

Mayday on Holderness: Ted Hughes, National Service, and East Yorkshire

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It would be easy to accept Ted Hughes's memorable description of his National Service as a time when he had 'nothing to do but read and reread Shakespeare and watch the grass grow' – and then to move on.² Though not completely neglected, this is a period of his life only glanced at by critics and biographers, worthy only of mention for the sake of the biographical record, and most often summarised briskly using Hughes's own pithy remark. Following his older brother's example by opting for the RAF, Hughes was conscripted in October 1949, and discharged in October 1951, the same month he went up to Cambridge. At first these two years appear as nothing more than an inconveniently compulsory interlude, a way of remembering National Service that was characteristic of Hughes's generation, for whom 'conscription meant a few weeks of fear, followed by around eighteen months of mild boredom', according to Richard Vinen.³ But there is, as ever, more to this story than Shakespeare and grass, and as the map of Hughes's life and work gradually gains more and more local colour, it is worth looking into Hughes's time in uniform and in East Yorkshire.⁴

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¹ I am immensely grateful to Enid Bates (*née* Wilkinson) and Peter Snaith, to whom this article is dedicated, for generously giving up a sunny August day to be interviewed and to guide Steve Ely and me around Patrington. Their memories of Ted Hughes and of this period have contributed greatly to this article. Enid's knowledge of Patrington's historical geography proved far superior to our map-reading. I am also grateful to Steve Ely for his invaluable support.

² Quoted in Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978) p. 8.

³ Richard Vinen, *National Service: A Generation in Uniform 1945–1963* (London: Penguin, 2015) p. xxxi.

⁴ Steve Ely, for example, has addressed 'the lacuna in critical and biographical work about [Hughes's] South Yorkshire period', thereby adding to the well-documented story of Hughes's first eight years in West Yorkshire. See Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes and South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 2–3. Similarly, fruitful research continues to be conducted into Hughes's life in Cambridge, London, America, Devon, and Ireland.

As was the case for so many British men born between 1927 and 1939, National Service for Hughes began at RAF West Kirby on Merseyside. This was one of the biggest camps in Britain, one of three where ‘Tens – or even hundreds – of thousands of men were churned through’ for basic training, known to the servicemen as ‘square bashing’.⁵ ‘At first the discipline was savage, and one youth broke down’, Hughes reported to Edna Wholey after three weeks, ‘but it relaxes daily as we grow neater’ (*LTH* 5). At some point later, probably early in 1950, Hughes was transferred to RAF Patrington, out in the plains of Holderness in East Yorkshire. Though the exact dates of his movements are difficult to pin down, by the spring of 1950 he was writing again to Edna, this time notifying her of his new address at the ‘OPS. SECTION’, where he was ‘waiting to begin a course for Fighter Plotting’ (*LTH* 8). Michael Rines, posted to RAF Patrington two years after Hughes, describes this activity in a collection of memoirs as

the business of plotting the positions of aircraft on a map painted on a large table; most people will have seen it shown in films of the Battle of Britain. Each plotter was responsible for a particular geographical area and information from radar stations was fed to him over headphones about the position (grid reference), speed, number, identity, height and direction of travel of any aircraft entering his area. He was then expected, using a four foot long stick with a magnet on the end, to place an arrow on the precise position of the map and then place a small rack next to it.

Painted steel symbols had to be hung on the racks to show the number, speed, height etc of the aircraft. Each arrow or symbol was held on the stick by the magnet and dropped on the appropriate place on the rack by pulling a trigger that moved the magnet away from the symbol.

The slightest clumsiness in this operation would cause all the other symbols to fall off the rack. While one tried to recover the situation, the jet aircraft continued to fly at high speed so that racks and arrows had to be moved and the information on them updated. What made it worse was that each plotter might have several racks on the go at the same time.⁶

Rines describes working ‘for long periods in the windowless operations centre, with artificial light and ventilation in a job that needed high levels of concentration. It was unhealthy and boring [...]’.⁷ Hughes obviously felt the same: ‘There are so many people they have nothing to do, and the atmosphere of the place is generally inert’, he told Edna (*LTH* 8). The sudden influx of personnel that was the result of the National Service Act 1948 posed a number of practical

⁵ Vinen, p.xxviii.

⁶ Michael Rines, in *National Service, Elvis and Me! A Miscellany of Memories*, ed. David Fowler (Scarborough: Farthings Publishing, 2010) p. 154.

⁷ Rines, p. 155.

challenges for the RAF, which had not yet constructed sufficient domestic quarters at Patrington. Servicemen were, therefore, billeted with the locals: officers lived in the homes of Patrington's most affluent residents, whilst for everyone else it was a camp bed delivered by the RAF to spare bedrooms and reception rooms. Being of the RAF's lowest rank, Aircraftman Second Class Hughes shared with two other men the downstairs front room of 4 Northside, Patrington. This was the family home of Peter Snaith, then in his teenage years.⁸ Peter remembers Hughes's roommates as Don Sullivan, a 'very handsome and very blonde' Irishman, and Bert, a Londoner.⁹ As for Hughes, he was 'a big fella' who loved puzzles.¹⁰ Whilst Peter's mother was probably glad for the additional income or rations which came with housing conscripts, for her son the experience of living among so many young men in uniform was:

absolutely shocking! Because all of us lads – these lasses didn't want us then – they were all keen on these RAF lads! We used to go to Withernsea to the Dance Hall, and they wouldn't have anything to do with us, the girls in Patrington. It was terrible!¹¹

Enid Wilkinson (now Bates) lived across the road from the Snaiths at Cromwell Lodge. At one point her family had four servicemen in an upstairs bedroom and another four in one of the downstairs reception rooms at the front of the house. She remembers two names: Johnny Oliver, a Scotsman, and George Gallagher-Daggitt, an Irishman who would marry a local girl and remain lifelong friends with Enid and her husband.¹² Hughes became particularly friendly with Gallagher-Daggitt, spending many evenings in the Wilkinsons' reception room poking the log fire. It was there that Hughes found Enid copying a favourite poem, 'The White Rose', into her English exercise 'rough book'.¹³ Presumably piqued by the surprise appearance of poetry amidst his new life of drills and masculine conversation, Hughes asked Enid if she would like him to write some of his own, transcribing two poems into the book. The first, an unpublished piece beginning 'If I were to hear you sigh', he signed with the bizarre pseudonym 'By Eeple Jote

⁸ One of Hughes's letters (to Edna and her new husband, Stanley) gives the address '2 North Side', but the house pointed out by Peter Snaith – the middle one in a very slim terrace of three – is Number 4. This may be a slip of the pen, or simply a case of the numbers having altered since the early 1950s.

⁹ Peter Snaith, personal interview, 21 August 2017.

¹⁰ Snaith, interview.

¹¹ Snaith, interview.

¹² Gallagher-Daggitt, who went on to have a successful career as a nuclear scientist at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell in Oxfordshire, also kept in touch with Hughes. He and his wife attended Hughes's memorial service at Westminster Abbey in 1999.

¹³ Probably by John Boyle O'Reilly (1844–1890), whose poem shares the same syntax and cadences as 'Song'.

Huckmarmer / Disciple of the Daimonic / Friend to George Daggitt'.¹⁴ The second, 'Song', which Hughes would later include in his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, he signed 'Also by E.J.H. / Disciple of the Daemonic / Friend to George Daggitt'.¹⁵ Enid shared the two poems with her English teacher at Malet Lambert School in Hull, who dismissed them as 'rubbish' attempts to emulate Shakespeare. She did not share the review with Hughes.¹⁶

To Enid, Hughes seemed 'moody', though 'probably just a thinker'.¹⁷ She remembers his passion for music – a passion made evident one day as they walked through the village, Hughes humming Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and insisting that she come in at specific points. As for Gallagher-Daggitt, a 'very quiet guy' with a barely perceptible Irish accent, Enid 'had the feeling that he came from a different background from Ted completely; they didn't seem alike in any way'.¹⁸ What must have brought the two together in the first place was being assigned the same role. A number of the buildings that formed the base at RAF Patrington are still in use today, albeit as part of a caravan and leisure park; but a number of smaller units further out in the landscape – 'sitting all round in the wilderness', as Hughes put it – made up a wider network (*LTH* 8). Hughes had been trained as a 'Ground Wireless Mechanic', responsible for the 'care and maintenance of transmitting and receiving gear'.¹⁹ The camp's transmitter and receiver huts were situated about a mile away from the main base, and it seems Hughes spent most of his working hours at Patrington in the 'VHF' (Very High Frequency), which was actually two small brick huts – one a Transmitter, one a Receiver – sitting apart from each other in the middle of a large field. Working in the 'VHF' was a one-man job, and Hughes and Gallagher-Daggitt would follow each other on- and off- shift. In one letter to Edna Wholey, Hughes writes vividly about a particularly hair-raising trek across the field to his hut:

When I came home from 48 last week, at 11.30 Sunday Night, I had to cross over 200 yards of field to this place. As I came out of the village I could hear these 4 bullocks conspiring just inside their gate. All the way over that field, in pitch darkness, they followed me 5 yards behind, and occasionally one would romp off into darkness, and come charging back, utterly invisible, only

¹⁴ The pseudonym's initials match Hughes's own, and the name is very similar to 'Eeple Jote Hyewze', the one he adopted for a nonsense prose piece, 'Wrot's Writing on Lolps', co-authored with his friend Peter Elliot and published in the July 1948 issue of Mexborough Grammar School's magazine, *The Don & Dearne* (see Ely, p. 160).

¹⁵ School exercise book, BL Add MS 88918/129/2.

¹⁶ Enid Bates, personal interview, 21 August 2017.

¹⁷ Bates, interview.

¹⁸ Bates, interview.

¹⁹ Hughes's RAF discharge papers, quoted in Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015) p.64.

their hooves heard. When I got in, I had three hairs that looked as if they had nearly begun to turn grey. (*LTH* 11)²⁰

Though both huts were demolished several years ago, their foundations are still visible beyond the gate described by Hughes – which, thankfully, now only contains a pair of timid ponies.

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Being on duty in the VHF meant working solitary and uneventful shifts through the night: ‘out at 18 to Pat, and return at 5 at night’ (*LTH* 8).²¹ As Jonathan Bate points out, ‘there was no immediate prospect of Russian bombers or missiles winging their way over Bridlington Bay to the Holderness marshes of the East Riding’.²² Four decades later, in *Moortown Diary*, Hughes would recount his memory of ‘roaming the space waves’ late one night whilst on shift: ‘I suddenly came into this unearthly lamentation, weaving and crackling through the galactic swells’ (*MD* 66). Terrified at first that he had stumbled across ‘the recording of the uproar on a battlefield, just after the attack’, he later discovered that he had in fact tuned in to the sound of ‘sheep-shearing’. With so little to do, and a strong sense of the situation’s absurdity and bathos, it is little wonder that Hughes characterised his National Service in the way he did. But the impact of his time in East Yorkshire went beyond memorising Shakespeare whilst the grass around him grew taller. In a letter to Leonard Scigaj, who had used that rather neat quotation in a manuscript sent for comment, Hughes writes:

I read a good deal avidly in those days. I once said, a little facetiously, that in the RAF all I did was ‘read Shakespeare and watch the grass grow’. The implication being that there was little else to do. It’s true that I did read Shakespeare constantly, but I always have done. Your wording implies that I had somehow just discovered the author and was making an excited study of him.²³

Whilst Hughes’s main concern here is to emphasise (with just a touch of irritation) a longer-standing familiarity with the Bard, he does confirm the ‘implication’ that he found himself with lots of time. Two items in the British Library archive help to show how Hughes made use of that time. In an autobiographical typescript, he remarks that ‘My two years National Service were in one way two years of reading in near solitary confinement – following up my

²⁰ Christopher Reid glosses Hughes’s use of RAF patter: ‘48’ means forty-eight-hour leave.

²¹ Reid again clarifies Hughes’s meaning: ‘18’ means 6pm, ‘5 at night’ 5am.

²² Bate, p.62.

²³ Letter to Leonard Scigaj, undated, BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

various trails as a member of Hull Library'.²⁴ A blue RAF-issue lined exercise book from this period has survived. In it Hughes has made some notes about radio parts at the top of the book's first page – a minute insight into Hughes's work for anyone with the technical knowledge to decipher such a thing – but has then abandoned this in favour of composing short stories.²⁵ The exercise book lends credibility, then, to Hughes's statement in the typescript that 'Through my two years National Service [...] I regarded everything as either a help or an obstacle on my way to becoming a writer'.²⁶

The importance of time in a writer's development can be easily underestimated: we take it for granted that writers read, and that they write, but often forget that such activities require time and mental space. At the very least, then, Patrington was important to Hughes because the undemanding, solitary, often nocturnal nature of his work there gave him time for reading, writing, and developing. But the timing is also important, because these were two formative years between school and university in which Hughes was able to swim further and further out from the landmass of English literature and culture – or, to be more precise, a version of English literature and culture as constructed by Cambridge, where he would have found himself immediately after school, were it not for the National Service Act that came into force in his eighteenth year. Although Jonathan Bate writes that Hughes was 'free to deepen his knowledge of [...] the canon of English literature', he is partly guilty of anglicising Hughes's diet, since Hughes arrived for National Service having spent his teens devouring Irish folklore and myth, and the poetry of Yeats; in Patrington he absorbed Jung with fascination; and whilst it would be difficult to find an English writer more canonical than Shakespeare, it was the *occult* Shakespeare that captivated Hughes.²⁷ 'Except for Eliot, contemporary poetry might as well have been in deep space', he also recalls, a detail that might help to explain why his literary development was so out of kilter with that of his peers.²⁸ Clearly this was a period in which Hughes gathered together the interests and instincts of his teenage years into a more coherent programme of cultural exploration, one much more idiosyncratic and non-English than Bate suggests. And this was not just a case of 'following up [...] trails' in Hull Library, as Hughes remembers, but was as much about his interactions with his fellow servicemen. In that autobiographical

²⁴ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2. Patrington is located approximately fifteen miles to the east of Hull, and was connected by a regular bus and train service. Sadly the city's library service has not maintained borrowing records from this period.

²⁵ RAF exercise book, BL Add MS 88918/9/11.

²⁶ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

²⁷ Bate, p.62.

²⁸ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

typescript at the British Library, which appears to be part of a draft version of 'Poetry and Violence', Hughes recalls something very interesting. He begins with the contention that 'Yorkshire people, whatever their work, [...] relate to the rest of England not as members of this or that class in the national class system, but as members of a different nation – as the Irish or the Scots might'. He then adds this:

This sense of being a separate nationality somehow within Englishness was sharpened when I emerged from School into National Service in the RAF. My friends there were Irish and Scots. The fact that my father's father, whom I never knew, was Irish, had never figured in the family mythology [...]. However, once out of Yorkshire I found myself drawn to Scots and Irish, but particularly to Irish people. I look back and see that now simply as a fact. It never struck me particularly at the time. When after National Service I moved to Cambridge University, and found myself a 'guest' of a people that were every bit as strange to me as they were to any Irish or Scotsman, I immediately, the first day, attached myself to an Irishman.²⁹

Thanks to the memories of Peter Snaith and Enid Bates, we can now put some names to Hughes's recollection: Don Sullivan, Johnny Oliver, and particularly George Gallagher-Daggitt. Until 1949, Hughes's experience of the world and his outlook were influenced by his life in West and then South Yorkshire and his family circumstances; National Service was the first time he lived away from those circumstances. Seeing the world through his own eyes, falling into a distinctly Celtic friendship group, and having the time to pursue his own course of idiosyncratic cultural exploration, it is clear that these experiences combined during his National Service to forge a strange sense of non-Englishness. As Hughes goes on to say, 'In this way, when I got to Cambridge University to read English I was totally immune to the intellectual world of Literary Criticism, and also to the social pressures [...] of the society in which I found myself'.³⁰ The sequence of events is worth noting: Hughes was already resistant to the formal study of English literature by the time he reached Cambridge. The significance of the famous 'burnt fox' dream has been extensively discussed in relation to his alienation from the Cambridge English curriculum; but what the comments in the typescript show is that Hughes's interpretation of this dream was simply *confirmation* – rather than *revelation* – of an attitude that had already hardened during his two years of National Service: an attitude that can be characterised as anti-metropolitan, anti-bourgeois, anti-canonical. We can only speculate about the contents of Hughes's literary diet had he progressed straight from

²⁹ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

³⁰ Autobiographical TS, BL Add MS 88918/7/2.

Mexborough Grammar School to Cambridge University – as would now be the norm in an age without National Service. But with two intermediary years well away from curricula, away from guided reading, away from tutorials and weekly essays, and away from the canon, Hughes’s unorthodox personal and poetic identity crystallised, and he arrived in Cambridge in October 1951 already resistant to what he found there, and already willing to engage in culture wars.

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What, then, of Hughes’s literary output from this period? A small number of poems can be traced back to his time in East Yorkshire, though it is important to distinguish between verse written during National Service and verse written later but drawing on his experiences and memories. Only one poem written in Patrington made it into a published collection, namely ‘Song’ – a variant of which he scribbled into Enid Wilkinson’s exercise book.³¹ This he included as a late addition to *The Hawk in the Rain* at Sylvia Plath’s suggestion.³² Markedly different to the kind of poetry he would go on to write (and from the kind of poetry found elsewhere in *The Hawk in the Rain*), Hughes has, characteristically, given numerous accounts of its origins. A loose sheet of lined paper in the British Library archive which catalogues the dates and circumstances of his *Hawk* poems specifies the following:

Song – began – walking home from seeing J.F. – wrote 3 a.m. on a night-watch, Patrington, after slogging at stupidities – swiftly in 2 minutes. June 13th 59.³³

Much later, in a slightly different account, Hughes told Carol Lee:

The earliest poem in that selected was the one titled Song. When I was 19, I was a Radio Mechanic on an isolated RAF station near Spurn Point. One night, 3 am I was sitting up on a night watch writing. I was stuck on a numb little couplet which went
 A hope ran crying out of the wood
 A fear clung to it, drinking blood

³¹ There are variants in every stanza of the poem.

³² ‘Of all that I wrote between that and *The Thought-Fox* in 1955 I kept nothing. I didn’t really look at *Song* again until 1956, when my wife found a straggly copy of it somewhere and asked why I hadn’t written more like it.’ Letter to Carol Lee, 6 January 1992, BL Add MS 88918/7/1. Hughes kept the poem in print throughout his life.

³³ Loose leaf notes, BL Add MS 88918/7/2. ‘J.F.’ is Jean Findlay, a girl Hughes knew from Mexborough Grammar School, and whom he continued to visit during his National Service. As Bate points out, ‘59’ is an error, since this was two years after the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain*. Bate writes that Hughes ‘clearly meant either “49” or “50”’, but the former can be ruled out on the basis that Hughes did not begin his National Service until October of that year (Bate, p.574).

(the image was of a Hare, with a stoat clinging to its nape). As I stared at this, trying to coax something out of it I heard a distinct voice inside my head – which simply dictated to me Song. I kept it – as a freakish sort of thing. During my next few years, at University, it seemed a bit silly and soft headed.³⁴

But just a few months later, writing to Nick Gammage in December 1992, Hughes speculated about what might have been had he followed the lead of this ‘freakish sort of thing’, characterising the poem as a kind of innocence destroyed by the coming of a damaging culture war:

Song – yes. Well – of all the verse in my books that is the one piece I got hold of before I stepped into the actual psychological space of contemporary literature, smogged as that is by the critical exhalations and toxic smokestacks and power stations of Academe. So it is the one song I sang in Arcadia – that came to me literally out of the air, utterly unaware of all that lay ahead [...]. Next thing, I stumbled into the smog – gasmasks, protective clothing, armour, weaponry, survival by the skin of the teeth, earth-quaking of ignorant armies, the general ninth circle of life among our colleagues and culture police. So – I just wonder how it would have been if this age had been, like all previous ages, without professionalised criticism elevated into an educational system. It would have been different. (*LTH* 617)

The poem is arguably not the striking false start Hughes implies: although on the one hand a fairly transparent (and therefore immature) imitation of Yeats, ‘Song’ is also a distinctly Hughesian work in that the female addressee’s anonymity elevates her to the status of Muse, or Goddess, the Gravesian concept to which his mind and writing would return again and again. Interestingly, this way of thinking about poetry pre-dates his reading of Graves’s *The White Goddess*, a copy of which Hughes received in October 1951 as a ‘going up’ present from his English teacher, John Fisher – further evidence that Hughes spent much of his National Service negotiating the occult and the arcane.

But if ‘Song’ was seen as a road not taken for Hughes’s poetry, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ represents a far more consequential turn, though this poem would not be written until 1959, a decade after Hughes commenced National Service. It was composed during his residence at the Yaddo artists’ colony in Saratoga Springs, New York, and published in *Lupercal*, the 1960 follow-up to *The Hawk in the Rain* which Neil Roberts describes as the ‘creative achievement’ of Hughes’s time in America, though it ‘reveals no imaginative response whatever to the new country in which its author was living’.³⁵ As Roberts argues, *Lupercal* is instead

³⁴ Letter to Carol Lee, 6 January 1992, BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

³⁵ Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.43.

‘saturated with English, and specifically Yorkshire, scenes, landscape and wildlife’; ‘As Hughes is removed physically from the English scenes on which he imaginatively draws’, Roberts writes, ‘so he seems to become more specific in his notation’.³⁶ Hughes’s eye for the wide, flat plains of East Yorkshire, where he found himself for the bulk of his National Service, is no less specific than his eye for the dramatic valleys and crags of the Upper Calder Valley, or the rolling landscapes of Crookhill and Old Denaby. In ‘Mayday on Holderness’, the poem’s narrator is positioned very specifically looking towards ‘Hull’s sunset smudge’, with the ‘Humber’ ‘melting eastward, my south skyline’ (*CP* 60) – a view of the river and the city afforded only by the fact of this region’s striking flatness and unusually wide horizons. Indeed, to stand on the site of the former VHF huts in which Hughes worked is to be afforded a clear view to the south of the Humber, which the poem describes as ‘A loaded single vein’, draining ‘The effort of the inert North – Sheffield’s ores’ out into ‘The unkillable North Sea’. The acuteness of Hughes’s vision of Holderness – the massive presence of the Humber snaking through a flat landscape which ends abruptly where it meets the sea – is remarkably similar to the way in which this region’s most notable poets have written about it; so much so, in fact, that as Antony Rowland points out, Hughes ‘almost accused’ Philip Larkin, the undisputed laureate of Holderness, of plagiarising this poem in his 1961 work, ‘Here’.³⁷ It is also true that the sense of having reached the end of the world which Larkin evokes in ‘Here’ can also be found in Hughes’s ‘The Road to Easington’, another poem from this period. But rather than adjudicate on a charge of almost-plagiarism, I wish instead to note how successfully Hughes focused his inner eye onto the peculiarities of the East Yorkshire landscape a decade later from New York State, capturing the character of this region as it has also been captured in the work of Larkin, Douglas Dunn, Stevie Smith, Sean O’Brien, and others.³⁸ This topographical precision would re-emerge on a much more ambitious scale in later collections such as *Moortown* and *Remains of Elmet*.

In other ways, too, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ represents an important turning point in Hughes’s writing. According to notes he prepared for a Sotheby’s book auction, the poem was initially planned as the ‘prefatory piece to what I

³⁶ Roberts, p.44.

³⁷ Antony Rowland, ‘A Case of Plagiarism?: Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes’, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 9.2 (2003), pp.53–61: p. 56.

³⁸ See, for example, Larkin’s description of the ‘flat country’ in his Foreword to *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, as well as his evocations of the landscape in poems like ‘Here’, ‘The Whitsun Weddings’, and ‘Bridge for the Living’: Philip Larkin, ‘Foreword’, *A Rumoured City: New Poets from Hull*, ed. Douglas Dunn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1982) p. 9; Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber & Faber, 2003).

hoped would be a long sequence of poems about the various animals, birds, fish etc from my young days': Hughes names 'View of a Pig', 'Pike', 'Hawk Roosting', 'An Otter', and 'The Bull Moses' as some of the poems originally intended for inclusion within the sequence.³⁹ Whilst a series of poems about 'various animals, birds, fish etc' might perhaps sound fairly commonplace, if not banal, Hughes has elsewhere outlined the significance of this sequence. In a long 1992 letter to Anne- Lorraine Bujon, Hughes recalls wanting 'to rid my language of the penumbra of abstractions that to my way of thinking cluttered the writing of all other poetry being written by post-auden [*sic*] poets', such abstractions being, to his mind, 'second hand – rancid – unexamined, inauthentic in the experience to which they laid easy claim'. He continues:

So I squirmed and weaseled a way towards a language that would be wholly my own. Not my own by being exotic or eccentric in some way characteristic of me. But my own in that it would be an ABC of the simplest terms that I could feel rooted into my own life, my own feelings about quite definite things. So this conscious search for a 'solid' irrefutably defined basic [...] kit of words drew me inevitably towards the solid irrefutably defined basic kit of my experiences – drew me towards animals, basically: my childhood and adolescent pantheon of wild creatures, which were saturated by first hand intense feeling that went back to my infancy. (*LTH* 630)

The product of this determination – albeit unrealised in sequence form – was this series of poems, with 'Mayday on Holderness' as its prelude.

Without over-simplifying, the poem is indeed a kind of 'ABC' of Hughes's preoccupations – actually stretching well beyond animals – and can be read as an intensely compressed version of the poetic *oeuvre* to follow.⁴⁰ Hughes's respectful vision of the animal world makes the jump across from *The Hawk in the Rain* in the form of the 'sanity' of the owl (*CP* 60) and the 'expressionless gaze of the leopard' (*CP* 61); but there is also, in the poem's reference to Gallipoli, the recurring notion of war as a traumatic assault, particularly on the mother-son relationship, which anticipates the tripartite poem 'Out' in *Wodwo*; there is the recognisably Hughesian co-existence between life and death, fertility and sterility; and the slow draining of industrial detritus from 'Sheffield's ores' (*CP* 60) out into the North Sea foreshadows the later ecological concerns and campaigns in the years before and after the publication of *River* (1983). Whilst Roberts's point that

³⁹ 'Comments About Books at Sotheby's', BL Add MS 88918/7/1.

⁴⁰ Hughes would make a similar observation about T. S. Eliot's early poem, 'The Death of Saint Narcissus': 'Yet within the *Collected Poems* almost every poem, certainly every major poem, seems related to it in some uterine fashion. [...] Does this poem present an image of Eliot's poetic self? I think it does exactly this' (*WP* 280).

Lupercal ‘reveals no *imaginative* response whatever’ (emphasis mine) to America stands, it was there that Hughes first began to explore the emerging literature on ecology and environmentalism.⁴¹ America, then, exists as a more subtle influence in what might be described as Hughes’s first environmental poem.

In form and language, however, the poem breaks away from some of the more traditional lyrics found in *The Hawk in the Rain* and elsewhere in *Lupercal*. Within a looser structure, Hughes utilises a harder, uglier language – not quite the ‘super-simple [...] super-ugly language’ of *Crow*,⁴² but certainly something approaching this, with its uncomfortably corporeal language, and the presence of those dazzling word compounds (‘Birth-soils’, ‘eye-guarded’ (CP 60)) that would become more and more frequent in Hughes’s verse. Formally, linguistically, and thematically, ‘Mayday on Holderness’ has more in common with 1979’s *Remains of Elmet* than with 1957’s *The Hawk in the Rain*, despite being much closer to the latter chronologically. In fact, one way to read *Remains of Elmet* might be as the logical conclusion to ‘Mayday on Holderness’, which was written at a time in 1959 when northern cities like Sheffield and Hull were still actively industrial. The signs of decline are, however, already there: the North is already ‘inert’, its effort being ‘drained’ into the sea that will ‘receive these *remains*’ (CP 60)(emphasis mine) – an early rehearsal of that all-important word. The poem’s digestive metaphor is also recycled in *Remains of Elmet*, most prominently in the collection’s title poem. Finally, remembering the poem’s fertility/sterility dualism and Hughes’s work as a wireless mechanic, we should remember that ‘Mayday’ is both a date in the calendar celebrating the coming of spring, and a radio distress signal. The poem is not just transitional, then, but also portentous.

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At some point during his National Service, Hughes may have been posted elsewhere: Enid Bates remembers him being moved to either RAF Fylingdales or RAF Staxton Wold (both in North Yorkshire).⁴³ Her recollection is that re-location was unusual for the men at Patrington, which suggests that the skills Hughes acquired there may have been particularly valuable to the RAF. However, the letter Hughes sent to Edna and Stanley Barnes following their marriage gives his

⁴¹ I am grateful to Terry Gifford for drawing my attention to this.

⁴² Hughes, quoted in Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980) p.208.

⁴³ This would help to explain Keith Sagar’s assertion, repeated in a number of subsequent works by other critics, that Hughes did his National Service at Fylingdales. See Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor, *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946–1995*, 2nd ed. (London: Mansell, 1998) p.278.

Patrington address – and since their wedding took place in July 1951, just a couple of months before Hughes was discharged, he cannot have spent much time, if any, at one of the North Yorkshire bases.⁴⁴

In any case, Hughes's time in East Yorkshire was significant and is worthy of attention, not least because it kept the kaleidoscope of his poetic imagination turning before helping him settle on styles, themes, and ideas that would characterise much of the verse to be written during his next five decades. National Service at RAF Patrington sharpened his own sense of self, allowing him to more clearly perceive himself outside of the English class system. It also sharpened his poetry, his sense of what was 'wholly my own', as he put it. Far from wasting two years watching the grass grow, Hughes read, wrote, thought, positioned himself in relation to class, culture, and nation, and would later draw inspiration from the Holderness landscape in a significant transitional poem, and his first environmental one, that eventually helped induce masterpieces as diverse as *Crow*, *Moortown*, and *Remains of Elmet*.

⁴⁴ Hughes to Edna and Stanley Barnes, undated, Emory MSS 870, Box 1, Folder 1.