subject to the laws of nature and of physics, and the other being mental, the mind, appearing not be subject to the same ineluctable laws of nature and of physics - how do these essentially very different entities connect in such a way as to make us aware of ourselves as unique human beings, complete with identities, personalities and perhaps a soul?

The poem I use for this exercise is one I based on the death of Shakespeare's son, Hamnet, and I called it "Hamlet Revisited." I wrote it as a reinterpretation of the graveyard scene in *Hamlet* (Act V, Scene 1) using what I can describe as imaginative empathy, to revisit the scene as Shakespeare himself might have done in a moment of deep reflection concerning not only his son's death but the meaning of his life as well.

The poem serves as a direct example of what I have been advocating throughout this work, that there is a close and useful connection between poetry and philosophy, and that both have much to offer each other. One of the most formally structured poetic forms known in the English language, the Shakespearean Sonnet, and free associations created by thinking imaginatively, creatively, and indeed poetically, even within such a constricting framework, has helped me to consider, anew, what remains an old but enduring philosophical problem. Just as in philosophy, where one philosophical problem so often leads naturally to another, a poem might too raise questions too about mortality, memory, and what, if anything, survives of us after death.

“Hamlet Revisited” raises these questions in a new and, I hope, interesting way, reflecting on what these questions might mean in the contexts of consciousness, identity, memory and death—subjects that are much germane in the field of phenomenology.

What follows is the poem after it was completed. Following that is a schematic illustration showing how the poem was constructed. And following that are the notes I took when deconstructing the poem in order to make new discoveries of meaning as well as to clarify the meaning of what it was I had created in what Sokolowski might refer to as “doxic modalities” (2000, p. 49) of the natural attitude. I show the ways that having adopted a natural attitude to create my poem a phenomenological attitude emerged and prefigured and triggered an opportunity for philosophical reflection.

Here is my poem.

Hamlet Revisited

(Act 5, Scene 1)

In Yorrick’s skull lived a mind and a brain,
Now, in their place, something ghostly lingers,
Where two worlds once mingled like tears in rain;
Inseparable, as hand and fingers.

Yet death divides us all from name and blood,
From dearest friends and deepest loves - and time
As you, poor Yorrick, a grimace in mud,
Your wit proved quick as though cankered in lime.

Oh unworthy end to this reign of tears,
If truth is held in the palm of a hand,
That memory makes of our hopes and fears
Pale shadows in a world where nothing stands.

As fleeting and enduring as your name,
Love burns in us all with a mortal flame.

The construction of the poem

| HAMLET REVISITED | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----------------|---|
| (Act V Scene 1) | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Lines | | | | | | | | | | | Rhyming Scheme | |
| Argument | 1 | u | / | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | A |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 2 | / | u | u | / | / | u | / | u | / | u | B |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Theme | 3 | u | / | / | u | / | u | u | / | u | / | A |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 4 | u | / | / | u | u | / | u | / | u | | B |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Dialectic | 5 | u | / | u | / | u | / | u | / | u | / | C |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 6 | u | / | u | / | u | / | u | / | u | / | D |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Binding Couplet | 7 | u | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | | C |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 8 | u | / | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | D |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Argument | 9 | / | u | / | u | / | u | u | / | u | / | E |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 10 | / | / | u | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | F |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Theme | 11 | u | / | u | / | u | / | u | u | / | | E |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 12 | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | u | / | F |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| Binding Couplet | 13 | u | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | | G |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |
| | 14 | / | / | u | u | / | u | u | / | u | / | G |
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | |

Mike McCall

This is its deconstruction: Notes and sub-text

I attempted to write “Hamlet Revisited” using the form that Shakespeare invented when he wrote his Sonnets. The sonnet structure or form seems to lend itself naturally and appropriately to the subject matter and meaning I wanted for my poem. I wanted to follow Shakespeare so that it contained an argument, a theme, dialectic and a binding couplet. This form seemed to me to potentially lend itself to my subject and a poetic expression of a philosophical idea.

The formal structure of a Shakespearean sonnet comprises three four line stanzas or quatrains followed by a binding couplet. It has 14 lines in total, each line 10 syllables long, with a rhyming scheme of ABAB CDCD EFEF GG. In “Hamlet Revisited” the only variation from the original sonnet form relates to the metre or poetic feet used to establish the poem's rhythmical structure.

In its original form, the Shakespearean sonnet was usually 14 lines of iambic pentameter. An iambic foot is denoted by a weak stress (υ) followed by a strong stress (/) on each word syllable. The rhythm was described as iambic pentameter because the iambic foot (υ /) was repeated five times in each line of the sonnet form. This rhythmical pattern closely mimicked or approximated the rhythm patterns of everyday speech in Shakespearean days. Though I mimic the form, obviously the rhythm patterns vary differently with my own speech patterns at the time of writing.

In “Hamlet Revisited” only two lines (5 & 6) follow the strict pattern of the Shakespearean Sonnet. The rhythmical variations in the poem are based on my own speech patterns but more importantly on the meaning of the poem, as expressed by the particular content words used. I was to find it useful to vary the pace and dramatic effects of the poem's individual words and lines, given that I intended the poem to be read aloud or acted out, as in a play, in a language that is much more familiar to me than it may well have been to Shakespeare. I also wanted the poem to be interesting textually, and not to sound too much like repetitive doggerel risked in the hands of someone as un-Shakespearean as myself.

The poem itself was based on Shakespeare's possibly most famous and philosophical play, *Hamlet*. The character, Hamlet has often been referred to as the “Philosopher

Prince,” reflecting the philosophical intent of the poem. I believe that the play *Hamlet*, in particular, Act V, Scene 1 of the play, may well reflect the deep feeling of loss Shakespeare may have experienced when he learned of the death of his own young son, Hamnet.

From this perspective, I wrote my poem thinking of it as a possible new soliloquy or internal monologue for just this part of the play, a poem based on Shakespeare's knowledge that his son had died at an early age, 11 years. As well I intended the poem to become an expression of my personal reflections on the philosophical problem, the mind/body problem - if minds exist distinct from bodies, how do they come together or react with each other? If a mind is inseparable from a body, what happens to it after death?

I wished the poem to be interpreted on two levels, but was aware that it could, of course, be open to a number of other interpretations, depending on the reader. In short, and from either perspective, the poem essentially poses the question, “What will survive of us after death?”

The last two lines of the poem, “As fleeting and enduring as your name, / Love burns in us all with a mortal flame” suggests it is our name, hence the family line that is most important to us, our historical belonging. Ironically, it is important to note that the name Hamlet, a fiction, lives on into posterity, while the name Hamnet (Shakespeare's son's real name) is largely lost to us in today's common or cultural memory.

In terms of the poem's philosophically directed aspects, “Hamlet Revisited” starts from a position of dualism, a mind and its body. By the end there is only the mortal body, and the ghostly presence of a memory. The references to mind and body are conveyed metaphorically in line 4 using the concept of a hand, which includes fingers, and in line 10, where we have only the palm of a hand, suggesting that nothing of our minds or souls survive death. The poem then, somewhat depressingly, suggests that our individual memories and thoughts might die with our mortal selves, our bodies.

“Hamlet Revisited” suggests that the mind may be as illusory as Hamlet's ghost. In this respect the play *Hamlet* portrays the ghost of Hamlet's father as real. This is just one of

many possibly inconsistent but undoubtedly dramatic elements of Shakespeare's play. Consider, for instance, Hamlet unknowingly kills Ophelia's father. No ghost attends his demise, or anyone else's in the play, for that matter, apart from Hamlet's father despite all the carnage that is on offer. Hamlet's madness is, in part, contrived to draw out his villainous and incestuous uncle. Hamlet's love, Ophelia, suffers true madness and dies it is suggested, by her own hand. Ophelia thus becomes a more tragic figure than Hamlet himself in many ways.

Hence line 12 in the "Hamlet Revisited" is derived from a notion that the things which stand largest in our lives - in Hamlet's case, first his father, the King, then Ophelia - cast the longest shadows, referred to ironically in the poem as "pale shadows." The specific phrase, "Where nothing stands," in line 12, implies that things that stand, or that have standing, cast shadows. It is a deliberate allusion, a literary tipping of the hat in greeting or acknowledgement, to a line borrowed from another of Shakespeare's tragic plays, *King Lear*, where Lear laments in his grief for the loss of his daughters' love, saying, "Will nothing stand?"

Yorrick, of course, is central to "Hamlet Revisited" because, as the court fool to Hamlet's father, Hamlet knew and loved him as a child. Hamlet loved him with the innocence of a child, and this gives Act V, Scene 1 of the play its particular poignancy and gravity. Imagine finding yourself holding the skull of someone you once loved as a child. Of course, imagining that is just what I tried to do when writing "Hamlet Revisited." Was it the product of a kind of ghostly visitation?

The often quoted phrase, "the quick and the dead," originated in *Hamlet*. In that context quick meant living or being alive. I used the phrase in line 8 to develop a kind of grim pun. Yorrick was probably in reality a quick-witted fellow because he was a court jester or fool by profession and one likely to be well acquainted with a good or a bad pun when the occasion or opportunity presented itself.

Quick-lime was once used, and probably in Shakespeare's time, to aid decomposition. So I brought these two ideas, quick and dead, together to make a kind of extended pun. Together with the word "grimace," line 7, the phrases then combine to convey a grimly mocking but melancholy humour, as if Yorrick himself was still playing the fool from

his muddy grave. Shakespeare was doing this too, of course, in his play. I simply borrow from him in order to revisit the grave yard scene through his eyes and with his feelings, if that is even possible.

Finally on the dual aspects of the poem already mentioned, one might read line 3 as a philosophical proposition about the relationship between our minds and bodies and about the intimacy of the relationship between Hamlet and Yorrick. Reinforcing this, the phrase “like tears in rain” is reversed in line 9 to become “this reign of tears”—what Hamlet’s life as a Danish Prince had become. I see this as what Shakespeare's own life might have become when he learned of the death of his son, Hamnet.

Was the death of his son the genesis of Shakespeare’s philosophical play? I can only surmise this, of course. The play lives on, as does the mind/body problem. The play and the problem surely will live on and endure, well beyond the life of my own meagre poetic efforts and life span—of that I can be sure. I do take some comfort in believing that I will not experience or come to know my own death, any more than I have come to know or experience my own birth or conception.

Writing and deconstructing one’s own works in the way I have just demonstrated can, I dare say, become a powerful tool or teaching/learning method in educational settings as part of lessons directed at drawing resources or ideas from literature to apply in philosophical contexts and/or vice versa. Better still is the idea of having students, with enough material of their own to work with, in terms of their own life experience, skills, knowledge and aptitudes, to turn inherently curiosities in their thinking – towards thinking creatively, even poetically and philosophically, and to writing and deconstructing their own works for later discussion with and amongst their fellow students.

At this point it is important to return to Sokolowski and to consider what he refers to as “prepositional reflection,” something akin to what I have been demonstrating and encouraging so far. Sokolowski talks about the importance of “two reflections” in this regard.

The distinction to be made between phenomenology and propositional reflection...is particularly important in bringing out the nature of philosophical thinking...Philosophy is often not understood radically enough; it is taken to be a mere reflection on and clarification of meaning; that is, it is taken to be what is done from the perspective of propositional reflection...Philosophy can only arise after the propositional reflection has taken place. (2000, pp. 196-197)

If I am to regard the deconstruction of “Hamlet Revisited” from Sokolowski’s standpoint, what I once considered to be a truly “philosophical” event may only be the necessary step towards what real philosophy should be about. Sokolowski says,

Philosophical reflection is more than just reflection on propositional reflection - it ranges over all intentionalities and their objective correlates – but it can be triggered only after propositional reflection, with the kind of truth that it permits, has taken place. Critical, propositional reasoning is a condition of possibility for philosophical reasoning. (p. 197)

Philosophical reasoning goes radically further than merely reflecting meaning, which, as Sokolowski claims (p. 197) is often thought of as the “highest form of reflective analysis.”

I understand that what Sokolowski is saying comes in two parts. Firstly, with the questions, what is intentionality and why is it so fundamentally important to phenomenology? Secondly, with my suggestion that phenomenology has so much in common with poetry, particularly with regard to the notion of “bracketing.”

Taking the second point first, Sokolowski helpfully bracketing in the following terms,

When we enter into the phenomenological attitude, we suspend our beliefs, and we bracket the world and all the things in the world...we now consider [what has been bracketed] precisely as it is intended by an intentionality in the natural attitude...If it is a perceived object, we examine it as perceived; if it is a remembered object, we now examine it as remembered [and so on]. (p. 49)

The point of this being that things (objects), once bracketed, can be examined, in so far as it is possible to do so, without presuppositions or preconceptions, and by a consciousness that is always a consciousness of something. Consciousness, in the absence of objects to be perceived, remembered, conceived, imagined, or fantasised, and so on, is essentially nothing - like time, with its co-dependency, or correlate, space – it is not a thing in its own right. And that brings the central notion of “intentionality,” in phenomenological terms, squarely into the discussion.

In the first chapter of his book, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, Sokolowski stresses the importance in phenomenology of intentionality. He states, “In phenomenology, ‘intending’ means the conscious relationship we have to an object” (p. 8). In this way, the “mind” becomes, as Sokolowski puts it, a “public thing.”

[That] acts and manifests itself out in the open, not just inside its own world...By discussing intentionality, phenomenology helps us to reclaim a public sense of thinking, reasoning and perception. It helps us to reassume our human condition as agents of truth. (p. 12)

To my own way of thinking, I see poetry then as a mechanism that would be useful in terms of bracketing phenomena because of its very nature. Poetry is a kind of concentrated or focussed thinking, of creative or imaginative kind, rather than of an overtly rational kind, which could suit a phenomenological approach that eschews preconceptions and presuppositions concerning the phenomena to be examined, while at the same time, allows for later analysis, like deconstruction in my terms, in preparation for more philosophical thinking.

Poetry can capture propositions and allow for propositional reasoning to take place as a precursor to the kind of radical philosophical activity that Sokolowski is advocating.

To finish this chapter, I need to clarify what phenomenology has come to mean to me, as both a philosopher and as a poet. I do this by offering two more related poems of my own composition. I wrote the first, called “Reflections,” as a way to contemplate what the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas meant by his phrase “the other” in his book *Entre Nous* (1998). The other arose out of this very poem but became a source of intense

revelation concerning the advancement of my own philosophy in a way that resolved some old philosophical problems, but which created some new ones.

The poem that I like to think of as Levinasian, despite the reference in it to Picasso, who came to paint with his mind and with his ideas and not just with his eyes and what he was seeing, was my own way of consciously reflecting on the idea of otherness and the encounter with the face of the other, expressed in Levinas' thinking.

Reflections

I shave the morning stubble from my face,
and ask myself, "Do others see us as we see ourselves?"

The face in the mirror does not think so.

But the face in the mirror is a face in reverse
where left is left and right is ...

It looks back from the glass like a puzzled Picasso
With knowing - seeing eyes.

"Do we see ourselves as others see us?"
the face in the mirror seems to say - in its own beguiling,
twisted way...

How odd it is I will never see what only others see:
the face that belongs to the face in the mirror - the face that belongs
to me.

The ideas embedded in "Reflections" influenced the next poem, as its final lines might suggest. I wrote it initially, to express the idea that the Bible is as much a work of literature or story-telling as it is a religious work, purporting to disclose or reveal absolute and eternal truths, and that science is just as concerned, in its own way, to disclose or reveal truths that may or may not be universal but rarely ever absolute, despite its avowed scepticism in relation to its method. Something else was to come out

of the poem, something that came for me, its author, as a surprise, in fact, it was more—it was a revelation.

In God's Image

I'm going to tell you a story (not the greatest ever told)
About God, who had no beginning, so was neither young nor old.
He was, however, lonely, despite the lack of time,
And completely made of matter, so was - was not - sublime.

But in this lay the answer to God's great isolation,
As he pondered on the problem of creating his Creation...

Down to a single point he'd press - to expand - creating space -
And with it time would start to flow, so life could take its place.

The idea exploded in his mind with this singular insight,
"My matter shattered will spawn and scatter a universe of light!"
So he turned his will upon himself with all the strength he had
And in an incandescent moment was in all things and was glad.

So here I end my story (not the greatest ever told) -
Bits of *Bible* and *Big Bang* in a pantheistic mould -
But still some questions haunt this page, and one invites chagrin,
Did God create us in his image or have we created Him?

And just one more, before I go, "What reflects and shatters?"

Strange, I know, but ask a mirror, and the thinker made of matter.

The references to "the greatest story ever told," and to "this singular insight" are allusions, respectively, to the story of The Bible and to the "singularity" preceding the "Big Bang" that has been proposed by many astronomers, physicists, and indeed, astrophysicists.

Hughes, in his book for children called *What is The Truth?* (1984, p. 121) wrote, “As I am, I am. I am that Fool. And I am the Cow...I am each of these things. The Rat. The Fly. And each of these things is Me. It is. It is. That is the Truth.”

What I had arrived at in my poem called “In God’s Image,” was something very much like the lesson Hughes expressed in *What is The Truth?* What my poem revealed to me was that the being staring back from the mirror, a being the Bible (Genesis 1:27 of the King James text of 1611, 2010) suggests was made in God’s mirror image was actually made of matter, whatever that might be. So why not God? What if God was simply matter and nothing more than that? Not that anything about matter is simple either, as the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva regularly demonstrates.

In terms of the duality I had always struggled with philosophically - the mind/body problem referred to earlier being one instance of this - the problem now vanished. There was no distinction to be made between the mind and the body in terms of matter and there was no longer the problem to be solved about how these things were meant to connect. The dualistic divide made so pronounced by philosophers like Descartes and by John Locke was no more.

And as far as “matter” is concerned, I became comfortable with the idea that all matter is energy in one form or another. This means that in one sense I have to give up the idea of a personal God with a white beard holding me to account for my wrong-doings, or rewarding me in another life for my good deeds, but in a sense it has to be said too that there can be no more personal a relationship with God than to be God.

The real miracle of life, as it turns out, is life. And that, I now believe, is perhaps one of the most important lessons I have learned. And that has come from philosophy and from poetry. In *Language and Hermeneutics*, a section of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer wrote,

Understanding or its failure is like an event that happens to us...a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it - i.e. that it allows something to “emerge” which henceforth exists. (1989, p. 385),

In terms of the nanosecond of my own life in cosmological terms, the writings from my past still represent something of a time capsule of the mind - a capsule from another time, another place, and, in some respects, another person. But in phenomenological terms, I suspect I was always going to become the person I am still trying to become. There is only the now.

Why I write poetry at all has something to do with the way I think. I use poetry in the way other people might use mind maps - to make better use of their minds by using more than just one particular part of it. This allows me, but not always, to break through into sometimes unfamiliar territories, to achieve a level of what I can only describe as free-thinking.

It is the kind of thinking I am certain I could not achieve simply by thinking analytically and then writing poetry or prose to capture or synthesise my ideas. My understanding of phenomenology continues to grow and to evolve, and it is helping me to go on making sense of myself, of others and of the world.

Chapter Four The Power of Poetry

Beauty is the end and law of poetry.

(W. B. Yeats, Letter to George Russell (AE). 1900)

To find beauty in ugliness is the province of the poet.

(Thomas Hardy, *Life*.)

With strength like light--- [48]

In Chapter One, I commented on the roles that literature and philosophy could play in enriching and enhancing the life experience of students in an educational context, and how these subjects could help students to become more fully rounded, engaged, open, tolerant, resilient and questioning human beings.

In Chapter Two, I considered the nature and importance of dualism as a key factor that influenced my own development as a thinking and feeling human being, and the pervasive nature of dualism and the impact of that on human thinking.

In Chapter Three, I used the ideas raised in the first two chapters to help focus on two key aspects of literature and philosophy; to consider a perceived relationship or connection between them, and, in particular, between the nature of poetry and phenomenology. I did this by considering what poetry was to literature and comparing that relationship to the perceived relationship between phenomenology and philosophy.

By considering these two relationships and comparing the two, I attempted to show the usefulness of both phenomenology and poetry as ways of seeing, observing and disclosing the world of human experience and understanding more completely, and of making sense of difficult human issues that could, in turn, be considered useful when applied in an educational context or setting. This leads me in this chapter to consider poetry itself in more depth, and explore the question “What power might poetry, in particular, possess to help us live a more fully human, meaningful and valuable life?”

To begin, poetry, for many people, is something quite mysterious and potentially exclusive. To me, as someone who reads, writes, and loves poetry, it is ironic and

surprising, to find that poets appear to be lauded, respected and revered - Percy Bysshe Shelley believed poets to be “the unacknowledged legislators of the world” in *A Defence of Poetry*, (1821) - and unappreciated and misunderstood by a public that eschews the writing of poetry publicly whilst writing volumes of it in private, one that, while appearing to be dismissive of poetry, might often admit to writing it at some point behind closed doors, as if it were a guilty pleasure or, in some cases, an irresistible compulsion.

The attitude of recognised poets towards poetry can often seem ambiguous too. “The notion of expressing sentiments in short lines having similar sounds at their ends seems as remote as mangoes on the moon,” wrote the former Poet Laureate, Philip Larkin, in a letter to Barbara Pym on 22 January, 1975. Yet popular songs, a dominant form of human artistic expression in today’s modern, popular (“pop”) culture, still rely on the facility to make lines rhyme.

Poetry, like phenomenology, resists attempts to define it precisely or accurately. Both appear too broad in their applications and interpretations to encourage definitions that might easily be criticised for being too narrow in their scope or focus. Poetry and philosophy tend to resist and yet invite definition, but ask almost any poet what poetry is, or what it means to them, or philosophers what philosophy or phenomenology means to them, and you are likely to be given almost as many definitions as there are poets and philosophers to give them. Yet poetry, for all the ambivalence and mystery surrounding it, and the difficulties of defining it, remains an undeniably potent force in the history of human art and expression.

Shelley’s romantic view of poets might be considered grandiloquent or overblown in today’s postmodern and, perhaps we might say, cynical world. But there is little doubt in my mind that poets, like writers generally, have been, and continue to be, among the most respected and highly regarded members of their societies. They continue to be regarded by many as the conscience or mirrors of the societies they observe, reflect, comment on and write about.

For me, the question of what poetry is remains deeply relevant and important to successive generations, just as the question of what it means to be human remains

relevant and important, despite the fact that it remains admittedly resistant to hard and fast definitions. By simply expressing a view on what poetry means to those generations, the responses poets give often disclose ideas that are worthy of much thought and reflection.

The expressed views of just two poets I greatly admire and appreciate, Dylan Thomas and Ted Hughes are of note in the context of a chapter devoted to the power of poetry. Both poets, in their very different ways, write poetry of great beauty, influence, and power. Their greatest poems are widely known, memorable, published repeatedly in various anthologies, and are universally admired by millions of readers around the world. Their power to move, stimulate, provoke, inform, educate, and inspire has become unquestionable, inspired and evoked by the ways they use words to reflect or convey meanings or aid understandings of the experiences that move them to create and write poetry.

From an originally recorded essay in New York in 1952 for the recording company Caedmon, is this extract from Dylan Thomas' "A Few Words of a Kind" on what poetry is.

Poetry is what's in a poem that makes you laugh, cry, prickle, be silent; makes your toenails twinkle; makes you want to do this or that or nothing; makes you know that you are alone and not alone in the unknown world; that your bliss and suffering is forever shared and forever all your own. All that matters about poetry is the enjoyment of it, however tragic it may be. All that matters is the eternal movement behind it, the great undercurrent of human grief, folly, pretention, exultation and ignorance, however un-lofty the intention of the poem. (Watts, 2011)

Here is a description of poetry that appears to tell us everything we might ever wish to know about what poetry is and does, but without actually telling us much at all about how poetry works on us to produce these effects. It none-the-less helps to demonstrate that poetry has the power to work upon our minds and imaginations, which is remarkable indeed, given that what Thomas actually gives us is poetic, but in prose. Even in ordinary prose and speech, his expression of what poetry meant to him was almost always inspiring and often deeply moving – and always poetic.

A useful and practical expression of what poetry is comes from the anthology of poems and programmes written specifically by Hughes for the BBC Schools Broadcasting Department. It was published as *Poetry in the Making* and it has been an invaluable reference work in relation to my own attempts to write poetry. There is this extract that attempts to describe what poetry is

The struggle to truly possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man's principal occupation, wherever he could find leisure for it, ever since he first grew this enormous surplus of brain. Men have invented religion to do this for others. But to do it for themselves, they have invented art – music, painting, dancing, sculpture, and the activity that includes all these, which is poetry. (1967, p. 124)

Hughes immediately adds,

Because it is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of those many mansions inside the head and express something...of the crush of information that presses in on us...Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are...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 in 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 a heap of lenses – but a human being, we call it poetry.

Hughes emphasises the role that imagination plays in the creation of a poem. Sokolowski, in *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (2008, p. 303) has something to say concerning poets and their craft.

We need to think in solitude if we are to have anything distinctive to say about poets, "They work alone." We must also turn away from others, because the conversational use of our words is not sufficiently under our own control; it is constricted by our interlocutors, by what they have to say

and what they can directly understand. If poets are to charge words with energy that they alone can give them, they need to separate themselves from the insistence of conversation. (2008, p. 303)

Sokolowski draws more from a lecture given by Josephine Jacobsen, *The Instant of Knowing* in 1973,

Jacobsen uses a photographic and hence visual analogy to show what happens when we speak an internal word, a word of the heart. She writes, “The poem’s inception and execution is as secret as a film’s development in a darkroom.” (p. 303)

Sokolowski’s understanding begins in the “dim and gradual light of imagination. Etymologically...” he explains,

...*photographic* means sketching or writing with light, and we need background darkness for this to occur. But we cannot carry out this darkroom thinking without the vocabulary, images, and syntax that public discourse gives us. The conversation we carry on within ourselves is derived from our speech with others, and it is a preparation for what we will later have to say and show to them. (p. 303)

Hughes’ love of Shakespeare and the classics of Ancient Greece, as well as of modern English Literature, richly prepared him for what he had to tell us and show us later in his own prose and poetry. *Poetry in the Making* (1967) is where he reaches us as readers and students of poetry. There he shows us that finding the right words can be like capturing an animal.

He tells us that the first animal poem he ever wrote (p. 19) called “The Thought-Fox,” he wrote “while sitting up late one snowy night in dreary lodgings in London.” The poem begins with the line, “I imagine this midnight moment’s forest.”

Solitude and the poet’s imagination, as observed by Sokolowski, begins a process of creation, and Hughes talks about the process itself saying (p. 20) that his words made a body for his fox and gave it somewhere to walk, but “if at the time of writing this poem, I had found livelier words, words that could give me much more vividly its

movements...the fox would probably be even more real and alive to me now...”
Hughes goes on to conclude,

In some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live forever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words. (p. 21)

Hughes has drawn attention to the heart of what poetry is all about in his thought-provoking and practical work for students (and adults), and helps to reinforce for me that the idea that poetry is so often about saying more with less.

It is this capacity of the poet, to convey so much with so little, that portrays a poem’s power. It is, for me, with inspiration and imagination, the real source of a poem’s power. Poems that have great power reflect two things: great care and attention to the words that are used, and the fact that they almost communicate so much with so little, like gems they are wrested from the deep earth of their poets’ imaginations, and they truly do have “strength like light” [48].

And that is how it is, [39]

Hughes’ emphasis on finding the words, not just any words, but the right or the best words to convey his experience of the world as he sees and experiences it, is poignant in showing the power that poetry has for the pursuit of educational purposes.

In *Poetry in the Making* of our experience of life, Hughes says,

The actual substance of it [experience], the material facts of it, embed themselves in us quite a long way from the world of words...Words are tools, learned late and laboriously and easily forgotten, with which we try to give some part of our experience a more or less permanent shape outside ourselves. They are unnatural in a way and far from ideal for their job. For one thing, a word has its own definite meanings. A word is its own little solar system of meanings... (p. 119)

He goes on to say,

In a way, words are continually trying to displace our experience. And in so far as they are stronger than the raw life of our experience, and full of themselves and all the dictionaries they have digested, they do displace it. (p. 120)

Later a poet who greatly admired the poetry of Hughes, and who Hughes admired in turn, the Australian poet, Les Murray, came to write a poem called “The Meaning of Existence” about experience that reflects Hughes’ own attitude concerning the wilfulness (p. 120) of words.

Everything except language
knows the meaning of existence.
Trees, planets, rivers, time
know nothing else. They express it
moment by moment as the universe.

Even this fool of a body
lives it in part, and would
have full dignity within it
but for the ignorant freedom
of my talking mind.
(Murray, 2006, p. 551)

Two notable and powerful poets seem so quick to attack the very things that make poets who they are, language and words. In this, it seems, is the very key to the power of poets and their poetry. Poets care deeply about the words they use. They select them with care, they may not always trust them, but they value them, weigh them carefully, test them, try to keep them apart, or bring them together, and all for the sake of bringing their experience – as fully and completely as possible – into some kind of permanent state that will outlive them but live anew, in the minds and imaginations of the readers who have the power to bring their words back to life whenever they read them. It is as the poet Marianne Moore wrote (Parini, 2008, p. ix), “Life is energy, and energy is creativity. And even when individuals pass on, the energy is retained in the work of art, locked in it and awaiting release if only someone will take the time and care to unlock it.”

River, wrote Scigaj (1986, p. 289) “offers readers such a profusion of lush imagery, vividness and accuracy of observation, rightness of feeling, and delicacy of mood that one can praise the volume as superb landscape poetry.” It and its penultimate poem, “An October Salmon,” are much more. Poetry is nothing if not the careful and considered use of words and language, and in Hughes’ “An October Salmon” we have a superb example of that fact.

Hughes’ characteristic modes of awe and terror as primary responses to nature are firmly present in the poem’s language and imagery, as are tones of spirituality and religion. The poem could be called a nature poem, or a religious poem, or a landscape poem, such is the poem’s inherent complexities and richness. “An October Salmon” reveals Hughes’ typically power-packed language - language that has something akin to what I think of now, rightly or wrongly, as a Yorkshire aesthetic, a language quarried from the imaginary landscape born of a particular place and time, a no-nonsense, direct language.

The poetic language in “An October Salmon” is laced with energy and nuanced tones, at times sinuous and visceral, at times religious and reverent, and at times almost overreaching. It is a poem that does not intentionally rhyme. It relies instead on natural speech patterns of a Yorkshire poet, and on the stresses and accents of consonants more than the assonance of vowels, and measured and careful tempo the phrases, pauses and the cadences they produce. The poem abounds with the poet’s inherent respect for nature and all its processes, death included. If the power of poetry can lie in its capacity to express tangentially, the ineffable, then “An October Salmon” comes close to achieving just that throughout, but particularly in its final lines.

There is something profoundly beautiful about “An October Salmon” which serves to highlight the relevance of the quotations provided at the beginning of this chapter. Only a true poet could hope to bring such beauty to the forefront of what must be considered at times an undeniably dark and even ugly poem. It is an extraordinary achievement and yet another reason why I claim for it the status of a masterpiece when Hughes wrote so much more that has been memorable, powerful and beautiful.

Beauty is critical for supporting the claim I make for “An October Salmon” because beauty is linked to something important. Gadamer wrote two essays which assert why artworks “can claim to be deeply true,” “The Relevance of the Beautiful” and “The Artwork in Word and Image: ‘So True, So Full of Being!’ ” referred to by Palmer (2007, p.192). In these essays, Gadamer explores “aesthetics and truth, the actuality and transcendence of the beautiful, hermeneutics and art, and the limits of language” (p. 192). Palmer goes on to say that Gadamer believed the work of art could “overcome the passage of time” to remain as “temporally valid” and “to speak as powerfully now as in the time of its creation” (p. 193).

Gadamer’s point concerning the “being” of a work coming from its interpretation brings into question my claim that “An October Salmon” is a masterpiece. So much depends on how others might interpret the work, after all, and I gladly acknowledge that not everybody I have shown this poem to has greeted it with unreserved enthusiasm. In fact, the opposite was true in a number of cases. It seemed the subject of the poem was not to the liking of some of its readers, because it was too dark and troubling. But is that how we want to measure the greatness of a work of art? By its popular appeal? Or should we consider that what it has to say, frightening and disturbing though it might be, is worthy, because it not only has something important say that is worth hearing, but because it is beautiful?

Sagar in his introduction to *The Challenge of Ted Hughes* observed,

The challenge of Ted Hughes is, ultimately, no different from the challenge of all great literature. It is not a matter of passing judgement upon it (however favourable) but of allowing it to pass judgement on us and to contribute to the process of regeneration. It can burn away complacency, sentimentality, inauthenticity. It can fertilise the imagination, cleansing the doors of perception. It can heal the dualistic split. It can help to resacralise the world. (1994, p. xv)

I think this might be what Gadamer intimates when he talks about the “deep beauty” of Art (Palmer, 2007, p. 192). Beauty speaks to human beings like nothing else, and it has the power to move and to complete and to heal us like nothing else – it connects us to something from which we are not connected but cannot hope to articulate or

understand fully – and that is why poets look for, and sometimes find, the greatest beauty of all in ugliness. Great art is rarely rational.

That is what I feel when I read the poem “An October Salmon.” I also feel something of what Gadamer refers to as *Energeia* - “aliveness” (Palmer, 2007, p.193). We feel the salmon’s aliveness all the more keenly precisely because it is close to death. We feel our own mortality keenly too, just as Hughes, no doubt, was feeling his own mortality keenly when he wrote the poem, and in particular the lines punctuated by exclamation marks:

What a change! From that covenant of Polar Light [31]

To this shroud in a gutter! [32]

What a death-in-life---to be his own spectre! [33]

His living body become death’s puppet! [34]

Dolled by death in her crude paints and drapes [35]

He haunts his own staring vigil [36]

And suffers the subjection, and the dumbness, [37]

And the humiliation of the role! [38]

And that is how it is, [39]

“And that is how it is.” This is so often the aim of the poet – to get to the essence of something – to get to a deep truth and to share it with others through the power of carefully crafted language and well-chosen words, aided by the poet’s imagination and the solitude that allows it to create its art.

We may weep for the salmon in Hughes’ poem but in doing so, we also ultimately weep for ourselves. Gadamer associates the term *Energeia* directly with the experience of experiencing a work of art. A work of art’s being as it emerges from an encounter with it has the quality of aliveness that Aristotle intended in his own use of the word. As the special meaning of words has significance for poets, its importance and significance must have special meaning for philosophers.

On the flyleaf to Sagar’s *Writers and their Work: Ted Hughes* (1981), he states,

No other modern English poet has been able to tap such energies in the English language. Everything Hughes writes is characterized by the same imaginative reach, courage, honesty, depth of caring and far-sighted intelligence, not only his adult poetry, but his writings for children, his stories, his plays and his critical essays.

I can only concur, as no doubt would Scigaj, who claimed,

The central persona of the [*River*] poems is closest ever to Hughes himself (the poems frequently use the first-person pronoun) and the real Gulkana salmon he quests for is...self-knowledge, a life-time's affirmation of the power of poetry, and a penetration to the spiritual source of it. (1986, pp. 288-9)

There is in addition to the powerful language, symbolism and imagery in Hughes's poetry, another power in his art, and it is present in virtually every poem of his *River* collection, "An October Salmon" included. Lucas Myers in *An Essential Self. Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: A Memoir* refers directly to the power of poetry to heal and to Hughes' acceptance of that belief in his use of the term "shamanism" in his work. He writes,

The function of the shaman is healing: to accompany a sick person on the journey and bring him or her back to health and a place in the tribe or, failing that, to help the tribe make adjustments to fill the absent one's place. (2011, p. 107)

The character of Lumb and his double in *Gaudete* (1977) – *gaudete* means rejoice - explicitly act in concert to serve this purpose of bringing back the salmon of "An October Salmon" in suffering the dumbness and the humiliation of its role takes us on its journey towards death, but in the process restores to us the acceptance of death in the cycle of life—the idea that life and death are not just connected but are somehow necessarily interrelated and interdependent. It is a view of nature expressed in religious terms, an extraordinary achievement.

The power of poetry to heal in relation to Hughes' *River* poems in particular has also been noted by Gifford (2009, p. 59). "The imperative of the title ['Go Fishing'] is to undergo a transformation on the river...this flow...all plasm healing." In a toast

Hughes gave to T. S. Eliot in the presence of his widow in 1998, Gifford relates how Hughes described Eliot's shamanistic characteristics in the following terms.

Eliot, like modern shamanesque figures, possessed unusual healing powers. It was as though the auto-immune system were at work. He revisits us in his greatest poems and, by them, heals. It is a shamanic function but we do not call it that, since that terminology and function are concealed from us. Poetry, though, has the capacity to heal. (2009, p.107)

The power of poetry has a variety of sources and effects. Its considered, focussed and careful use of words and language convey so much in a concentrated and intense way. Poetry captures the energy that leads to its genesis and stores it permanently on the page. It waits for that energy to be released anew when read and interpreted by the reader. In a very real sense, the written work becomes a "body [that is] simply "the armature of energy." It has the power to heal; an idea I suggested and illustrated in my own poem suite "Views from a Bridge" in Chapter Three.

I come now to an idea that I consider more fully in the next chapter. It is an idea based on the several powers of poetry that I have sought to draw out and illustrate with the help of Hughes and others. It is the idea that both philosophy and poetry share common ground in relation to the careful and considered use of words and language and their relationships to meaning, and my central question of what it means to be human.

In Chapter Five, I consider another power that poetry might have in an educational context to address what I consider to be of fundamental educative importance—the need to restore and maintain respect in the world.

I stress that the ideas I put forward are not perceived by me to be a "silver bullet" in any form, in that I am expecting such an outcome to take place, or that their application will magically transform what has possibly become an entrenched and possibly irretrievable malady. I acknowledge that some readers might disagree at the outset with the premise of my claim – that respect even needs to be restored to the world of human beings. Rather, I am simply hoping that from the ideas I suggest, as the songwriter's Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody proclaim, that "from little things big things grow."

I would expect any such triumphs to be like outbreaks of peace in isolated pockets of a much larger and ongoing war. In other words, whatever is attempted within schools and their communities, I believe they will remain at the mercy of much larger forces and influences within the larger societies that shape them at least as much than they can even hope to help shape and change them. My one concession to such a negative outlook, is that trying to bring about change, even when it can only be slow and potentially ill-fated, is worth the effort if we are, as I hope to show, always capable of becoming more like who we are meant to be—caring human beings, not the armatures of negative energies.

Before moving on to the next chapter, and to prepare the ground a little, I include here at the end of this chapter what I consider to be 50 powerful poems to inspire in an educational setting. I selected these poems with the idea of teaching respect, the subject of my next chapter, in mind. I selected them first and foremost not so much because of the words and the language they contain, and the forms and structures they use to convey their messages. It was because I deemed that the ways poets cared about words and language became the genesis for my idea of how respect might be taught and encouraged.

It was only later that I began to realise that the poems I selected to help teach the idea of respect were, in a sense, bound to be respectful by virtue of their poetic natures. And this is an idea I will be exploring more in the chapter to come. For now, I consider two more things before I bring this chapter to its close.

First, it is worth thinking about the relationship that exists between violence - a subject closely associated with Hughes' poetry and identified by many readers and critics alike—and the physical use of language in all its forms, including gestures and body language and the use of oral communication. Have you, my readers, ever noticed that acts of criminal and violent behaviour are virtually never accompanied by the loud (or soft) recitation of verse, or the demure modes of oral communication more in keeping with polite or simply civilised speech? People engaging in violence towards others, should they attempt to communicate at all, invariably yell and swear, and often in the most obscene ways.

Second, and to further support my claim that poems, by their very nature, lend themselves ideally to the teaching of respect in an educational setting. I challenge my readers to choose five to ten of your own liked, loved, admired or memorable poems, and then ask yourself these questions about each poem, “Can it be used to show the meaning of respect, with the help of its subject and treatment?” And “Why might the poem be important in the context of what it means to be human?” I suggest that the poems I have selected answer those questions extremely well. Next I intend to show why this is so.

Finally in this chapter I leave you with the list of my own personal favourite poems. They are each magnificent, beautiful, profound, disturbing, emotional, thought-provoking and powerful examples of what Gadamer might call “deep truths.” And although the merits of beauty and art are very much a matter for the proverbial “eye of the beholder” (and the ear of the listener, in the case of poetry) and are so very subjective in their natures, or beings, as Gadamer would have it, it is remarkable, is it not, that great beauty, like great music, tends to speak to so many of us in what appears to be a universally understood and moving way – at least among those who are fortunate enough to be human; not just in terms of their DNA (bodies) but in terms of the energies that manifest themselves into “the vital signature of a human being – not of an atom, or of a geometrical diagram, or a heap of lenses – but a human being.” (Hughes, 1967, p. 124)

| 50 Powerful Poems for the Classroom | | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|--|-----------------------|--------------------|---------|
| No | Poem | First Line | Poet | Nationality | Times |
| 1 | Refugee Mother And Child | No Madonna and Child could touch | Achebe, Chinua | Nigerian | 1930 |
| 2 | Dover Beach | The sea is calm tonight. | Arnold, Matthew | English | 1822-88 |
| 3 | Funeral Blues | Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone, | Auden, Wystan Hugh | Anglo- American | 1907-73 |
| 4 | The Peace of Wild Things | When despair for the world grows in me | Berry, Wendell | American | 1934- |

| | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|
| 5 | Death in Leamington | She died in the upstairs bedroom | Betjeman, John | English | 1906-1984 |
| 6 | The Sick Rose | O rose, though art sick! | Blake, William | English | 1757-1827 |
| 7 | The Tyger | Tyger Tyger, burning bright, | | | |
| 8 | The Soldier | If I should die, think only this of me: | Brooke, Rupert | English | 1887-1915 |
| 9 | Hamnavoe | My father passed with his penny letters | Brown, George Mackay | Scottish | 1921-96 |
| 10 | From Sonnets From The Portuguese | How do I love thee? Let me count the ways. | Browning, Elizabeth Barrett | English | 1806-61 |
| 11 | The Donkey | When fishes flew and forests walked | Chesterton, Gilbert Keith | English | 1874-1936 |
| 12 | November | There is wind where the rose was, | De la Mare, Walter | English | 1873-1956 |
| 13 | The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock | Let us go then, you and I, | Eliot, Thomas Stearns | American | 1888-1965 |
| 14 | Barn Owl | Daybreak: the household slept | Harwood, Gwen | Australian | 1920-95 |
| 15 | To the virgins, to make much of time | Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, | Herrick, Robert | English | 1591-1674 |
| 16 | The Death of the Bird | For every bird there is this last migration: | Hope, A. D. | Australian | 1907-2000 |
| 17 | An October Salmon | He's lying in poor water, a yard or so depth of poor safety. | Hughes, Ted | English | 1930-98 |
| 18 | Existential Song | Once upon a time there was a man. | | | |
| 19 | February 17th | A lamb could not get born. Ice wind | | | |

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|-------------|-----------|
| 20 | Ravens | As we came through the gate to look at the few new lambs | | | |
| 21 | That Morning | We came where the salmon were so many | | | |
| 23 | The Day He Died | Was the silkiest day of the young year, | | | |
| 24 | Plate Tectonics | In the Great Rift, the wilderbeest wheel and run, | James, Clive | Australian | 1939- |
| 25 | Church Going | Once I am sure there is nothing going on | | | |
| 26 | Sunny Prestatyn | Come To Sunny Prestatyn | | | |
| 27 | The Old Fools | What do they think has happened, the old fools, | Larkin, Philip | English | 1922-85 |
| 28 | This Be The Verse | They fuck you up, your mum and dad. | | | |
| 29 | Snake | A snake came to my water trough | Lawrence, David Herbert | English | 1885-1930 |
| 30 | Bush Girl | She's milking in the rain and dark, | Lawson, Henry | Australian | 1867-1922 |
| 31 | The Quaker Graveyard In Nantucket | A brackish reach of shoal off Madaket— | Lowell, Robert | American | 1917-77 |
| 32 | On A Dead Cripple | Strapped on an iron frame and racked, | Mason, Ronald Allison Kells | New Zealand | 1905-71 |
| 33 | The Meaning Of Existence | Everything except language | Murray, Les | Australian | 1938- |
| 34 | Dulce Et Decorum Est | Bent double, like old beggars under sacks, | Owen, Wilfred | English | 1893-1918 |

| | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|----------------|-----------|
| 35 | Clancy of the Overflow | I had written him a letter which I had, for want of better | Paterson, Andrew Barton ("Banjo") | Australian | 1864-1941 |
| 36 | Hardcastle Crag | Flintlike, her feet struck | Plath, Sylvia | American | 1932-63 |
| 37 | The Red Cockatoo | Sent as a present from Annam - | Po, Chu-i | Chinese (Tang) | 772-846CE |
| 38 | The Raven | Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered weak and weary, | Poe, Edgar Allen | American | 1809-49 |
| 39 | Sonnet 18 | Shall I compare thee to a Summers day? | Shakespeare, William | English | 1564-1616 |
| 40 | Sonnet 116 | Let me not to the marriage of true minds | | | |
| 41 | Ozymandias | I met a traveller from an antique land | Shelley, Percy Bysshe | English | 1792-1822 |
| 42 | Five Bells | Time that is moved by little fidget wheels | Slessor, Kenneth | Australian | 1901-71 |
| 43 | Break, Break, Break | Break, break, break | Tennyson, Alfred, Lord | English | 1809-92 |
| 44 | The Lady of Shallot | On either side the river lie | | | |
| 45 | Fern Hill | Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs | Thomas, Dylan | Welsh | 1914-53 |
| 46 | The Conversation of Prayers | The conversation of prayers about to be said | | | |
| 47 | The Hunchback in the Park | The hunchback in the park | | | |
| 48 | Death | Nor dread nor hope attend | Yeats, William Butler | Irish | 1865-1939 |

| | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| 49 | He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven | Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths, | | | |
| 50 | The Second Coming | Turning and turning in the widening gyre | | | |

Chapter Five **Respect for Self, Others and the World**

A human being is part of a whole, called by us the 'Universe,' a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest - a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circles of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty. (Albert Einstein)

... this uneasy channel of minnows [52]

In Chapter One of this work, I outlined the merits of literature and philosophy, generally, in the context of education, and in Chapter Two I expanded on the important role these subjects can play in the growth and development of human beings coming to terms with life's big questions and biggest challenges, and how such questions, more often than not, involve dualities in one form or another.

In Chapter Three, I extended the narrative arc developed in the first two chapters by using my own poetry to show, in the context of my own search for meaning (or what I refer to as "making sense") the similarities or compatibilities that exist between literature and philosophy, generally, and specifically between poetry and phenomenology.

This led me to consider in Chapter Four, and with the help of Hughes' poetry and prose, the care, regard, and value, the respect, that poets show in their choice and use of words to capture and convey their experience, and how that "care," "regard" and "valuing" of language helps them to create poems that are inherently respectful by their very natures, and that often have an impact on their readers, poems that possess the power to inform, affect, and influence.

In this chapter I consider a further contribution that the power of poetry might make in educational settings, and it is this.

If poetry is in part about respecting language (regarding, seeing and esteeming, and valuing), then teaching poetry can play an important and significant role in students' learning self-respect, respect for others and for the world we live in, especially when teaching takes place in an environment that fosters and encourages the use of literature in ethically oriented philosophical discussions that place emphasis on considered and careful use of language as a means to seek and impart meaning, and facilitate understanding.

Poetry, literature and philosophy can, I propose, play an important role in teaching the kind of respect that Einstein so wonderfully expresses in the quotation used at the beginning of this chapter.

Before outlining in more detail why I believe there is a real need to teach respect in educational settings I expand on the reasoning behind the proposition I put forward.

This proposition is partly founded on the simple premise that I draw from my consideration of the perceived differences between the human animal and other non-human animals outlined earlier in Chapter Two - that it is the faculty of human language that contributes most significantly and fundamentally to what it means to be a human being. Programs of education directed at helping make students more fully rounded and socially oriented members of contemporary human society require language as a focus.

In the conclusion of Chapter Four, I also drew attention to the idea that violence towards others constitutes lack or absence of respect for self, others and the world, and is distinguished through the ways we use or misuse language. Degrading and noisy use of language that takes place during violent conflicts or even in everyday discourse is itself a form of violence. We modern human beings live in a world akin to Hughes' "uneasy channel of minnows;" it is a world where violence thrives, ironically, in the civilised world of human kind.

This is why I propose that teaching poetry, as part of teaching literature and philosophy might help students become well-rounded and well-developed, engaged, respectful, open-minded and empathic human beings.

Poets, philosophers and writers, like scientists, observe the world and interpret it though their ends or purposes might be markedly different. But what poets and philosophers in particular care about is the precise meaning of terms and meaning itself. There is a connection between regarding the world, in the more scientific sense of observing the world, and the verb *to regard* – in the sense of holding someone or something in high esteem. It is this aspect of being regarded that, in my view, drives gang culture and peer pressure alike: that is, the fundamental need of human beings to be seen or acknowledged and to be recognised by one's peers.

Regarding in this sense involves caring about something and valuing it, to the point where it becomes something worthy of protection. We seek to protect the things we care about, and this why I believe that love itself is at the heart of respect or to put it another way, respect is one of the greatest expressions of love there is. So when I say there is a need to restore respect to the world, I am also talking about restoring love to the world – and that includes to the natural world. Hughes reveals this vision, in his poetry and prose, and expresses it in a very different way to me. I am grateful and appreciative, because in “An October Salmon” I see a profound expression of respect and love of nature.

There is a digression I would also like to make at this point to reflect upon some views about the relationships between human knowledge and understanding and language that I find myself coming to terms with as I proceed in writing. For instance, Ludwig Wittgenstein (date) shares a view of language that says that the limits of human knowledge and understanding are strictly circumscribed by the limits of language itself. Some philosophers, such as....., believe as well that thought is not even possible without language. I think of language as being very important to what it means to be a human being, and that it is a necessary conduit for us when, in our encounter with the external reality of the corporeal world we must filter it subjectively through our senses and interpret it. On the other hand, language may not be critically fundamental to being human and neither is it a representation of the external reality it expresses. Deaf and

dumb people are clearly human despite their incapacities, and reality remains distinct and external to the languages that can only ever reconstruct it.

I make this position known so that the considered and careful use of language, and the appreciation of what poetry, philosophy and literature can offer to readers and listeners alike - the opportunity to shape young students into more complete human beings - is a proposal that will clearly have limitations and constraints. Those limitations are not imposed, in my view, by the limits of language itself—at least not in the way that Wittgenstein or others might think. Rather, my proposal is more likely to be limited by the kind of societal pressures and constraints I referred to in the conclusion of Chapter Four.

There is too, and possibly even more significantly, the impact on the likely success of my proposal, if implemented, on human nature itself—but I will say more on that subject later in this chapter, when I come to talk about the relevance and importance of the teaching and learning of respect and empathy.

Returning though, for the moment, to the reason I do not agree with the proposition that the limits of human knowledge and understanding are circumscribed by the limits of human language, I can further explain my view in terms of the history of human evolutionary biology. If evolution as a theory is accepted, it means that human beings must have survived and developed for millions of years to the point where a larynx, a voice box, evolved. The earliest species of developing and evolving human beings would not have had a larynx at all, let alone a voice to be produced by it—and yet, clearly, this did not hamper their evolutionary development.

This would also mean that human beings who had to survive a hostile and dangerous planet for millennia, without being able to produce words of any kind - audibly distinct grunts codified into language included - were still obviously able to do so, which would have required communication in one form or another, particularly if it is also accepted that collaboration and not just conflict must have been a key feature or hallmark of human kind's ability to survive "like minnows" in the "uneasy channel" of their hostile world.

How then was collaboration and co-operation possible in the absence of words and therefore the kind of thoughts and ideas necessary to achieve it, if one accepts, as I clearly do not, that words are necessary for ideas and thoughts to exist?

Outrageous though it may seem, I suggest here the idea that human beings may have been capable of telepathic communication at an early stage of their evolutionary development. I am clearly not referring to a form of telepathy involving word-based thoughts but rather emotion-based thoughts, thoughts reflecting needs, wants and desires. These are rudimentary thoughts in all probability, very much like the highly evolved instincts of wild creatures living today—animals without the human capacity to speak words of any kind but clearly still able to communicate with each other. Animals use the kind of capabilities that have long since been repressed or made redundant in today's modern human beings by centuries of steadily accreting modes of tradition and habituation brought about by the emergence of modern human civilisations and their concomitant cultural traditions, social mores, and, of course, human language itself.

Hughes was vitally interested in language and words and the limits they could impose on “The salt mouthful of actual existence” [47]. In Chapter Two I drew attention to this when talking about the dualities at play in his poetry and prose. One duality involved the power and the weakness of words in the context of their ability to grapple with the subjects they were attempting to represent.

It is perhaps worth mentioning too, that Hughes once experimented with a language of his own invention in collaboration with Peter Brook, the English playwright, which Hughes called “Orghast.” Together, they tried to show that while words themselves were arbitrary signifiers of meaning—along the lines expressed by Shakespeare when he wrote in *Romeo and Juliet*, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” (Act II, Scene ii, Lines 1-2). They invented instead, sounds that literally had no pre-defined meanings at all, that when presented in certain settings and as part of a liturgy and ceremony comprised of repeated chants and songs using repeated sounds alone, sense could still be made by the audience of the essential drama that was unfolding, and they felt connected to the play in a meaningful way—even when meaning itself was being withheld.

With that small digression behind me, it is time to articulate why I consider that the teaching and learning of respect is a worthy activity in an educational context, particularly when there is so much effort already being directed towards the teaching of this subject in a number of Australia's schools and other educational settings. To that end, it is also worth stating what I mean when I use the word respect.

In a sense, I have already given my definition of the word respect by equating it with the verbs *to regard*, as in *to see* and *to esteem*, and *to value*, as in *to care for* and *to love*. Of course, respect, it has to be acknowledged, is also closely related to fear. Fear continues to be used to this day, as a way of getting respect in a variety of contexts—educational contexts included.

The quote provided at the beginning of this chapter, from Einstein, also provides a meaningful and an aspirational answer to the question “What is respect?” And teaching - and learning - that kind of respect in our classrooms is, for me at least, arguably as important today as it has ever been, especially in the context of today's modern but seemingly shallow and materialistic western world, where the cult of celebrity has emerged as a full-blown industry in its own right, and where self and instant gratification appear to have become its dominant cultural paradigms or motivations.

We are also living in an age where the rise of even greater forms of violence, in the form of terrorism, has become prominent and has manifested itself as a seemingly politically acceptable way to resolve difficult human differences and conflicts.

The growing Green Movement around the globe, while a pleasing sign of concern and respect for the earth's environment and for nature, is also a sign that the very planet that supports all life is being disrespected - unvalued and uncared for - by many who are causing it great harm, in terms of resource depletion, habitat destruction, and pollution—almost always for financial gain, benefit or reward.

Even on a much smaller scale, it is easy to interpret acts of littering as signs of disrespect for local communities and the environments that support them. Drunkenness, hooliganism, vandalism and gratuitous violence are outward effects of disrespect for the happiness and well-being of others, just as drug abuse is the outward effect of disrespect

for one's self, as well as others, who often become the victims of theft to support a user's habit.

For my own part, I can still clearly identify the precise moment from which there appeared to be a general decline in respect amongst and between members of my own Australian community, and a growing emphasis and focus on the needs of individuals rather than the needs of others—those necessary others who help to define who we are and who are necessary in the process of shaping us as fully rounded and compassionate human beings. That moment came from the sport of tennis, when Bjorn Borg and John McEnroe turned sport into a professional, money-making activity that put celebrity and entertainment at the forefront of sports from that time on, and at the cost of simply playing sport for the values it encouraged, including good-will, sportsmanship, and the use of competition to better ourselves, both as competitors and as people.

McEnroe's open defiance of the umpire's decision started a trend that has been seen in sport ever since, and sport has become mired in negative issues to the point where gambling and drug taking in sport, as well as poor sportsmanship, has become a dominant feature of many sports, once heralded as the bastions of valour and virtue.

At an even more localised level, it is easy to point to other examples of the lack of respect amongst many in our society. The appalling use of language is a key example of this in the context of the kind of response I am now looking to encourage by teaching poetry and ethics, amongst other things, in today's education systems and from as early an age as possible. I would include music too, for a number of reasons, one of which is that recent research shows that it aids in the development of the brain and enhances thinking. I believe it is also important for young people to be creative. Musical instruments make that possible, and it's much better - at the risk of stating the obvious - to put a musical instrument into the hands of a young person than a weapon.

As I have mentioned before, however, the pressures acting on schools themselves from the larger societies of which they are a part are enormous, and any effort to encourage changes in societal attitudes, especially those held by adults, is going to be met with strong and possibly, overpowering resistance. But if students can be encouraged, for example, to start loving language by embracing the power of poetry, and then to start

using language in an intentionally respectful way, they may then have a positive influence on those around them, even outside the relatively protected environments of their educational communities and settings.

Having said that, I want to mention a case of disrespect that demonstrates why I believe that the teaching of respect to adults, who clearly lack it, is likely to be a wasted effort. I say this because, in recent times, full colour posters have appeared in Service Tasmania shops which state: “Elder Abuse. It’s Not O.K.” This sentiment is, in fact, the name of a Government Policy, clearly aimed, not at young children, but at adults. I can clearly remember a time in my own childhood where the very thought of such a policy would have been not just incomprehensible but a complete anathema to the general sensibility of the times.

Such claims that respect for self, others, and the world has been eroded or is in a state of decline can of course be disputed and have been by many. The counter argument to these claims hinges on the simple fact that I am growing older, that people, as they age, start to yearn for the golden age of days-gone-by, and in the process simply get grumpy with the world and resentful of youth.

In any event, these claims of modern disrespect may not be considered proper evidence by scientists, especially those influenced by the principles of logical positivism and who, accordingly, want to interpret data that is gained, tested and verified by experimental means or from the field of their scientific enquiries. The point I will make though here is that all evidence, however it is collected or presented, still has to be interpreted before it can be accepted or rejected, or applied and used.

With this very much in mind, I offer my evidence for the erosion of respect, and of the perceived need to restore it to a world that I believe is sorely in need of it, for the purpose of making good my further claim that the teaching of poetry and philosophy – with the aide and support of good and appropriate literature and if taught with enthusiasm and care - can help to restore respect for self, others and the world, notwithstanding the efforts currently already being made in educational settings to do just that.

Just as I argued in Chapter One, that philosophy and literature could have great benefits for students from an early age, I suggest again that they have restorative benefits in relation to the specific subject of respect. The list of poems listed at the conclusion of Chapter Four can be used as the basis of lesson plans for use in educational settings for this very purpose.

Great poetry by its very nature lends itself naturally to the teaching of respect, in terms of the poets' craft and their subjects, which are closely observed and valued, esteemed and cared about. "An October Salmon" is an excellent case in point, and in *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (2010), Edward Hadley identifies elegiac poetry as the poetry of mourning (p. 94). He clearly identifies the poetry of mourning as an expression of respect, and the poem "An October Salmon" as a modern day example of an old poetic form used for that purpose. It is certainly that and more, it combines two long familiar poetic forms - the elegy and the pastoral - that expresses aspects of both in a powerful way, which is what you might expect from a poet who was interested in both the traditional and the new in relation to his art. Hadley talks about the poem in the following terms,

The tone [of the poem] is remote from the usual elegiac norms, for the salmon's passing is not bewailed; instead Hughes implies great respect for the salmon who plays its part in the vitality/death processes of nature with blind obedience and determination. He has been rewarded for his devotion to his instinct. But the salmon does not desire eternal life, rather eternal rest. It is as if it yearns to be part of the natural fabric which bore it, to decompose and literally become a part of the environment. The 'palate' acts as an emblem of creative potential; his death, a 'daub' on the river's surface, is a part of the unfinished and continually evolving painting that is the natural world. Hughes sees a beauty in the salmon's utilitarian 'only birth matters' ["Salmon Eggs"] dogma. Taking his cue from nature's objectivity, his descriptions like those in *Moortown Elegies* are unsparing, yet tender and appreciative. It is a necessary detachment which gives the poems their power....The salmon embodies nature's persistence and desire to continue living. If the river is a good metaphor for life, then the need to live sustains the importance of the regenerative qualities of the elegy. (p. 94)

Here then is a concrete example of what I have just been talking about. "An October Salmon" is both an example of the poet's respectful artfulness and craftsmanship and of

the respect inherent in his poem's subject. How apt is it then to suggest that students would benefit directly by being encouraged and helped to read or write, preferably both, poetry or prose that requires a close and careful consideration of how language itself can be used and respected.

It is, I claim, through the encouragement of a more focussed and careful use of language, and the teaching of respect for the way we use our words and our language, not just when writing but in everyday speech, that students, particularly young students, can learn to become more respectful in other ways and towards other things. I am not suggesting a large or a fast change of attitudes towards respect in a broad context, but rather an incremental, slow and localised change in the attitudes of students towards themselves, each other, and the world. Such a change is desperately needed, and I truly believe that the teaching of poetry and the powers it possesses, when taught within a framework that encourages the intelligent use of literature and philosophy, can be a powerful tool in the hands of educationalists who share my concern for the general lack of respect that is manifested in so many ways and with such negative effects.

If boys see him they will try to kill him. [56]

This, however, brings me to a very real impediment or obstacle to the claim I have just made, and it should be acknowledged and not simply ignored.

In Chapter Four, I said that poetry was nothing if not the careful and considered use of words and language, which led me in this chapter to consider, apart from the sheer pleasure and value that poetry can add to the human experience of life, what other powers poetry might have that could enhance the human experience of life or deepen our awareness and understanding of what it might mean to be more fully human. And in Chapter Three, I identified what I considered to be another critically important power that poetry possesses, the facility to encourage a perspectival shift in order to aide and encourage empathy in ourselves and in others.

But here the human condition or, to be more specific, human nature itself, becomes a matter of some importance and a source of considerable constraint in relation to the

kind of success I might be hoping to achieve by encouraging the teaching and learning of poetry as a means of encouraging respect and empathy for self, others and the world.

The Australian author, television presenter and interviewer, Andrew Denton, in his television series, *Enough Rope: Elders*, interviewed Bob Hawke, Australia's former Prime Minister, in July 2008, and posed the following questions, "Do human beings evolve? Or is human nature essentially the same as it has always been?" Hawke's answer was interesting and despite the poor transcription, it is worth quoting in full. Please note that I have scored through confusing or unnecessary words in the actual transcript and have added, in brackets, missing words in order to better convey Hawke's message.

Well it's as though we've got a lobotomy. We've had a lobotomy. There's one side right [left side of the brain] which has ~~is~~ developed ~~in~~ exponentially in the way - you know - we can actually produce goods and services and [the way we] communicate now is just infinitely beyond recognition compared to just less than a century ago. That side of the brain has just blossomed and flourished and given the opportunity for us to have a life beyond imagination. The other side [the right], if anything, has withered; it certainly hasn't matched the growth of this [the left] side. Our social engineering capacity, our sort of moral conscience - if you like - [that part of] the consciousness - it hasn't developed.

Questions of neurological accuracy aside, I believe Denton's questions and Hawke's response to be insightful and significant in terms of human nature and the proposition that human nature does appear to be un-evolving. And there is good reason why this might be so.

The point is that, notwithstanding the millions of years of human evolutionary history that preceded them, every human beginning is a life that starts anew, albeit under the influence of two dominant factors: nature and nurture.

In a formal educational sense we are, as Hawke suggests, well adapted to receive the wisdom of our human past when it comes to the rational part of our being. This wisdom is passed on to us by successive generations of parents and other educators,

with varying degrees of success, in accordance with the natural intelligence our genes allow.

In terms of human biology, however, it also takes decades to get a human child from a stage of dependence on others to a stage of adult maturity, independence and relative autonomy that, in the early years at least, remain full of insecurities involving issues of identity - self-knowledge and sexuality - and tribalism - acceptance and socialisation - amongst other things. The whole issue of how much human behaviour is linked to or influenced by biology and culture remains vexed to say the least.

But it seems that human nature has had millions of years to evolve with what appears to have been very little change, in terms of the DNA that makes us who we are, or in cultural terms, when it comes to the kinds of behaviours human beings go on repeating, generationally and historically, and despite our highly evolved and super-sized brains.

All this being said, Hughes, in “An October Salmon” expresses the issue of a possibly un-evolving human nature in the single and memorable line, “If boys see him they will try to kill him.” [56]

Hughes was an acute observer of human nature, and a number of his poems have the ability to achieve insights that can be jarring and unsettling. The idea that boys will kill, for example, puts the notion of innocence together with murder in a juxtaposition that seems quite shocking, but less shocking than the apparent truth the statement conveys—innocent children can be shockingly cruel and even murderous.

That certainly complies with my own memories of childhood bullying, and it has been the subject too, of course, of major literary works. I am reminded, for example of the line “Boys, innocent as strawberries” from the Dylan Thomas poem “The Hunchback in the Park,” which tells of the cruelty boys show towards a hunchback. William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* (1954) is another memorable example from literature that suggests something dark and awful is at work within human nature itself.

The point here is that in a very real sense there has to be some question about whether respect is something that can be taught to or learned by students who may not be open

to learning it in the way I would hope, simply because we do not become more respectful than our un-evolved natures will allow.

But how credible is such a claim, really? If respect can't be taught or learned at all there would seem to be very little point to education at all, and particularly, as I have already suggested, education is unavoidably moral in its character and purpose. Isn't respect a subject that has a decidedly moral and ethical dimension to it?

But therein lies a very real impediment. It is much easier to perform mathematical functions or to reason with the aid of logic and deduction than it is to make well informed or ethically wise moral decisions and judgments that can have potentially profound effects on our lives and on the lives of others. And this calls into question too, the nature of empathy, the most fundamentally important element when it comes to teaching respect and that other related but as yet unmentioned and unacknowledged element, responsibility.

I suggested in Chapter Three that empathy is often an important part of the poet's craft when it comes to engaging their readers or listeners more fully and completely in their poems about the lives of other people or other living things. But herein lies another of those almost unavoidable dualities that might not be immediately apparent or obvious at first glance.

It is common to think of empathy, for instance, in its positive aspect. In fact, the very idea that empathy might have a negative aspect is something that seems to be almost universally ignored. Putting ourselves in the shoes of others is a clichéd expression, to be sure, but it is clichéd for good reason. This is how empathy is supposed to work. But there is another much darker and negative side to empathy, and it relates specifically to cruelty, something that seems to be an entrenched or ingrained part of human nature.

The writer Simon Baron-Cohen, in his book *Zero Degrees of Empathy: A New Theory of Human Cruelty* (2011), argues, using evidence derived largely from recent findings from the field of Neurological Science that the phenomenon we call human evil is essentially a failure of empathy.

I would, however, beg to differ with his view that encourages too simplistic an explanation of the phenomenon he refers to as evil. I consider evil - cruelty - to be a deeply ingrained feature of what it means to be human. Human beings are flawed and some human beings are quite simply irredeemable—the real problem, of course, is in knowing who is irredeemable and in knowing who, what then?

I dispute the proposition put forward by Baron-Cohen that evil is a failure of empathy. While this might appear to be both reasonable and true, it does not go quite far enough, in my view, towards explaining the sheer prevalence of cruelty throughout human societies.

Consider the case of a child that pulls the wings off a fly without thought or intent concerning their actions. While the child is still being cruel in my view, if empathy is to mean anything at all, the question remains, how much crueller is a child who would do such a thing knowingly and take pleasure from such cruelty?

It is tempting to think that in this human beings are distinctly different from all other animals but that, in all probability isn't true either. If, as both Hughes and I agree, human beings are themselves a species of animal, it would be strange indeed if another species of animal wasn't capable of cruelty too. This is precisely the case when it comes to chimpanzees, human kind's closest biological relative. Chimpanzees have been observed to torment and torture before killing and eating other members of the monkey family.

While it is almost unimaginable that a monkey could take pleasure from being cruel, it seems clear that the animal closest to human beings shares a good deal more in common with human beings than might previously have been considered thinkable. What this suggests to me is that cruelty is not just a failure of empathy but it is perhaps just as significantly, if not more so, the result of empathy.

In Yorkshire, Ted had learned that humankind is a predatory creature...he fished at every chance he got. The hawk roosting had evolved a beak and a claw...Predation is in the bones of the race...[It] is part of everyone's nature except a few anchorites who devote their lives to getting beyond it. As he grew older, poetry took him or he took poetry – in the Volume *River*

for example – more explicitly into the “machinery of heaven”. (Myers, 2011, p. 108)

The point then of this consideration of empathy as critical and useful in the teaching and learning environment for inculcating, promoting, or fostering the idea of respect, is that empathy itself is a double-edged sword, it has a positive and a negative aspect to it. With all the good will in the world, I have a sense that teaching something like respect to students using empathy, through creative writing exercises, philosophical discussions, readings, or a host of other means, while undoubtedly useful in my view, is likely to be for all that akin to preaching to the converted.

In other words, students who are predisposed to being respectful to begin with are far more likely to benefit from the kind of classroom activities and approach to teaching language use that I have been advocating in this work. But clearly such an approach will have limited success based on issues relating, ironically, to the very thing that is needed to achieve success.

There is a similar duality in what Sokolowski in *Phenomenology of the Human Person* talks about when he says in an existential vein (2008, pp. 256-7) that who we are is intimately connected to “how we declare ourselves in our choices.” He goes on to make the following assertion,

Wishing by itself does not make us practical agents...Only when a wish becomes an intention, and only when the intention effectively determines actions that we perform and choices that we make, have we become truly active. For a choice is an action, a doing of something...it is an intervention, and it creates the world in a way that exhibits rational articulation. A *proairesis* is a *praxis*.

Sokolowski, in this regard, shares much in common with Hannah Arendt, author of *The Human Condition* (1998), but while I agree with his statement in broad terms I think, and in a similar way to Baron-Cohen, that his view does not go quite far enough. Being the recalcitrant dualist that I am, I am inclined to look at both sides of the single coin called, in this instance, action, and ask why this would not have both a negative as well as a positive aspect to it as well.

No action, can also be looked at as an action. Deciding, for example, to remain silent and to do nothing in order to protect the safety of someone hiding from others who would do them harm when asking about their location, despite not being a physical act remains an action by virtue of the withholding of an action. Such negative actions have the moral dimension and force of choices made not to act. In this sense Sokolowski is right to assert that we define ourselves through the choices we make, but in linking choices with actions without making qualifications about what actions can be, in their negative aspect, risks defining them too narrowly and simplistically.

Choices, of course, also occur in language and the choices made when using language is something Sokolowski is well aware of (p. 257), and much more so are poets, Hughes most decidedly among them.

Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles [53]

In *The Life of a Poet* (2001) Elaine Feinstein writes, “Throughout 1980...Hughes worked on *River*, a book of poems that not only celebrate his experiences in Alaska but also records his growing awareness of the ineluctable force, animating all the living creatures on the planet” (p. 210).

River is important in the context of Hughes’ poetic *oeuvre* because it reveals him becoming, as it seems he was destined to become, a poet with strong environmentalist leanings.

Hughes, like his son Nicholas, had a strong interest in the conservation of rivers and waterways and was something of an activist in his efforts to preserve, maintain and protect waterways around the world, particularly in England. His environmental concerns, together with his focus on nature as the bedrock on which all life depends - human life, civilisation and culture included, which, as I see it, is fundamentally a form of respect for the world itself - is masterfully expressed in this ecologically aware and semi-religious treatise from the natural world, of which “An October Salmon” is a quintessential example.

Sagar (1981, p. 33) has observed that Hughes “cannot take seriously any attitude or experience which takes for granted the continuance of our civilisation with very much of its present structure and values, the continuance of the race, or even the reality of the physical universe.” And in an interview cited by Sagar (p. 33) Hughes himself said,

If it's [civilisation] is still here, it's still here by grace of pure inertia and chance...one had better have one's spirit invested in something that will not vanish. And this is a shifting of your foundation to a completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse.

For Hughes the only thing that could emerge from such rubble was nature itself, not simply nature returned from its place of exile - an exile imposed by Christian religion - and not simply a world of nature stripped bare of Christianity's egocentric view of the world and indeed of the Universe. Rather, for Hughes, the natural world remains as much a world for human beings as it is for all living things, the difference is that humans have a vital responsibility for the world's future and that means bearing responsibility for ourselves, for others, and the world.

In his letter to Gifford of 17 December 1993 in Hughes wrote,

Poetry has to be on all sides at once-or it has to take form at a level beneath that on which taking sides begins. In the Environmental Wars it is very easy to become righteously embattled against the individuals who seem responsible for the damage. The real problem, as I see it, is the difficulty of avoiding that easy but exhilarating battle with them, and of finding effective ways of making them painfully aware of the human folly in which we are all implicated. (2011, p. 10)

From this Gifford concluded that the “great sense of responsibility as a poet is to offer us a complex vision that reconnects the dualities we struggle to reconcile in human culture with the contradictory tensions of the world in which we must make a sustainable home for future generations” (p. 10).

I like to think of reconciling such dualities in the following terms. Life shapes our life stories or living narratives just as we in turn shape our own life stories, through the choices we make and the responsibilities we choose to accept or are made to bear. And this is what Victor Frankl might well have referred to as “logotherapy”.

In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence. (2011, p. 88)

There can be few better expressions of what responsibility and ultimately respect can come to mean. I agree with Frankl that responsibility should be a defining element of what it means to be a human being. And at the heart of responsibility is respect.

And this sense of responsibility for nature as a shared concern for us all, as human beings complicit for the current state of the world, particularly in environmental terms, becomes most clear in the poem “An October Salmon” and in the line “Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles” [53].

Scigaj said, “All of *River*, but especially “Salmon Eggs,” offers a wonderfully positive and life-enhancing alternative to *Crow’s* myopic vision. Hughes has constructed a cathedral of ecological vision” (1991, p. 144).

The unifying vision of *River* is in fact, as I have suggested elsewhere, a key to understanding much of Hughes’ considerable poetic output. He is committed to restoring nature to religion by reconnecting human beings once again to a world of nature from which they have become disconnected through their own hubris - a form of disrespect - a hubris borne out of arrogance or a sense of superiority over nature that has been encouraged, in part, it must be said, by the rise of science—notwithstanding the laudable and encouraging moves within science towards a more biocentric view of nature, such as, Biomimicry, for example.

The danger for science, however, continues to come not from the scepticism inherent in its methodology, which is in fact its great strength but from how it seeks to discover or reveal knowledge and, possibly even more importantly, how it intends to use it.

Chapter 10 of *The Challenge of Ted Hughes* (Sagar, 1994) is an article by Scigaj entitled *Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision*. In it, Scigaj notes (p. 160), “Hughes’ poetry shares a basic premise with ecologists and environmentalists: the only way to save this planet is to change perceptions of its human habitats about Nature.” Scigaj also observes,

...where Nature once existed independently of humans, our ability to change Nature through acid rain, global warming and genetic engineering has made Nature a ‘subset of human activity’...Hughes concurs...to the extent that humans, with their technological powers, have become in some ways stronger than Nature...” (p. 178)

He then goes on to conclude his powerful essay,

[Bill] McKibben, writing in 1989 [*The End of Nature*]...suggests in his conclusion...we must change our way of thinking, and adopt a more Biocentric view before we destroy the entire planet. Hughes in his poetry has been suggesting such a change for the past twenty years. Reverence for the nurturing powers of organic Nature and respect for the intrinsic worth of all of Nature’s creations have led Hughes to adopt a Biocentric [as opposed to an Anthropocentric] vision...Hughes continues to hope that humans will develop an ecological perspective...a vision of the ‘sacred’ interdependence of every cell and the ‘soul-state of the new world’. His poetry, a beacon directing us towards ecological and spiritual renewal, is vitally important for the survival of our planet. (p.179)

This, for me, is what Hughes’ masterpiece “An October Salmon” is all about, and in his work *Totality and Infinity* (p. 39) the philosopher talks of the enigmatic “Other” who calls us to responsibility. And who else could? We do not live in isolation, and if we did, to who could we be responsible to other than ourselves? And what would responsibility mean then, if anything at all? Hughes, however, is not just called to responsibility by the human other but by the natural world of which he and every other living thing is part, and that is why I believe teaching his work in educational settings can be so effective in

making a small start towards the huge and quite possibly aspirational goal proposed by Einstein at the beginning of this chapter.

Other writers, including Yvette Watt, are also answering that “enigmatic other that calls them to responsibility,” where that other involves a widening of the Levinasian circle of the other to embrace and include the otherness of animals. Watt wrote,

The generalised lack of consideration demonstrated by artists and curators for animals as sentient and self-interested individuals and the consequent failure to address the ethics of our relationship to animals is a key motivating factor behind my recent artwork, which seeks to aid in redressing this matter through the production of artworks that encourage the viewer to consider animals in a more empathetic manner and in doing so engage with the ethics surrounding human-animal relations. (Freeman, Leanne & Watt, 2011, p. 126)

It is this very kind of engagement that Gifford points out (2009, p. 56) is taking place in Hughes’ own artistic endeavours, for example, in his collection *Three Books*, where he places the *River* poem “If,” a poem about the human neglect of responsibility for the planet’s health alongside its “antidote” in the poem titled “Go Fishing.”

Often, in *River*, respect for self, others and the world is fully evident in the tone and reverence the Hughes feels and expresses for his subjects. The tone of his poem “September Salmon,” for instance, as Edward Hadley points out (2010, p. 94) “... is remote from the usual elegiac norms, for the salmon’s passing is not bewailed; instead Hughes implies great respect for the salmon who plays its part in the vitality/death processes of nature with blind obedience and determination.”

While respect for the equally determined and obedient salmon of “An October Salmon” remains clearly in view, that poem’s dimension expands to include the awareness of the poet’s own mortality, and that encourages the poem’s readers to consider not just their own mortality but the plight and mortality of all living things

Scigaj puts it in these terms,

Implicitly the salmon's deathward journey relates to the fisherman's own, and he slowly reconciles himself to his intuition that this journey is in harmony with the natural order of the ecosystem. As fall arrives the sense of the deathly in the river's flow becomes more intense and so does the fisherman's identification with the salmon. The poignant irony of the salmon's end - to die so soon after mating - is mediated by the hope for the continuance of the inhabiting spirit in a transcendent realm, the abode of a Spiritual Master. (1991, p. 142)

And learning to accept death as a necessary and interdependent part of life, its purpose and meaning, as I concluded in Chapter Three of this work, is a subject that is itself worthy of teaching and learning.

The philosopher Michel Eyquem de Montaigne in his *Essays* (Volume 1, Number 20, p. 89) famously remarked "To philosophize is to learn how to die." And in so many ways, I have begun to see my own unique response to the knowledge of mortality and death in just that way, as I continue on my own personal journey of discovery through life.

But in a curious way too, in coming to terms with learning how to die, I have also been learning how to live and to love - more completely - life itself. Hughes has been, and will continue to be, an important part of that journey, and I could not have wished for a better, or a more challenging, companion.

Conclusion The Making of a Masterpiece

[Boswell] Then, Sir, what is poetry?

[Johnson] Why, Sir, it is much easier to say what it is not.
We all know what light is; but it is not easy to tell what it is.

(Dr Johnson)

Review

Gifford, the literary critic, said this of Hughes' contribution to the Arts (2011, pp. 10-11),

More than ten years after his death it has now become clear that in an always changing body of poetic work, and in a range of other literary modes, Hughes sought to raise questions for readers...In the twenty-first century the questions Hughes' work raises have only become more urgent: What is it to be human within our universe? How might we understand our inner life in relation to the forces of nature around us? [Chapters 1-2] What is the moral scope for action within the paths already chosen? How can the contemporary imagination be a force for cultural change? What alternative forms of knowledge might we be ignoring? Is culture nature? [Chapter 3] What might be the healing role of literature in considering the problems we have created in our relationship with our environmental home? [Chapters 4 and 5]

In many ways, and quite without intending it from the outset, this work has been a reflection of the essential points made in Gifford's brief but comprehensive appraisal, as the bracketed references to the chapters in this work (inserted by me) serve to illustrate.

To expand, briefly, on this for the sake of reviewing more adequately what has been written to this point, chapters one to five of this work, as mentioned in my introduction, were initiated by the questions posed at the beginning of each chapter. These key questions helped to give this work its impetus, a cohesive forward direction, and a

narrative arc or shape that replicated, at least in a loose chronological way, the sense of a story being told, one with a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The poem “An October Salmon,” with which this work’s Introduction and Conclusion end, provides a ground, focus or reference point in each chapter in that the poem, or lines from it, act as a kind of prop or interpretive device to help illustrate some of the points being made or to provide a context for the ideas or questions being discussed. For example, in Chapter One of this work, *Philosophy, Literature and Poetry*, in which I dealt with the question, “What has most affected or influenced my life and the way I have chosen or come to live?” the poem “An October Salmon” is used in an emblematic way. The poem, I suggest, affectively symbolises, in a very real sense, who I am, or to be more accurate, who I am still becoming, in terms of what moves me; what I respond to; what I value; what troubles me; and what makes me think deeply.

Speaking more broadly about the question my first chapter raises, apart from the obvious and critically important role my immediate family played in my upbringing and continue to play to this day, the education I received outside my family, both formally and informally, has also been critical in helping to shape me as a thinking and feeling human being.

A factor in the education I received that was to become of enduring and surprisingly significant importance in relation to my entire outlook on life, in both a negative and a positive sense, was my religious education or upbringing. The influence of this factor on the choices I made later in life - to study philosophy, literature and poetry - was the result of choices I am still unable to say with any certainty, even after years of considered philosophical thought and study, that were either made of my own free will or that were determined for me by factors over which I have had no real control.

Hence the important phrase contained within the question framed and posed for this work’s opening chapter, “I have chosen or come to live.”

The negative and a positive aspects of my religious upbringing, and the philosophical questions surrounding free will, scientific and moral determinism (absolutes), ethical relativism, and other dualities, inform the contents of Chapter Two, *A Self Divided*, in

which I posit an answer to explore the question “Why have philosophy, literature, and poetry in particular, become such an important part of my life?”

In this chapter I also stressed the great value and importance of the work of Ted Hughes, who I read, and whose work I was immediately attracted to while undertaking undergraduate studies majoring in English and Philosophy. Hughes’ subsequent, and ongoing role in my life as a teacher, guide and person of great influence are also discussed in this chapter.

“An October Salmon” in Chapter Two provided an opportunity to refer again to Hughes’ role as both a poet and a philosopher in the context of his ability to raise important questions of philosophy within the context and process of writing poetry, a habit I have become familiar with myself, a point I further illustrated using poems of my own, “Table for Two” and “Hamlet Revisited.”

In Chapter Three, *Making Sense*, I raised the question “How might philosophy, literature and poetry help others to make sense of their lives, themselves and others?” This question provided me with an opportunity to explore more fully the differences and similarities between philosophy, literature and poetry.

Of particular significance and relevance to this work as a whole, in this chapter, I also referred to what I called the nexus that exists between writing poetry and the philosophy of phenomenology. To that end, I made reference to the work of the American philosopher and phenomenologist Robert Sokolowski, whose central claim, from my reading of his works *Introduction to Phenomenology* (2000) and *Phenomenology of the Human Person* (2008) is that “being” involves a kind of “disclosure” or “truth.”

In Chapter Three, I also referred, albeit very briefly, to the German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer’s theory of Art, as articulated in the second edition of his work *Truth and Method* (1989), and in particular to his idea that beauty is a kind of deep truth, an idea much like Sokolowski’s when he talks about “being,” “disclosure” and “truth.”

Because of the convergence of the two philosophers’ ideas, and their crossover or similarities with the philosophy of existentialism, I also expressed the view that, in

practical terms, the consequences or applications of their thinking approximate closely what Victor Frankl, the neurologist and psychiatrist, in his influential work *From Death-Camp to Existentialism* (1946) (later republished as *Man's Search for Meaning* (2011)) came to refer to as “logotherapy,” a form of existential analysis that invites or encourages self-disclosure and accepting responsibility. As Frankl puts it (2011, p. 88):

In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by *answering for* his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.

In Chapter Three, I demonstrated a form of poetic deconstruction, by using my poem, “Hamlet Revisited,” to show how poetry and the self-disclosing nature of phenomenological analysis, as opposed to scientific analysis, share some useful similarities.

For me too, the poem “An October Salmon” is also a clear demonstration in poetic terms of these very ideas, and I used it in this chapter, together with several other examples of what I consider to be exemplary artefacts that one might consider to have come directly from the field of phenomenology, to reinforce that observation.

The several examples referred to therefore served to illustrate the strong connection or nexus that I believe exists or occurs quite naturally between poetry and phenomenology, and that also arises in part, I suggest, from the subjective and perspectival natures inherent to both poetry and phenomenology in terms of their respective methods.

The nexus or connection between poetry and phenomenology, then provides us with the opportunity to consider more deeply and meaningfully the question that underlies or underwrites all the questions raised in this work, the question, “What does it mean to be human?” For this reason, Chapter Three of this work is the largest and possibly most philosophically significant chapter.

The ideas that came out of Chapter Three led to those I explored more fully in Chapter Four, *The Power of Poetry*. The key question raised by this chapter is “What power might

poetry, in particular, possess to help us live a more fully human, meaningful and valuable life?”

In addition to the poem “An October Salmon,” which again served as an important exemplar within the chapter to illustrate, in this case, what I meant by the term power, I also included a list of 50 other poems that I believe might assist in demonstrating the power to communicate deep and important truths (though it is not the task of this work to do), in the context of being more fully aware of what it might mean to be a human being in the world of others. I also go on to suggest all of the poems listed, including “An October Salmon,” could serve a possibly useful, significant and important role in educational settings, foreshadowing what was to be disclosed more fully in this work’s final chapter.

This brought me to Chapter Five and to the important question, “If poetry is, in part, about respecting and caring for language, can it also play a part in the development of self-respect, respect for others and the world we live in?”

I used the suggestion in this chapter that poets care about language in a quite intentional way, through the care, regard and respect they show in considering, weighing, and finally choosing their words when writing poetry, to highlight not only where some of the power in poetry comes from but to suggest too, how the power of poetry itself might be used, particularly in an educational context, to help students and others come to a better understanding of, and greater appreciation for, the value, meaning and significance of respect in its various forms and applications.

Observations about the word regard, its etymology and meanings also helped me to draw out the relevant connections to be made between observing as seeing, seeing as regarding, regarding as respecting, and all that that entails.

The poem “An October Salmon,” along with any of the poems referred to at the end of Chapter Four, could, I suggested in Chapter Five, be used, especially in an educational context, to encourage deeper thinking and useful discussions between students or other readers concerning the nature of what it might mean to be more fully human and why respect for self, others and the world is so fundamental, vital and relevant to the

critically important conversation that needs to happen between human beings who have to find a way to live with themselves, each other, and in the only world capable of sustaining them and all living things. In this regard, the quote used by Alfred Einstein at the beginning of Chapter Five was, in its own way, every bit as important and relevant to this work as the poem at its centre, “An October Salmon.”

As to why I chose to cite this particular poem as Hughes’ masterpiece, a contentious claim that would rightly provoke a response one way or the other from a range of Hughes critics and indeed his readers in general, I can for my own part indicate that my choice was largely determined by the view that of all his poems, and in number and variety the Hughes opus is undeniably large, rich, complex and full of artistic merit of one kind or another, “An October Salmon is” – for me – the most complete and fully formed example of his art, his thinking, and of his poetic and aesthetic character and sensibilities. It is at once deep, dark and troubling, but at the same time, illuminating, beautiful and visionary.

Beginnings, Middles, and Ends

News of Hughes’ death at the age of 68 on 28 October 1998 came as a great shock. It was announced in my local newspaper *The Mercury* on 30 October 1998 under the headline, “Poet Ted Hughes dies of cancer” and I still remember the deep and sudden pang of shock, distress, regret, and sadness I felt at the news of his passing. Hughes died, it was reported, at his home in Devon after an 18-month battle with liver cancer, a battle he had been able to keep secret from many who knew him well right up until the time of his death.

I remember vividly the very first poem by Hughes that I read after hearing of his death. “The Day He Died” (2003, p. 533) was a poem he had written in memory of the death of his fellow Devon farmer, friend and father-in-law, Jack Orchard. I cite the poem here in full because it reflects, on an emotional level, how I had come to feel about a man I never had the chance to meet in person, but who had come, none-the-less, through his writings and recordings, to have a profound and positive effect on my appreciation for and love of life - and for the people who have shaped it - the living and the dead.

The Day He Died

Was the silkiest day of the young year,
The first reconnaissance of the real spring,
The first confidence of the sun.

That was yesterday. Last night, frost.
And as hard as any of all winter.
Mars and Saturn and the Moon dangling in a bunch
On the hard, littered sky.
Today is Valentine's day.

Earth toast-crisp. The snowdrops battered.
Thrushes spluttering. Pigeons gingerly
Rubbing their voices together, in stinging cold.
Crows creaking, and clumsily
Cracking loose.

The bright fields look dazed.
Their expression is changed.
They have been somewhere awful
And come back without him.

The trustful cattle, with frost on their backs,
Waiting for hay, waiting for warmth,
Stand in a new emptiness.

From now on the land
Will have to manage without him.
But it hesitates, in this slow realisation of light,
Childlike, too naked, in a frail sun,
With roots cut
And a great blank in its memory.

It wasn't until August 2012 that I composed my own small and modest poem in memory of Hughes. It alludes to lines taken from two of his own poems that question the nature of memory, time and being, "Still Life" (2003, pp. 147-8), and "Coming

down through Somerset” (p. 525). I record the lines taken from these poems here to make more comprehensible my own poetic response to the questions he was able to raise so powerfully and poetically.

Still Life

Outcrop stone is miserly

With the wind. Hoarding its nothings,
Letting the wind run through its fingertips,
It pretends to be dead of lack.
Even its grimace is empty,
Warted with quartz pebbles from the sea’s womb...

Wakeful and missing little and landmarking
The fly-like dance of the planets,
The landscape moving in sleep,
It expects to be in at the finish.
Being ignorant of this other, this harebell,
That trembles, as under threats of death,
In the summer turf’s heat-rise,
And in which – filling veins
Any known name of blue would bruise
Out of existence – sleeps, recovering,

The maker of the sea.

And these lines about a dead badger are from “Coming down through Somerset,”

...I don’t want
To bury and waste him. Or skin him (it is too late).
Or hack off his head and boil it
To liberate his masterpiece skull. I want him
To stay as he his...I want him
To stop time. His strength staying, bulky,

Blocking time...
A badger on my moment of life.
Not years ago, like the others, but now.
I stand
Watching his stillness, like an iron nail
Driven, flush to the head,
Into a yew post. Something has to stay.

Elements from each of these poems subsequently became the essential elements of my own tiny elegy, albeit one written with a cosmic sense of time in mind, a poem I called “For Ted.”

The nail
driven flush into the yew
left untouched
turns to dust

the maker and fate of the stars

and of the riven sun
that made anew
the driven nail
and you

With Hughes’ death taking place in October, it became natural for me to wonder some time later if “An October Salmon” was also consciously prophetic in any way. Did Hughes know, for instance, of his terminal illness when he wrote this decidedly dark, complex, yet beautiful poem about life, death, religion, nature and the environment?

As it happens, “An October Salmon” was not prophetic in the sense that it was a portent of what the poet thought or knew was to come in the full light of someone who was fully aware or cognisant of their terminal condition—although anyone who is alive is also, in a very real sense, terminal from the day they are born, a fact the Welsh poet Dylan Thomas often drew upon when writing his own poetry.

Hughes, like Thomas, was concerned with the big themes of poetry, including the big themes of life and death, but, and as reported in *The Sunday Times* (27 May, 2011, p. 27), Hughes only became aware of his terminal illness in 1996, some twelve years after he had already published “An October Salmon.”

Scigaj, however, wrote this of the poem,

Implicitly the salmon’s deathward journey relates to the fisherman’s own, and he slowly reconciles himself to his intuition that this journey is in harmony with the natural order of the ecosystem. (1991, p. 142)

In so many ways, “An October Salmon” would therefore have made a fitting end to Hughes’ original collection *River* (1983), which ended instead with his poem “Salmon Eggs,” a poem that is also about the beginning of the salmon’s life cycle and about its end. This might be why the poem actually begins, not ends, the revised sequence of *River* poems Hughes reworked and republished in his later collection *Three Books* (1993), pointing again to the cycle of nature and echoing the idea expressed earlier in Chapter Three of this work, where I referenced T. S. Eliot’s “Little Gidding” in order to illustrate the idea that, particularly in nature, ends are so often to be found in beginnings and beginnings in ends.

Into Light and Darkness

“An October Salmon” was the penultimate poem in both the 1983 publication of *River* and the 1993 collection *Three Books*, but in the latter collection the poem that followed “An October Salmon,” and that concluded the sequence of revised and updated *River* poems, was a new poem that celebrated a special moment in Hughes’s life, “That Morning.”

The special moment captured in “That Morning” (2003, pp. 663-4) was one he shared with his previously estranged son Nicholas fishing for salmon (Hughes’ great life-time interest) in the Alaskan river “The Gulkana,” the title of another memorable *River* poem. The poem “That Morning” concludes with these lines,

There, in the mauve light of drifted lupins,
They hung in the cupped hands of mountains

Made of tingling atoms. It had happened.
Then for a sign that we were where we were
Two gold bears came down and swam like men
Beside us. And dived like children.
And stood in deep water as on a throne
Eating pierced salmon off their talons.
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.

As with “An October Salmon,” there is an undeniable power in the closing lines of this stunning poem, which makes such apt use of the metaphor of light. Even so, the dualism that pervades my own way of seeing and thinking about the world (and discussed earlier in Chapter Two) comes to mind.

Light, as Ben Johnson was thought to have said to Boswell centuries before, is easily perceived but not easily explained, and I can’t help wondering what he would have made of today’s modern scientific explanations of light and its movement in terms of both particle and wave motion. I have a sneaking suspicion that he would have resisted the impulse to make light of something other than, and quite possibly something much reduced as a result, what it appeared to be. In short, I think the erudite Mr Johnson would have made an admirable phenomenologist, as the reference to light in Chapter Three might well suggest.

Light was an undoubtedly a significant phenomenological element or feature of many of the poems in *River*, and Sagar observed this in his book, *Literature and the Crime Against Nature: From Homer to Hughes* (2005, p. 367), “In *River*, Hughes found the end of his poetic journey, from a world made of blood to a world made of light.” And Gifford, editor of *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, wrote these lines (2011, pp. 91-2) about the poem “That Morning,”

In one of his most ecstatic poems of ecological integration, which celebrates fishing beside bears, among lupins and salmon ‘hung in the cupped hands of mountains / made of tingling atoms’, where all is so ‘alive in the river of light’, Hughes begins by evoking human self-destruction and ends by

standing ‘among the creatures of light, creatures of light’: So we found the end of our journey’, father and son, poet and scientist, social ecologist and scientific ecologist. It is in poems such as this that Hughes’s imagination enacts, as he says of the imagination of each new child, ‘nature’s chance to correct culture’s error’ (*Winter Pollen*, p. 149)

Nicholas Hughes, to whom the original version of *River* (1983), and its subsequent republication by Faber and Faber in 2011 was dedicated, shared, like his father, a great interest in nature generally, and in the life and environmental viability of rivers in particular. He had studied Veterinary Science early in his life but later became an evolutionary ecologist who specialised in the study of stream fish and became Professor of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences at the University of Alaska in Fairbanks. Following that, he based himself at his Fairbanks home in Alaska to make pottery.

Birthday Letters, which was dedicated to his children Nicholas and Frieda, was Hughes’ last major collection of poetry. It was published in 1998, the year of his death, and it shed new light on his troubled relationship with his former wife, Sylvia Plath, the American poet who tragically took her own life on the 11th of February 1963, leaving behind a distraught husband and his two children Nicholas and Frieda.

Nicholas Hughes, who suffered from depression, and for whom, in his own way, nature did not, or could not, make up for what his father had referred to as “culture’s error,” hanged himself at his Fairbank’s home on March 16, 2009, the day after his 47th birthday. It was also 40 years, to the day, after the suicide and death by asphyxiation of Ted Hughes’ mistress Assia Wevill and their daughter, Alexandra (Shura), six years after the suicide by asphyxiation of Sylvia Plath, Hughes’ first wife and mother to Nicholas and Frieda. It was left to Frieda to report the news of her brother’s untimely and tragic death in a brief statement to the media.

Hughes, who was Poet Laureate from 1984, had refused to be interviewed about his last major poetic work (which, as it turned out, was eerily - albeit unknowingly - prophetic), but the poet who followed him as England’s Poet Laureate from 1999 until 2009, Andrew Motion, said this of *Birthday Letters* when writing for London’s *Times* (17 January, 1998),

Hughes is one of the most important poets of the century, and this is his greatest book. It closes in a heart of darkness, a black hole of grief and regret. We stare into it feeling changed and enriched.

The Making of a Masterpiece

Motion's statement about feeling "changed and enriched" is how I have come to value and feel about Hughes' entire poetic *oeuvre*, but especially his poem "An October Salmon."

Notwithstanding this fact, I have, to this point, made much of Hughes' poem "That Morning," and for good reason. I agree wholeheartedly with John Greening's assessment of it (2007, p. 25), that it was "one of the most poignant poems Hughes ever wrote" and with Neil Roberts' (2007, p. 68) assessment that the poem concludes with "the most paradisaical moment in Hughes' *oeuvre*." And yet it is the penultimate and undeniably dark but beautiful, and, in my view, even more poignant poem, "An October Salmon," that I regard as his poetic masterpiece.

While a special moment in the poet's life is captured beautifully and powerfully in the paradisaical moment of "That Morning," "An October Salmon" strikes me as a more complete or typically characteristic or archetypally Hughesian poem, in terms of its complex themes, accented rhythms, use of pauses, perspectival effects, and its visceral, muscular, and characteristically electrically charged language—its unique and powerful voice.

Hughes' use of the pathetic fallacy - a kind of subjective perceptivity and something akin to anthropomorphism - is a common feature of many of his poems involving animals in the natural world, and his innovative use of old poetic forms and types (elegy and pastoral forms) in a less formal way, as well as his use of gendered language to provide a sense of connection and disconnection within his poem "An October Salmon" are also trademark qualities of Hughes' poetic world. And in the poem I consider to be his masterpiece for all these reasons, and more, there is also, for me at least, the force of its undeniable realism, a realism engendered and enhanced by a true sense of the epic, the grand, and the dramatic.

Despite the fact that the two great impulses that fired Hughes' poetic imagination, namely terror and awe (as the title of Sagar's critical study of Hughes' poetry *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'* (2009) implies) are clearly evident in many of Hughes' poems, "An October Salmon" also stands out for being at least as poignant, if not more so, than his other outstanding poem "That Morning."

"An October Salmon" is also a more complex poem because of the questions it raises, questions that are wholly in tune, or in keeping with, the general character and predisposition of its maker. The very questions referred to by Gifford at the beginning of this chapter, and more. Again, for me, the most interesting questions it raises concern the nature of free will and will in nature, and the relationship between human beings and nature, in terms of human culture, religion, and the environment, and the relationship that exists between the life and death forces of nature.

These then, broadly speaking, are the reasons why I believe "An October Salmon" to be Hughes' poetic masterpiece, but I can also give another reason that I think might help substantiate such a large claim.

Just how large the claim is becomes clear when it is assessed in the context of his poetic and literary output, which was considerable. Hughes was a prolific writer. His collected and uncollected poems, those written for adult readers alone, totalled around 1,100 poems. It is also worth noting first that Hughes was, and is, one of the most recognised and highly regarded poets of the twentieth century, and that his poem "An October Salmon" comes from *River*, which was also highly regarded by many literary critics of his work who considered it to be among the best of his poetic creations.

Again, this of itself is no small claim when Hughes' artistic and literary output is taken fully into account, comprising as it does some fourteen major works of poetry, not including his extensive works on classical poetry, his five collections of prose writings, or the sixteen collections of poetry he wrote specifically for children.

In the case of the poem "An October Salmon" what can be said of it – in terms of how others with a highly developed sense of what good poetry is or might be – is that a number of Hughes' more prominent critics, while not calling it a masterpiece

themselves, do include it among the very best of the poems he wrote for *River*. Neil Roberts, for example, said (2007, p. 66), “At least four of the poems in *River* are among Hughes’ greatest.” “An October Salmon” was among them, and it was a view shared by other critics including Sagar, Scigaj and Gifford.

As to whether I am a good judge of poetry or not myself, I can at least refer any potential interlocutors in this regard to the list of poems I have written myself for this work, or to the *50 Powerful Poems for the Classroom* which I have included at the end of Chapter Four. This list of poems, suggested for future reading and discussion in an educational setting, for the purpose of teaching students, amongst other things, the value and meaning of respect, should go a long way towards helping others to make their own judgements about the quality of my own poetry.

What I feel sure I can say with real confidence, is that “An October Salmon” was written by a poet who was at the peak of his creative powers and maturity when he wrote it. It is also worth mentioning what is perhaps the most obvious but relevant fact of all when it comes to my own particular judgement of a poem I am happy to keep referring to as Hughes’ poetic masterpiece.

The fact is that “An October Salmon” has had an undeniably enduring and profound effect on me as an avid reader, and writer, of poetry over many years, and from the very first time I read it while still in my early thirties and enrolled as a mature aged undergraduate student studying English Literature and Philosophy.

To reiterate, then, but more concisely, why I consider the poem “An October Salmon” to be a true masterpiece, firstly, the poem has, for all its appearance suggesting otherwise, complexity. It is part nature, part pastoral, part elegy, part epic, part religious, part secular, and part an environmental poem, yet for all of that it remains a wholly engaging and unified poem. And while ostensibly about the life and death of a salmon, it is so much more than just that. It is also about what it means to be a human being, intimately connected to the world of nature but in danger of becoming disconnected from it and from its almost infinite capacity to heal, while at the same time revealing its vulnerability to harm at the hands of human beings subject to their own, at times, malicious natures.

“It is, of course,” as Gifford and Roberts say (1981, p. 12), “part of our sense of Hughes’ greatness that his poetry says something important.” “An October Salmon” is a complex poem addressing itself to large issues and themes, and without doubt it has something important to say about human beings and their relationship to the world of nature and the environment.

It is a poem that speaks directly to the need for human kind to be aware of their own inherently dangerous natures and of the need for human kind to protect the environment that is home to all living things rather than to go on causing it harm. It is also an undeniably dark poem while at the same time being moving and beautiful. And in being beautiful, it discloses, as Gadamer himself might have suggested, deep aesthetic and moral truths—the kind of truths that can only be captured and revealed through art, and in this case poetry, because to articulate them in any other way reduces them to less meaningful and impactful utterances.

These then are not only the reasons why I have come to believe that “An October Salmon” is a poetic masterpiece, but that the really important aspects of life and death too are themselves essentially poetic.

“To find beauty in ugliness” said Thomas Hardy, in the journal *Life* (Watson, 2011, p. 120), “is the province of the poet,” and in “An October Salmon,” Hughes manages, almost miraculously, to find great beauty in the ugliness of death. And in so doing he has helped me come to understand that life and death are not just interrelated or interconnected forces of nature, but interdependent forces of nature—life and death do not exist independently of each other. In the world of nature, Hughes shows us that all things are connected.

Hughes through his poetry and prose, and through the work I call his masterpiece, has helped to make me a better person, able to see that every other living person is also, potentially at least, a better person in the making. He has helped me to understand that every human being is the masterpiece of their own lives and that because life ends each masterpiece remains forever unfinished.

Each life, therefore, is itself, like any work of art, a work-in-progress; a striving towards something more complete, and as each life ends so too does life go on – finding in each new beginning the chance to correct, as Hughes put it, “culture’s errors.” The philosopher Hannah Arendt, as Margaret Canovan observed in her introduction to Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1998, p. xvii), expressed an idea that is very similar to Hughes’ own when he talked about correcting “culture’s error,”

Arendt argues that faith and hope in human affairs come from the fact that new people are continually coming into the world, each of them unique, each capable of new initiatives that may interrupt or divert the chains of events set in motion by previous actions.

Both Arendt and Hughes had much to say about the human condition that could in my view, be used in educational settings to great advantage, in terms of helping us all to understand just what it might mean to be a more fully engaged, intentional, morally centred, directed and purposeful human being. Philosophy and literature, together, and as I suggested in Chapter One of this work, can combine to make wonderfully effective teaching and learning aids and companions.

Epilogue

My last visit to England in 2004 (also related briefly in Chapter One) was very rewarding and I plan to visit it again in 2014. Specifically, I plan to stay at Hughes’ birthplace (1 Aspinall Street in Mytholmroyd, West Yorkshire), to visit the stream where he first learned to fish as a young boy and the countryside where his love of nature was formed. I also want to attend the celebratory dinner that is now held annually in Mytholmroyd by members of the Ted Hughes Society - I am pleased and proud to say that I am its first Australian member - on the 17th of August, the day of his birthday.

To quote Thomas on the subject of those who cloister together willingly for the purpose of listening to an evening of possibly unrelenting or unremitting poetry readings, such a prospect might be considered “hell to anyone except some brash, anti-septic, forty-two toothed, smilingly-ardent young hunters of culture, with net, notebook, poison bottle, pin and label” (Watts, 2011), and I can’t help but feel slightly pretentious or self-conscious at the very thought of even making plans to visit “Bronte

Country” and the birthplace of a poet who was and who still is so present in my life, in one sense, but more than half a world away in another.

Am I just another 42-toothed culture vulture who Thomas derided with such devastatingly deprecating wit and humour in his wonderfully entertaining monologue *A Few Words of a Kind*? Whatever the case may be, I remain steadfast in admittedly earnest desire to visit not just the birth place of Hughes but also his final resting place.

Hughes was cremated in Exeter, Devon, in 1998, and his ashes were scattered at a remote location on Dartmoor, close to the source of Devon’s River Taw, and a large granite stone bearing his name marks the place where his ashes were spread. What I hope to find when I finally do visit the poet’s grave is firstly a memorial that has been left as it was laid, untouched by the hands of troubled feminists, who, it was reported (“Today’s Woman: Rhyme and Reason,” 1992) went as far as to chisel the poet’s surname from Sylvia Plath’s tombstone in Heptonstall, Yorkshire.

Next, I want to place my hand on the sun-warmed surface of his grave stone, and feel it hoarding its nothings, miserly, barely conscious of the sun’s transit in the sky overhead, and even less of my hand upon it. I want to watch too, the frail grasses and harebells surrounding it, trembling under Dartmoor’s breezes, and remember, with full gratitude and thanks, another maker of the sea.

If I do get the chance to make such a visit, I think that I too will read aloud, as the poet Seamus Heaney did when Hughes was finally laid to rest, three poems, two by Thomas, “Fern Hill” as well Heaney’s own admirable choice, “Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,” and the other, the poem by Hughes that begins and ends this work and that moved me deeply and encouraged me to embrace life completely as a more fully engaged human being—one made more alive to the world of nature for all its terror and awe, but, for all that, more alive too, to its astonishing, profound, and ultimately ineffable beauty.

Such is the depth of respect and feeling I hold for someone I have come to love, admire, and appreciate through his prose and his poetry. Hughes wrote about matters of life and death as if they were just that, matters of life and death. Such matters come to

shape our personal life stories or what I like to think of as our living narratives, and we in turn shape them in terms of how we respond to them through the choices we make and the responsibilities we choose to accept or are made to endure. Frankl, who I quoted earlier in this chapter, but who is worth quoting again now was right to conclude that “each man is questioned by life” and “he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible” and “responsibleness is the very essence of human existence” (2011, p.88).

Philosophy is in large part about learning how to live and to be responsible, but I also agree with the sixteenth century French humanist philosopher Michel de Montaigne, who argued in the twentieth of his one hundred and seven published philosophical essays that “to philosophize is to learn how to die” (2003, pp. 89-108). Hughes, together with Montaigne, have become my greatest spiritual guides as I make the journey they, and so many others - salmon included - have already made towards the death they can only ever experience through dying and the death of others but never their own deaths, which ends not just life and experience but, as the English metaphysical poet, John Donne, would have it, in his poem “Death be not Proud,” death itself.

In an obituary piece written for the *Times* in London by its then Editor, Peter Stothard (“Focus: Ted’s Last Stanza”, 1998), Stothard states “Hughes defied what is normal and public...The hour of sanity and reality and closeness to the purest human power had gone. Now it will never come back,” except, of course, I might suggest, in the phenomenological moment of interpretation.

The final words of this work I therefore leave to Hughes himself, confident in the hope that, like me, you will find in his poem, and masterpiece, “An October Salmon,” the powerful words of a master poet and a great human being, one who will continue to live beyond his death in the life and living memories of those who knew him and of his readers, readers who will go on giving meaning to his words and to his life for as long as words and the people who speak them and care about them live on.

An October Salmon, by Ted Hughes

He's lying in poor water, a yard or so depth of poor safety,
Maybe only two feet under the no-protection of an outleaning
small oak,
Half under a tangle of brambles.

After his two thousand miles, he rests,
Breathing in that lap of easy current
In his graveyard pool.

About six pounds weight,
Four years old at most, and a bare winter at sea---
But already a veteran,
Already a death-patched hero. So quickly it's over!

So briefly he roamed the gallery of marvels!
Such sweet months, so richly embroidered into earth's beauty-
dress,

Her life-robe---
Now worn out with her tirelessness, her insatiable quest,
Hangs in the flow, a frayed scarf---

An Autumnal pod of his flower,
The mere hull of his prime, shrunk at shoulder and flank,

With the sea-going Aurora Borealis of his April power---
The primrose and violet of that first upfling in the estuary---
Ripened to muddy dregs,
The river reclaiming his sea-metals.

In the October light
He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths.

Death has already dressed him
In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,
Mapping the completion of his service,
His face a ghoul-mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body
A fungoid anemone of canker---

Can the caress of water ease him?
The flow will not let up for a minute.

What a change! From that covenant of Polar Light
To this shroud in a gutter!
What a death-in-life---to be his own spectre!
His living body become death's puppet!
Dolled by death in her crude paints and drapes
He haunts his own staring vigil
And suffers the subjection, and the dumbness,
And the humiliation of the role!

And that is how it is,
That is what is going on there, under the scrubby oak tree, hour
after hour,
That is what the splendour of the sea has come down to,
And the eye of ravenous joy---king of infinite liberty
In the flashing expanse, the bloom of sea-life,

On the surge-ride of energy, weightless,
Body simply the armature of energy
In that earliest sea-freedom, the savage amazement of life,
The salt mouthful of actual existence
With strength like light---

Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.
This chamber of horrors is also home.
He was probably hatched in this very pool.

And this was the only mother he ever had, this uneasy channel of
minnows
Under the mill-wall, with bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles

And sunk sheets of corrugated iron.
People walking their dogs trail their evening shadows across him.
If boys see him they will try to kill him.

All this, too, is stitched into the torn richness,
The epic poise
That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so
patient
In the machinery of heaven.

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