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### **'Throttle College?' Ted Hughes's Cambridge Poetry**

Ted Hughes's views of his time studying English Literature at Cambridge are well known. He enjoyed reading canonical texts, but the academic analysis of them stifled his creativity, according to his own account. Hughes would claim in later life that Cambridge was 'destructive' and a 'prison from life',<sup>1</sup> a sterile place where he produced no creative work worth keeping. However, research notebooks that have recently become available at the British Library, and a sheaf of typescript poems kept in the Cambridge University Library, suggest that Hughes was very productive while he was at university. Critics have questioned the myth of Hughes as an intellectual outsider during his time at university before, but scholarship has not yet considered the large corpus of surviving material that Hughes wrote while he was at Cambridge. This article shows that during his student days, Hughes was researching some of the mythical themes that lend such strength to his published poetry. It demonstrates that some of the writing that Hughes produced at Cambridge provided the groundwork for later published poems and began to develop some of the themes in his later prose criticism. Hughes esteemed his undergraduate creative work highly enough to submit it as an Original Composition that could raise his grade at his Tripos examinations, and to reuse imagery, themes and even entire lines in later, collected poetry. Some of the distinctive stylistic devices that characterise his early, collected work are present, but these devices are often obscured by pastiche, parody and a strict adherence to traditional form. His undergraduate writing suggests that Hughes was gaining confidence in his poetic talent, but that he wished to [practise](#) his skills by mastering traditional metres and rhyme-schemes, and to deflect negative criticism by placing his poems within a satirical prose narrative. A script for a short play, and research notes that Hughes wrote while he was an undergraduate, are [quoted and discussed here](#) for the first time; the Ted Hughes Estate has kindly permitted the first publication of an entire poem. This work breaks new ground in Hughes studies, and reveals highly significant insights about a period in his life that scholarship has too often overlooked.

On leaving Mexborough Grammar School, Hughes had demonstrated his academic ability by winning an exhibition to read English at Pembroke College.<sup>2</sup> Some of his poems were also sent to the College for assessment when he applied for a place, although there is no record of whether they survive, or of what the Fellows thought of them (Wilcockson, p. 147). He completed two years of national service in 1949 and 1950, when he worked as a radio operator first in the Wirral, then in Patrington in the

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<sup>1</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press 1980), p. 56. Further citations of this book are given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>2</sup> Colin Wilcockson, 'Ted Hughes' Undergraduate Years at Pembroke College, Cambridge: Some Myths Demystified', *Agenda* 44. 4/45. 1, (2009), 147-53 (p. 148). Further citations of this article are given in parentheses after quotations.

East Riding of Yorkshire.<sup>3</sup> In 1951, he ‘went up’ to university. Hughes began by reading English Literature, but changed to Archaeology and Anthropology for the last year of his degree. The *Cambridge University Reporter* for Hughes’s time shows that he had the opportunity to attend English Literature lectures by George Rylands, whom he admired (Hughes, *Letters*, p. 12), about ‘Pope and Eighteenth Century Verse’<sup>4</sup> and ‘Wordsworth, Crabbe and Hardy’.<sup>5</sup> It was probably thanks to the English Tripos that Hughes encountered *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, as H. S. Bennett gave lectures on ‘Literature, Life and Thought, 1300-1500’ (*Reporter* 1951, p. 93). Towards the very end of his career, Hughes would publish a translation of part of the Middle English poem. M. J. C. Hodgart, Hughes’s first year supervisor at Pembroke, taught ‘Shakespeare: Prescribed Plays’ (*Reporter* 1952, p. 525). Hughes probably found some elements of the English Tripos boring (Wilcockson, p. 149), university ‘wasn’t taken seriously’ by his circle of friends,<sup>6</sup> and he went to English lectures infrequently in his second year.<sup>7</sup> He relied more on his own reading than on the English Tripos syllabus: from his second year onwards, he spent his days at the University Library (Hughes and Sagar, p. 282). There, he devoted most of his time to ‘reading folklore and Yeats’s poems’ (Faas, p. 56).

Every undergraduate student of modern poetry knows the story of Hughes and the burnt fox. One night, towards the end of his second year of studying English Literature, Hughes was struggling to finish an essay on Samuel Johnson. A strange creature – ‘a figure that was at the same time a skinny man and a fox walking erect on its hind legs’ – entered his room, terribly burnt. This creature placed its hand on his essay, saying ‘Stop this – you are destroying us’. It left a bloody palm-print on his page.<sup>8</sup> The academic study of English Literature was supposedly stifling Hughes’s creativity: much later, he would refer to writing prose as ‘burning the foxes’ (Hughes, *Letters*, p. 719). As Neil Roberts puts it, ‘This narrative constitutes a ‘myth’ of the creative individual struggling in a hostile academic environment’.<sup>9</sup> Hughes recalled

<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid (London: Faber & Faber 2007), p. 8. Further citations of this book are given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>4</sup> Cambridge University Library, Cam b I 10 82. *The Cambridge University Reporter, 1951-1952* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 93. Further citations of this volume are given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>5</sup> Cambridge University Library, Cam b I 10 84. *The Cambridge University Reporter, 1952-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952), p. 526. Further citations of this volume are given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel Huws, remark in ‘Conversation With Hughes’ Contemporaries’ <<http://ann.skea.com/CambridgeRecording.htm>>. [07. 10. 14.]

<sup>7</sup> Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*, ed. by Sagar (London: British Library Publishing 2012), p. 281. Further citations of this book are given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>8</sup> These details of the dream of the burnt fox are taken from Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber & Faber 1994) p. 9, and *Poet and Critic* p. 74.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Roberts, ‘Ted Hughes and Cambridge’ in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. by Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2013) pp. 17-23 (p. 17). Further citations of this chapter are given in parentheses after quotations.

that F. R. Leavis's form of practical criticism dominated students' views: the 'frosty breath of Leavis' cooled any inspiration (Hughes and Sagar, p. 242). While the 'Leavis-style dismantling of texts' was 'deeply destructive' to him, Hughes did actually have a 'special bent' for it (Hughes and Sagar, p. 75). Hughes liked to attribute his change away from studying English Literature to his famous dream, but, as I shall show, a passionate interest in myth and folklore might also have informed his decision to study Anthropology. Leavis himself even encouraged English students to change Tripos to Archaeology and Anthropology, to broaden their skills (Roberts, p. 19). For the academic year of 1953-4, Hughes read Part I of the Archaeology and Anthropology Tripos – and it was not unusual for students at that time to change subject (Wilcockson, p. 150).

Although Hughes was of course 'well aware of the class divisions that permeated the university',<sup>10</sup> there were many other Northern grammar school boys at Pembroke at that time (Wilcockson, p. 152), and he was the centre of a supportive circle of friends (Roberts, p. 21). Hughes had an Irish grandfather, and many of his friends had 'tenuous Celtic' heritage. One of the first friends he made at University was the Irishman Terence McCaughey; another was the Cornishman David 'Cass' Morton.<sup>11</sup> Their friendship group developed to become a reading, singing and drinking group called 'The Smart Set',<sup>12</sup> which included McCaughey and the Welshman Daniel Huws. Later members were the American Lucas Myers, and the American Fulbright Scholar Harold Bloom, [who would write such books of literary criticism as \*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry\*](#). Bloom recalls that Hughes would chant lyrics by Robert Graves and songs from Shakespeare, and carry around Graves's *The White Goddess* as his bible.<sup>13</sup> If Hughes disliked the 'Restoration fop[s]' among the wealthier students and objected to the prevailing 'public school aesthetic mode' (Hughes, *Letters*, p. 680), he felt at home among these fellow poetry enthusiasts and migrants to Southern England.

Hughes was not widely known to be a poet when he was a student. Before he went to Cambridge, the only place his poems had been published was in his school magazine (notes to Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 1240). He submitted his typescript of poems and satirical prose for assessment at Tripos in 1953. Roberts writes that 'It was only in his very last term at Cambridge [in 1954] that Hughes published two poems pseudonymously in the student magazines *Granta* and *Chequer*' (p. 22). It was not

<sup>10</sup> Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (New York: Norton 2001), p. 23. Further citations of this book will be given in parentheses after quotations.

<sup>11</sup> Hughes remembers his Irish grandfather in unpublished autobiographical notes. British Library Add MS 88918/7/2, Ted Hughes, TS autobiographical notes, unnumbered page beginning 'And there is a real sense in which Yorkshire people'...He recorded a party with the Cornishman David 'Cass' Morton in *Letters of Ted Hughes*, pp. 12-13. Daniel Huws recalls the group's 'tenuous Celtic' roots in *Memories of Ted Hughes 1952-1963* (Nottingham: Five Leaves 2010), p. 16. McCaughey recalls meeting Hughes in Heffer's bookshop during their first or second week at Cambridge. 'Conversation with Hughes' *Contemporaries*'.

<sup>12</sup> This might be an ironic reference to the 'smart set' of King's College undergraduates, who had close connections with the London literary world. See *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup> Email from Harold Bloom to the present author, 19. 09. 2012.

until February 1956 that he and his friends would launch their poetry magazine *St Botolph's Review*, which led to Hughes's first meeting with Sylvia Plath. His good friends Daniel Huws (Huws, p. 20), Terence McCaughey and Brian Cox did not know for a long time that he wrote poetry (Roberts, p. 22). However, Hughes produced a great deal of poetic work during his time as an undergraduate. Some friends were aware that he wrote verse, as during his third year at university, he sent a humorous poem to his friend Charles Ryskamp along with a party invitation. The comic verse states that the gathering will include cuckoos, owls and fools, which probably reflects his views of the wisdom and folly of some of Cambridge's other undergraduates.<sup>14</sup> Ryskamp also recalls Hughes's writing copiously while he was an undergraduate, but commenting that "This is not good", crumpling up the paper and throwing it into the waste bin.<sup>15</sup> Hughes's time at Cambridge was a time of 'confusion'<sup>16</sup> while he 'tried constantly to write' – but his output amounted to far more than 'nothing', as he dismissively called his undergraduate work in a letter (Hughes and Sagar, p. 122).

In recent years, highly significant new archival material has become available. Manuscripts and typescripts that Hughes wrote while he was at University suggest that he was writing prolifically, reading voraciously, and creating detailed research notes that would later prove important. The Ted Hughes archive acquired by the British Library in 2008 is a rich source of information, and it contains an exercise book full of notes on some of Hughes's reading from his adolescence to his time at University. The notebook includes work on canonical literary texts – but it devotes far more space to a vast and meticulously researched corpus of world myths, folk-tales, proverbs and ballads. [The Original Composition that Hughes submitted for assessment is](#) a humorous fictional account of a poetry reading in a college room. (Original Compositions [did](#) not lower students' grades, and if they [were](#) deemed to be of sufficient quality, they [raised a student's degree class](#).) This typescript, now held in the Cambridge University Library, contains an impressive body of early poetry – and it has been almost completely ignored by scholarship to date.<sup>17</sup> He later returned to subjects and images that he had written about while he was at university, and he even used lines from poems that he had written during that time in later, collected work. Far earlier in his career than most scholars have realised, Hughes was writing about foxes and fish, bats and swallows, moors, the moon, the Muse, Shakespeare and the occult – some of the images and ideas that would prove foundational to his later writing.

#### English, Anthropology and a 'Craze for Folktales'

<sup>14</sup> Morgan Library LHMS MA 7643 Autograph Poem: Cambridge.

<sup>15</sup> Mark Wormald, remark in 'Conversation with Hughes's Contemporaries'.

<sup>16</sup> Drue Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI' *Paris Review* 134 (1995), 85.

<sup>17</sup> I am grateful to Simon Pomery for bringing the typescript to my attention during his presentation at the 'Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected' conference in September 2010.

A notebook in the British Library begins in the beautiful, slanted copperplate writing that characterises Hughes's surviving adolescent work,<sup>18</sup> and moves gradually to the brisker, more upright handwriting style that he adopted at university. His 'craze for folktales' (Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 5) began when he was about thirteen, when he began 'noting them down in notebooks'. He especially liked Irish tales, which helped to develop his admiration of Yeats's 'The Wanderings of Oisín' (ibid., p. 6). Several of these notebooks survive, one of them containing notes written during Hughes's adolescence and university days.<sup>19</sup> Among the earliest entries in it is a motif that recurs in a poem published perhaps forty years later. When in 'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan', Hughes writes of an eerie encounter with a small salmon while fishing the Sligachan in Skye, he describes the fish as a 'Gruagach'.<sup>20</sup> He first encountered far-fetched Irish and Scottish ('Milesian') tales about these creatures during his adolescent reading of folklore. He recorded a Scottish tale informing him that Gruagachs often have their souls 'in external things, three trout in a stream, or in any bird on a certain hill' (FTNB p. 2): the origin of that later image of salmon as 'Gruagach'.

His 'craze for folktales' seems only to have increased when Hughes arrived at university. He taped several sheets into his folklore notebook, headed 'C[ambridge] U[niversity] B[owmen]' and signed 'E. J. Hughes, Sec.', describing archery scores (FTNB p. 32, p. 42); he took up archery at Cambridge (Hughes, *Letters*, p. 12). The notebook also contains a Cambridge University Library reservation slip.<sup>21</sup> These papers – on which he sometimes wrote out folktales – date parts of the notebook with certainty to his time at university. While the notebook contains brief notes on Greek tragedy (FTNB, p. 11), a page on *Oedipus Rex* (p. 101) and a synopsis of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (unnumbered page), which Hughes probably encountered during his studies, the pages of folkloric information far outnumber the pages of notes on more orthodox, 'canonical' literary texts. Hughes's longstanding interest in preliterate culture was further developed by some of the people he met at Cambridge. His first year supervisor was M. J. C. Hodgart, an authority on ballads and oral literature;<sup>22</sup> his enjoyment of folksongs was further stimulated by McCaughey's extensive repertoire of Irish songs.<sup>23</sup> Although the academic study of English Literature was not as important to Hughes as his developing poetic career, he was a dedicated and careful scholar of the songs, folkloric and mythic texts that most interested him.

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<sup>18</sup> BL Add MS 88918/129/2 contains the two poems that Hughes copied out in 1949 for Enid Wilkinson, a local girl whom he met during his national service at Patrington. They display the early cursive, slanting hand.

<sup>19</sup> BL Add MS 88918/9/12, uncovered ruled and grid-marked notebook containing folktales. Henceforth abbreviated to 'FTNB'; page numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber 2003), p. 654. Further references to this volume will be given in parentheses after citations.

<sup>21</sup> BL Add MS 88918/9/13, loose pages inserted into folktale notebook, unnumbered loose library slip marked 'E. J. Hughes 30<sup>th</sup> Jan. 1953'.

<sup>22</sup> McCaughey, memoir read during 'Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries'.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Huws, remark during 'Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries.'

Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, a legend-haunted book written by a canonical author, resonated with both Hughes's interest in English Literature and his fascination with mythology. Probably in 1951, when his English teacher presented the book to him when he 'went up', the young Hughes wrote out the Celtic tree alphabet that Graves describes (FTNB, p. 23).<sup>24</sup> He notes down nuggets of folkloric information against each tree: birch twigs expel evil (FTNB, p. 23),<sup>25</sup> while the rowan is 'used to extort information from reluctant Demons' (p. 23).<sup>26</sup> Perhaps most importantly for a young poet, Hughes learnt that the willow 'Gave its name to Helicon where the 9 muses, moon-priestesses live', and that the apple symbolises 'Poets' immortality' (p. 30).<sup>27</sup> The tree symbols he wrote about in his notebook foreshadow his later use of potent natural [symbolism](#). The significance that he gives to the 'poetical address' of 9 Willow Street in Boston, a 'tower of the Muses' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 1087), was probably informed by his reading of Graves.

Hughes's reading while he was at Cambridge included texts that would have complemented his study of both English and Anthropology. One copy of the several editions of James Frazer's *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* that Hughes owned<sup>28</sup> has the rather formal inscription 'Edward J Hughes', suggesting that he might have used this book while he was at university. Muriel Bradbrook humorously told Jonathan Bate that the purpose of the Cambridge English Tripos in Hughes's time was to enable students to read and interpret *The Waste Land*.<sup>29</sup> As one of the texts mentioned in Eliot's (perhaps mock-scholarly) notes to *The Waste Land*, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was not only important to Hughes as an anthropological text, but also because it had provided a source text for Eliot, whose work Hughes admired and who would become his mentor at Faber and Faber. Hughes made careful notes on the first part of Frazer's book, which he inserted at some point into his notebook on folktales.<sup>30</sup>

The tales that Hughes wrote down continue to illustrate how preliterate narrative traditions informed his published poetry. His focus on the wolf in *Lupercal* (1960) as a powerful symbol for ferality, fertility and bloodlust can be traced back to his time at Cambridge: he recorded a detailed etymology from *The Werewolf* by Montague Summers that links Latin words such as *lupus*, a wolf, to 'Lupana – a whore' and 'Lycorexia – the hunger for raw meat that werewolves have' (FTNB, p. 100). He wrote down a story of lycanthropy where wolves enter a hut 'and return as young women' (p. 43). Surely this is the origin of the line 'Men become wolves, but a wolf

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<sup>24</sup> Almost all of these notes can be matched exactly to Graves's text. This one corresponds to *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber & Faber 1999 [1948]), p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 161.

<sup>26</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 162.

<sup>27</sup> *The White Goddess*, p. 168, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> Emory University MARBL archive, BL310.F72 1949B HUGHES.

<sup>29</sup> Personal communication, December 2009.

<sup>30</sup> BL Add MS 88918/9/13, unnumbered loose sheet removed from folktale notebook, 'Chap I: King of the Wood'

has become a woman' in his early poem 'The Woman With Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 11), which he submitted to *Delta* magazine as an undergraduate, and which was published after he graduated. Meanwhile, Hughes's interest in the trickster, which is most clearly manifest in his collection *Crow* (1970), might have been partly informed by his early reading of a Native American myth about Raven. In the myth that Hughes wrote out, Raven disguises himself as a baby in order to steal one eye from everyone in a village (FTNB, p. 94).

Hughes's fascination with folklore, and its effect on his writing, are described in a letter of 1995 to the French critic Joanny Moulin. He relates that at university, he felt the need to reconnect with what academic study deprived him of: 'a non-analytic language, a wholeness of language [...] modelled on the wholeness of the language of proverbs, folk-rhymes, folk-songs and in fact Shakespeare' (cited in Wilcockson, p. 149). Hughes, probably encouraged to some extent by McCaughey and Hodgart, developed his interest in ballads and became an accomplished singer of folk-songs (Feinstein, p. 31); he also knew some Yorkshire songs.<sup>31</sup> His folktale notebook contains a rich array of such folk-rhymes, proverbs and songs (FTNB, p. 101, p. 103). They include the Yorkshire proverb:

Halifax is made of wax,  
 Heptonstall of stone.  
 In Halifax there's many a pretty girl,  
 In Heptonstall there's none (p. 101).

This rhyme would appear, slightly altered, in the 1994 preface to *Elmet* (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 1201).

#### A Visit to Throttle College

During his student days and subsequent weekends in Cambridge, Hughes clearly enjoyed visiting the University Library. The 'UL', which was such a wonderful source of reading for Hughes when he was an undergraduate, now holds a typescript full of early poems that he never saw again after his time at Cambridge. The typescript is entitled 'The ear-witness account of a poetry-reading in Throttle College, before the small poets grew up into infinitesimal critics.'<sup>32</sup> Hughes submitted it as an 'Original Composition,' for assessment for Part I of the English Tripos in 1953.<sup>33</sup> The typescript creates a humorous, fictional account of a poetry reading, and contains long

<sup>31</sup> Remark by Daniel Huws in 'Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries'.

<sup>32</sup> Cambridge University Library, CUA ENGL. 1. 155. Henceforth abbreviated to 'Cam TS'. Page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text. I preserve the spacing and spelling of Hughes's original. Handwritten emendations that Hughes has added to the typescript are shown in italics.

<sup>33</sup> John Wells, caption to CUA ENGL. 1.155, displayed as part of the 'Writing Poetry' exhibition that Wells curated at the Cambridge University Library in 2004.

passages of verse. The typescript shows Hughes imagining that the vital life of Cambridge students, and his own imaginative life, were flourishing in spite of some of the constraints upon them.

The typescript is highly significant for the insights that it offers into the evolution of Hughes's talent. He esteemed it highly enough to submit it to contribute to his grade at Tripos, and he even published some lines taken from poems in the typescript elsewhere in his corpus of work. The tone of the typescript is often wry, humorous and satirical: he described it to Nick Gammage as 'some sort of imitation of *The Island In The Moon*', and notes that he never saw the typescript again after he graduated (Hughes, *Letters*, p. 681). Blake's prose satire with sections of verse, *An Island in the Moon*, was a text that Hughes read aloud, to great acclaim, to undergraduates at a tea party at Selwyn College (Feinstein, p. 25). Huws remembers this as one of the texts that Hughes's social circle most enjoyed (p. 22).

The prose sections of Hughes's Cambridge typescript create an incisive satire of the literary pretensions of Cambridge's 'small poets'. When the typescript was exhibited at the University Library in 2004, a caption pointed out the 'scathing ridicule'<sup>34</sup> to which Hughes subjects his characters. Yet much of the verse in the 'ear-witness account' seems serious. The exhibition caption also commented that parts of the poems 'foreshadow the vision of a bleak, violent and enduring natural world' in his later work, and are 'redolent of poems in *Wodwo* and *Crow*'. Blake's *An Island in the Moon* mingles parodic verse and children's songs with poetry that he would later publish. Blake included 'Holy Thursday', 'Nurse's Song' and 'The Little Boy Lost'<sup>35</sup> in *Songs of Innocence*, after he had placed early versions of them in *An Island in the Moon*. Much as Blake had done before him, Hughes took lines, images and ideas from his Cambridge typescript and used them in later publications. Even if Hughes did not have the typescript in his possession after he graduated, he had a prodigious talent for remembering and reciting poetry, and his published writing suggests that he remembered parts of his own earlier work.

Blake was an important poet for Hughes – so important that Hughes commented in an interview that 'Blake I connect inwardly to Beethoven, and if I could dig to the bottom of my strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces' (Faas, p. 202). Perhaps the young Hughes was even styling himself as Blake's poetic heir by drawing inspiration from *An Island in the Moon*. This is a highly significant move, especially when one considers the implications of Hughes's comment that Cambridge undergraduates aped the mannered gentility of 'Restoration fop[s]'. One only needs to look at his notes to the second edition of *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse* to read of Hughes's contempt for poetry that came after the Restoration. English poetry underwent 'subjection' to 'the rhyming couplet' until 'the next revolution released

<sup>34</sup> John Wells, caption to CUA ENGL. 1.155, displayed as part of the 'Writing Poetry' exhibition that Wells curated at the Cambridge University Library in 2004.

<sup>35</sup> William Blake, *Complete Writings*, ed. by Geoffrey Keynes (London: Oxford University Press 1996), pp. 59-60. Further citations from this book will be given in parentheses after quotations.



Blake and Wordsworth'.<sup>36</sup> Hughes scorned the aesthetic mode of the typical Cambridge fop, and by positioning himself as Blake's heir, he was defining himself against [what he saw as](#) the strangled gentility of some of the other students' poetry. The 'ear-witness account' also gave him the opportunity to experiment with different characters, various poetic personae and diverse poetic forms. He was testing out his talent by putting these early poems into the mouths of characters; he would begin publishing poems in his last year of university via the even more guarded tactic of using a pseudonym.

Various characters recite their poems during a party at 'Throttle College'. Dront, Farceyverse and Snatchcraftington<sup>37</sup> invite their friends to a poetry reading in a very cold, North-facing room; the full complement of guests would be sufficient to keep the room warm. There are nine bottles of wine and fifty glasses on the table (Cam TS, p. 1). They sit 'like natural features' (Cam TS, p. 1) until Miss Straptankard and Miss Fluttermouth arrive, and then the recitation – and the drinking – can begin. They are later joined by other friends including Lord Gumdraught. Gumdraught brings an Irish friend called Flukeliver, and a character called Gleewit has an extensive repertoire of songs (Cam TS, p. 2). A character called Gobello recalls the eccentric intellectuals whom Blake had satirised in *An Island in the Moon*. Daniel Huws interprets him as a caricature of F. R. Leavis.<sup>38</sup> Gobello's 'furious carnivorous meataphorical commentary', 'high didactic peaks' and 'bad books' (Cam TS, p. 3) certainly suggest that he is a caricature of a bombastic Fellow. When Twiceasy alludes to Gobello's lack of a tie, Gobello calls him a 'fool' (Cam TS, p. 27): Gobello's lack of a tie might suggest Leavis's famous dislike of wearing a tie outside lectures.<sup>39</sup> There were indeed poetry discussions run by students of Leavis: the circle that Peter Redgrove frequented included the English students Tony Davis, Neil Morris and Philip Hobsbaum,<sup>40</sup> as well as Roma Gill, who would later become a distinguished critic (*ibid.*, p. 65). Terence McCaughey has no recollection that Hughes attended any such gatherings, although Hughes was aware that they happened; McCaughey does not

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<sup>36</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, ed. by Ted Hughes, 2<sup>nd</sup> revd edn (London: Faber & Faber 1991 [1971]), p. 227.

<sup>37</sup> This name appears in early letters by Hughes, and he seems at one stage to have wished to write more about the character. 'Snatchcraftington' was a fantastical story for children, which Hughes never published (Hughes 2006 75). Plath wrote that the character was a 'little wizard' who 'looks like a stalk of rhubarb' (1975 224). This creation might even have predated Hughes's time at Pembroke (letter from Terence McCaughey to the present author, 14. 11. 14.) Olwyn Hughes contributed letters to the British Library that contain unpublished 'Snatchcraftington Addresses': BBC news, 'Ted Hughes archive acquired by British Library' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-11300964>. Accessed on 22. 10. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Letter from Daniel Huws to the present author, 19. 10. 14.

<sup>39</sup> Both Daniel Huws and David Matthews recall Leavis as tie-less. Daniel Huws, personal communication, 25. 10. 14; David Matthews, *Memories of F. R. Leavis* (Bishopstone: Edgeways 2010), pp. 5-6.

<sup>40</sup> Neil Roberts, *A Lucid Dreamer: The Life of Peter Redgrove* (London: Random House 2012), p. 63.

recall that Hughes organised any poetry readings of his own either.<sup>41</sup> Snatchcraftington's is the most satirical voice: he creates admirable 'representations of birds, beasts and fishes' and sprawls across his armchair with a 'noise like a tired leopard [sic]' when someone's poetry bores him (Cam TS, p. 1). Daniel Huws recalls that Snatchcraftington featured in conversation between Hughes and McCaughey.<sup>42</sup> The students' names are clearly inspired by Blake's *An Island in the Moon*, whose characters have names such as Mrs. Nannicantipot, Mrs. Sistagatist, Sipsop the Pythagorean and Inflammable Gass.<sup>43</sup> One of the Islanders' meetings, held in the study of Obtuse Angle the mathematician and helped by quantities of rum and water,<sup>44</sup> might be echoed by Hughes's setting of the gathering in a college room. In a later children's play, *The Tiger's Bones*, Hughes would create caricatures of absurd intellectuals with names such as Jitterwit, Dully and von Gonktop. Here too, he was remembering his reading of Blake.

The powerful sound and elemental themes of Hughes's collected poetry are famously distinctive. To show how Hughes's undergraduate work foreshadows writing from *The Hawk in the Rain* onwards, it is necessary to analyse the stylistic features of his collected poetry. Hughes's use of consonants, which Heaney commented on in an essay, is especially [distinctive](#) 'Hughes' vigour has much to do with this matter of consonants that take the measure of his vowels like calipers, or stud the line like rivets'.<sup>45</sup> Heaney attributes Hughes's use of consonants to the influence of the alliterative verse of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: he is 'heir to this alliterative tradition', and his poetry also displays 'the cleaving simplicity of the Border ballad' (Heaney, p. 19). One does hear the Border ballad in Hughes's undergraduate poetry – but the alliterative tradition seems to have influenced Hughes less at this stage, even though he read alliterative medieval verse at university. His first poetry collection certainly 'recalled English poetry in the fifties from a too suburban aversion of the attention from the elemental; and the poems beat the bounds of a hidden England in streams and trees, on moors and in byres' (Heaney, p. 17). His undergraduate poetry attempts to raise elemental forces from their repressed slumber, but he deprives it of some of its vigour when he forces it into formal metres and rhyme schemes. Hughes's collected work also displays a distinctive use of rhythm and stress. This is exemplified in 'Wind': 'The wīnd flūng a māgpie awāy and a blāck - / Bäck güll bēnt like an īron bār slōwly' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 36). Stressed syllables predominate in the second line especially, which also exemplifies Hughes's characteristic use of industrial metaphors to describe living things. Readers used to the urbane poetry of The Movement might have found these lines violent – and Hughes's undergraduate

<sup>41</sup> Letter from Terence McCaughey to the present author, 14. 11. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Letter from Daniel Huws to the present author, 19. 10. 14.

<sup>43</sup> Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 46.

<sup>44</sup> Blake, *Complete Writings*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>45</sup> Seamus Heaney, 'Englands of the Mind' in Keith Sagar, ed. *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 14-21 (p. 27).

work anticipates the 'admirable violence' that Edwin Muir praised in 'The Jaguar' (cited in Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 251).

Although the first three poems in Hughes's undergraduate typescript clearly satirise the intellectual pretensions of their effete speakers (pp. 1-3), the fourth displays a gothic focus on violence. Miss Fluttermouth recites this poem about grim happenings on a moor, whose setting foreshadows some of Hughes's later moorland poems. It begins 'In the hollow of the moor a horror pulled her down', and mentions the 'lichens' that eat her eyes, the silence of her 'fine bones', and her 'shadow' that watches under stones (Cam TS, p. 4). Miss Fluttermouth's poem is written in her diary, and an appointment for tea with the girls interrupts the text of the poem halfway through: an inspired comic touch. Hughes might have been responding to Miss Gittipin's song in *An Island in the Moon*, which describes a woman who sorrows until she fades away, so that passers by will see her shadow 'Thro' the gloom' and hear her 'voice upon the Breeze'.<sup>46</sup> The poem's archaisms and doom-laden imagery are deliberately overdone, and the other poets' attempts to offer a critique are cut off by Snatchcraftington's imitation of a jackass (Cam TS, p. 5); this hints at Hughes's view of both bad student poetry and tedious Leavisite criticism. Yet the last line of Miss Fluttermouth's poem, which describes the wind, is especially significant: 'That was once nigh terrible and alive as a mad hand' (Cam TS, p. 4). This line recalls a line in Hughes's collected poem 'Wind', published in 1957: the 'mad hand' of the last line of Miss Fluttermouth's poem is reworked to become a 'mad eye' in 'Wind'. Yet by the time he wrote 'Wind', Hughes had stopped using archaisms such as 'nigh', and was using lines that were more rhythmically compact. An important difference between Hughes's undergraduate work and his collected work becomes apparent when one scans these lines, and compares his deployment of strong stresses. 'That was ōnce nīgh tērrible as a mād hānd' loses its rhythmic impact in the unstressed syllables of the middle, but Hughes's later 'Flēxing like the lēns of a mād ēye' begins with the restlessness of two near-dactyls and ends with a powerful, weighty spondee. The poem in the typescript reflects Hughes's longstanding poetic preoccupation with Yorkshire landscapes, which would be explored much more fully in *Remains of Elmet* (1979). But it does not yet display the rhythmic dexterity that was to characterise his collected poetry.

Hughes's published poetry articulates his concern with humankind's psychological and physical connection to nature, but this preoccupation was developing while he was an undergraduate. An unnamed speaker – presumably Gleewit – comes out with the Jungian idea that human beings need to encounter their inner bestial impulses if they are to remain healthy and sane. If man tries to deny his bestial origins, they claim him; the solution is to 'meet the beast halfway and beat him back into a new obedience', otherwise we risk being 'devoured' (Cam TS, p. 11). Far later in his life, in the last published interview he ever gave, Hughes was to comment on that very connection between humankind and the 'primitive' man or woman.<sup>47</sup> The connection

<sup>46</sup> Blake, *Complete Writings*, p. 61.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas R. Pero, 'So Quickly It's Over', *Wild Steelhead and Salmon*, Winter 1999, 50-57 (p. 56).

could be restored by fishing, or any other activity that reminds human beings of their intrinsic links to the more-than-human world. Gleewit's idea of meeting the beast halfway suggests a possible way to mend the broken link between people and their inner nature. Although his view that one should beat the beast into obedience seems contradictory, this passage is an indication that Hughes was writing about the connection between civilization, repression and the 'natural' many years before he commented on these issues in published prose and interviews.

Moreover, Hughes's rereading of Shakespeare while at University seems to have strengthened his interest in the patterns underlying Shakespeare's plays and poetic works. One poem mentions *Macbeth*, and contains the line, 'Against the clock and progress of the sun' (Cam TS, p. 25). This shows that the young Hughes had already spotted – and begun to imitate – what he would later term the 'double language' of Shakespeare's hendiadys:<sup>48</sup> the coupling of a word of Anglo-Saxon or Norse origin with a 'higher' counterpart of Romance origin around a pivotal 'and'. The undergraduate poem in which this line occurs, 'The Circus', is written in a much more regular form than most of Hughes's collected work: each stanza is composed of two iambic pentameter lines, of which 'Against the clock and progress of the sun' is the most regular, followed by a line of iambic tetrameter and one of trimeter. Hughes was experimenting by combining two lines of Shakespeare's preferred metre, with balladic, shortened last lines that might have been inspired by the short line that ends each stanza of Keats's 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'. The poem criticises the grotesque antics of tamed animals and the repressed predatory instincts of the crowd; Hughes references the unnatural portents in *Macbeth* to suggest that repression leads to violence. In his later poem 'Acrobats' (1960), he would use a freer metrical form and focus more closely on the animal grace of 'Gibboning' acrobats, who reconcile their animalistic instincts with their human rationality (Hughes, *Collected Poems* pp. 72-73).

Remarkably, the 'ear-witness account' also contains verse that illustrates Hughes's developing interest in the patterns that he saw underlying Shakespeare's work. He was interested in *Venus and Adonis* from an early age, and this poem was to prove central to his later (controversial) theories about Shakespeare's plays. His unpublished poem 'If I were to hear you sigh', which dates from before he went up to Cambridge, mentions 'spoiled' Adonis in the 'love-grove': the myth of Adonis clearly inspired him when he read Shakespeare during his adolescence.<sup>49</sup> A poem in the Cambridge typescript also revises *Venus and Adonis*: it is titled 'Venus between Adonis and Mars, occult psychology'. Among the dazed birds and flies of a 'sun-struck woodland', a shriek that is neither beast nor bird is heard: 'What tragedy has recurred? Cough of a wound' (Cam TS, p. 14). At the sight of Adonis' wound, Venus is half terrified, but

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<sup>48</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, ed. by Ted Hughes, 2<sup>nd</sup> revd edn (London: Faber & Faber 1991 [1971]), p. 236.

<sup>49</sup> BL MS ADD 88918/129/2, 'If I were to hear you sigh'.

half longs for the disaster to be complete. A sound like ‘Demonic’ horses suddenly appears in the poem, bringing ‘battle-fever’. The poem ends:

And laugh after laugh, terrifying summer, there passes  
Berserk to his wars, the small terrible war-bird, the  
woodpecker. (Cam TS, p. 14)

The phrase ‘What tragedy has recurred?’ (Cam TS, p. 14) in ‘Venus between Adonis and Mars: Occult Psychology’ suggests that the young Hughes saw structural parallels between *Venus and Adonis* and Shakespeare’s tragedies. In a 1970 interview, he comments at length on *Venus and Adonis* and its implications for Shakespeare’s tragedies (Faas, pp. 197-98). In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), he finds a ‘tragic equation’ typified by *Venus and Adonis* running through Shakespeare’s other works. *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* in many ways concerns occult psychology – more specifically, it documents the traces of occult Neoplatonist thinking that Hughes thought he could perceive in Shakespeare’s work. One of the most ‘occult’ excerpts from the book, about ‘Shakespeare and Occult Neoplatonism’, is reprinted in *Winter Pollen*. Hughes sees Occult Neoplatonist strains in *Love’s Labours Lost* (Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 302), and views Prospero as a possible portrait of John Dee, or of Shakespeare himself (ibid., p. 307). He argues elsewhere that Shakespeare might have been familiar with the work of both Giordano Bruno and John Dee.<sup>50</sup> Hughes presents the triumph of science and orthodox religion over occult practices as the defeat of the goddess Tiamat – and even calls this ‘the *Venus and Adonis* phase’ of the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism (Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 305). This reading of world mythology into Shakespeare is highly unorthodox. Yet it clearly shows that Hughes was interested in the ‘occult’ strains he thought he could detect in *Venus and Adonis* throughout his career. His Cambridge typescript is remarkable in showing that these ideas had probably been developing since his undergraduate days.

While Hughes re-imagines the mythical setting of Shakespeare’s ‘Venus and Adonis’, real cityscapes also feature in poems in the typescript. A poem about the Parisian summer adumbrates ‘Sunstroke’ from *Lupercal* (1960) and ‘Heatwave’ from *Recklings* (1966). Snipedragon’s next poem is called ‘Paris at Midsummer’, which he jokingly describes as ‘la bombe atomique’ in his introduction to the poem. The poem sets a scene where ‘People, stunned under the beat of summer | Stretch their helpless limbs and frightened blood’ (Cam TS, p. 14). The sun’s heat is ‘like an invisible bomber’ and ‘a red hot iron giant’ (p. 14). The expression ‘frightened blood’ (p. 14) is recalled in ‘Sunstroke’s’ line ‘Frightening the blood in its tunnel’, while the ‘harvest’ of the early typescript recalls the ‘mowing machine’ (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 86) of the later published poem. Hughes had helped with the harvest in Yorkshire in 1945,<sup>51</sup> and both his undergraduate poems and published poems draw on this

<sup>50</sup> *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, p. 224.

<sup>51</sup> BL Add MS 88918/1/55, Ted Hughes, ruled blue exercise book, notes for a speech about farming, 1.

experience. He works on his evocation of a heatwave at several stages in his career, as this remarkably prescient poem shows. Yet more intriguingly, the 'iron giant' reminds one of Hughes's later children's classic *The Iron Man*.

While Hughes's early poetry is acutely aware of surroundings and the ambient, living things also play a very important role. One of the most significant poems in the typescript is about swallows, 'very symbolically treated':

Where we sat all winter there was not a sound,

Save frost rusting the lock-jawed world. For night

Emptied the scope of our hands when the sun shut,

And shrank to the size of our eyes where we sat stunned.

Now all the summering skies swell full sails;

The blue sky rocks slowly, and the sun leans out:

Nothing is left of his world-waking shout

But a whisper of disaster when it reaches us.

Then over the windy wake of blossoms, what

White-bellied and blue-fin-ned, terrible, steel

Predator ricochets,

Panicking Spring; but if you look more closely,

Nothing but a swallow goes

Cutting the grass with the scythes of his wings, or easily

Swims where green light deepens under the trees.

Scud the dolphins of air, and sleek, and swift, and dark

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX As a violin's elastic voice they are vaulting;

Electric-blue, with a glittering voice like a spark,

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Discharging the hot currents where they are swirling and melting.

They stitch the shadows and snare the wind for their food,

Twisting and whetting their barbs in their haste,

And retempering their harpoon-blue in the sun's blast,

But when they dip to quenchxx they splash blood.

That blue glint sliding down their gossamer wires

Is trafficking a fever through all the nerves of summer;

It is something deadly radio-active, a swooping dark star

Intimating some demonic second comer,

A madness beating under the heart's floor:

It is not the handsome flourish we love them for. (Cam TS p.15.)

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The young Hughes's lines about 'twisting and whetting' and 'retempering' blades in a 'blast' are beautifully incandescent, and display the fusion of industrial with natural that characterises Hughes's collected poetry. This poem criticises our admiration of the picturesque 'handsome flourish' of the swallow's flight: these creatures are killers. Images of iron, whether being cast or rusting, are juxtaposed with images for frost in both this poem and 'The Horses' from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). 'Frost rusting the lock-jawed world', whose sounds evocatively suggest the crackle of frost and the creak of rusty iron, foreshadows the later, simpler 'world cast in frost' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 22) of 'The Horses'. Hughes seems to have reinvented a cluster of images from this early typescript poem for two much later poems. 'Work and Play' from *Season Songs* (1976) appears to rework some of the typescript poem: the 'current' of the early poem is replaced by the 'glittering voltage' of 'Work and Play', while the 'barbs' and 'harpoon' of the early poem are joined in the 'barbed harpoon' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 322) of the later piece. 'Swallow', from *A Primer of Birds* (1981), begins in winter, like the poem in the Cambridge typescript; a 'fringing and stupor of frost' (ibid., p. 634) revises the image of frost as rust in the earlier poem. The line 'Twisting and whetting their barbs in their haste' shows Hughes trying the 'admirable violence' (Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 251) that Muir admired in his first published collection. 'And retempering their harpoon-blue in the sun's blast' clarifies the harpoon-conceit, and adumbrates the images of creatures welding and wielding concealed energies that characterise Hughes's later poetry. Hughes would

rework images of frost, electricity, harpoons and barbs from his Cambridge typescript yet again in his 1981 collection *A Primer of Birds* (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 604), and in his 1983 poem 'Swallows' (p. 634). Of all the poems in the 'ear-witness account', this is probably the most prescient of Hughes's later poetry.

Hughes's famous animal-poems do not only create realistic descriptions of creatures, but highlight the animalistic aspects of human beings. Images used to describe women in the typescript are strikingly creaturely. Snatchcraftington's song in Hughes's 'ear-witness account' describes a woman as like a fish: 'O she was slick and sliver as a whiting' (Cam TS, p. 15). He must have been pleased with the line about the whiting, for he included it in 'The Woman With Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous,' which he submitted for publication the following year. Far later, Hughes used fish-imagery to describe Plath in *Birthday Letters*, calling her 'slim and lithe and smooth as a fish' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 1058). A few pages later in the typescript, there is a description of a town inhabited by predatory women, perhaps forerunners of 'The Woman With Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous':

In the body of each a primary hunter stirs

Miming the divine ritual of the kill

To a bored unhappy beast stretched behind bars. (Cam TS, p. 21)

The ending of this short poem centres around a similar nexus of imagery to both 'The Woman with Such High Heels She Looked Dangerous' and the caged beasts of *The Hawk in the Rain's* 'Jaguar' and 'Macaw and Little Miss'. The women in Hughes's early poetry stand out because they refuse to accept the sexual behaviour-codes imposed upon them, and instead embrace their instinctive, vital life.

As one would expect, foxes feature in Hughes's early typescript. It is impossible to tell whether or not Hughes had already had his famous dream of the burnt fox by the time he wrote the typescript, but images of foxes and fire are present. A poem about autumn contains some lines about vixens: 'And daylong in warm ovens the kindling vixens / Quicken under wide eyes' (Cam TS, p. 23). *Lupercal's* 'Crow Hill' has a similar image: in the later poem, the weather has 'lit the fox in the dripping ground' (Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 62). Mixed metaphors that describe the life-force of creatures as fire or electricity are already present in Hughes's poetry, even at this early stage. The contentment of the warm vixens is nuanced later in Hughes's student poem, for at the end of the poem, 'foxes scream like witches in their fires' (Cam TS, p. 23). Hughes's fire-images marvellously evoke the fiery russet of foxes' fur. The kindling vixens are much more contented creatures than the tormented burnt fox of Hughes's famous dream, but his image of foxes screaming like witches in their fires foreshadows his later writing about the distress that 'burning the foxes' caused him. The poem about autumn also contains some careful observations of warm wind in the woods, the departure of dappled sunlight from the tree-roots, and star-like dew in blown grasses. Decay and the night are compared to crystals, while small birds are



compared to jewels. Hughes did not cluster together images that are so similar in his published poetry; he rarely aestheticised the natural processes of death and decay, preferring instead to let his reader confront them. Yet the line about the screaming foxes that ends the poem prevents it from becoming a pastoral idyll. At the age of thirteen or fourteen, Hughes had come face to face with a fox one morning when he was out hunting rabbits,<sup>52</sup> and when he was a student, he was already using the fox as a symbol for vitality and ferality.

Hughes's 'ear-witness account' begins to differ markedly from Blake's *An Island in the Moon* towards the end. It finishes with a long series of poems with few prose interventions, some of which are not attributed to a particular speaker. There are many poems in this section – about bats and archaeologists (Cam TS, p. 22), mountains and dinosaurs (p. 23), technology, hyperrationality and the Muse (p. 26) – which illuminate our understanding of how these important themes were developing in Hughes's early writing. One poem concerns the colossi (a theme that would preoccupy Plath), built by great statesmen and intellectuals. These include Beethoven, a favourite of Hughes and his social circle (Cam TS, p. 23). A version of Hughes's adolescent poem 'Were I to hear you sigh...' also appears (p. 23). Snatchcraftington ends the poetry evening by singing a bawdy ballad with the songlike refrain 'Fol-de-rol-de-rol-O' (p. 27). The typescript contains several ballad-like poems, which relate drawn-out sagas of mismatched couples, lecherous young men and unfaithful wives (pp. 6-11, pp. 15-16, pp. 19-21, p. 27). These ballads testify to Hughes's interest in traditional songs and his skill at mimicking them. They are clearly lighthearted. Yet when he used ballad metre in collected poems such as 'Roarers in a Ring', Hughes was to modernise the ballad form by using enjambement and half-rhymes to give the poems a suppleness that his undergraduate ballads had lacked.

Hughes had not yet mastered the controlled deployment of strong stresses that make collected poems such as 'Wind' sound so distinctive, and his reliance on regular iambic and balladic metres, rather than devices drawn from the alliterative tradition, means that these early poems do not match the striking rhythms of his later work. The poems in the latter third of the typescript seem closest in their themes and forms to the work he would eventually publish in *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*. His pastiche of Blake's satirical play, Shakespeare's pentameter and 'double language', and traditional folk ballads testifies to his skill at reading, analysing and imitating earlier writing. Most writers begin by imitating the work of those whom they admire, and parodying those whom they dislike; so this focus on pastiche was an important stage in Hughes's development as a poet. Yet the satirical play that begins the typescript, and which attributes the poems to fictional characters, distances Hughes from his own poems. There was no danger that submitting the typescript for assessment would lower his grade. Yet before he went to Cambridge, Hughes's only poetry publications had been in his school magazine; his only critics had been his friends, his teachers and

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<sup>52</sup> BL Add MS 88918/7/2, unpublished autobiographical notes, unnumbered page beginning 'hoping to see rabbits in a hollow down on the other side'.

those in charge of admissions when he applied to Pembroke College. Submitting creative work for critique by literature experts at the Faculty of English was a new venture, [and probably more daunting](#). Understandably, he was cautious.

Hughes's time at Cambridge was certainly not a fallow period for him. Although his poetic vocation was far more important to him than the academic study of English Literature, he was a gifted scholar. His research notes, many of them made in the Cambridge University Library, show just how much meticulous work he put into recording myths, folk-songs and folk-tales that would later prove highly significant to his poetry. He judged his typescript 'ear-witness account' to be of sufficient quality for it to be assessed by academics at the Faculty of English in his second year. In this humorous work, he pokes fun at boring literary criticism, eccentric dons, and pretentious student poets. The framing device of the poetry reading enabled him to experiment with a wide variety of poetic styles, including pastiche and parody, and to attribute them to fictional characters – guarding him against negative criticism. Yet having the poems assessed in this way obliged him to attach his own name to them. Submitting poems under pseudonyms to magazines, as he did the following year, with his early publications in *Chequer* and *Granta*, was arguably a more cautious approach. But there was nothing cautious about satirising Cambridge English, rewriting Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, or revising Blake's *An Island in the Moon*. The young Hughes styles himself as heir to some of the greatest poets in the English language: certainly heir to Blake, perhaps heir to Shakespeare as well. Affiliating himself with such major writers suggests that Hughes was becoming surer of his talent. His writing at Cambridge suggests that he wished to reject everything that the university's infinitesimal critics and Restoration fops represented – and to replace it with something utterly new.

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### **Archival resources**

#### **At the Cambridge University Library**

Cambridge University Library, CUA ENGL. 1. 155, Ted Hughes, original composition.

Cambridge University Library, 'Writing Poetry: Manuscript Verse, 250 BC to 2000 AD' exhibition in 2004, caption to CUA ENGL. 1.155.

Cambridge University Library, Cam b I 10 82. *The Cambridge University Reporter*, 1951-1952 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951).

Cambridge University Library, Cam b I 10 84. *The Cambridge University Reporter*, 1952-1953 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952).

John Wells, caption to CUA ENGL. 1.155, displayed as part of the 'Writing Poetry' exhibition that Wells curated at the University Library in 2004.

#### **At the British Library**

BL [Add MS 88918/7/2](#), Ted Hughes, TS autobiographical notes, unnumbered page beginning 'And there is a real sense in which Yorkshire people'...

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BL [Add MS 88918/7/2](#), Ted Hughes, TS autobiographical notes, unnumbered page beginning 'hoping to see rabbits in a hollow down on the other side'.

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BL Add MS 88918/9/12, Ted Hughes, uncovered ruled and grid-marked notebook containing folktales.

BL Add MS 88918/9/13, Ted Hughes, loose pages inserted into folktale notebook.

Dr. Yvonne Reddick Forthcoming in Cambridge Quarterly, September

BL Add MS 88918/1/55, Ted Hughes, ruled blue exercise book containing notes for a speech about farming.

BL Add MS 88918/129/2, Ted Hughes, poems copied out during National Service.

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BL Add MS 88918/129/2, Ted Hughes, research notes.

#### At the Morgan Library

Morgan Library LHMS MA 7643 Autograph Poem: Cambridge.

#### At the Emory University Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Library

Emory University MARBL archive, BL310.F72 1949B HUGHES.

#### Online resources

-'Conversation with Hughes' Contemporaries'  
<<http://ann.skea.com/CambridgeRecording.htm>> [07. 10. 14].

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BBC news, 'Ted Hughes archive acquired by British Library'  
<<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-11300964>> [22. 10. 14].

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