Hughes's Notion of Shamanic Healing

Terry Gifford

(Published in the *Ted Hughes Society Journal*, 6:2, 2017)

In January of last year an obituary in *The Guardian* caught my eye. The painter Derek Hyatt was said by his obituarist, the art historian Tim Barringer, to have 'collaborated […] with the poet Ted Hughes, whose work he greatly admired'. Derek Hyatt's name appears in Sagar and Tabor's *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography* in entry A47 since, as a lecturer at Leeds Polytechnic, he and his students made broadsides for Hughes poems exhibited at the 1975 Ilkley Literature Festival. Hyatt's triptych etching for 'Wodwo' included the complete text of the poem. But five years earlier Hyatt had made an oil painting given the title of the poem 'Wodwo'; this is reproduced in Derek Hyatt and Peter Woodcock's 2001 book *Stone Fires-Liquid Clouds: The Shamanic Art of Derek Hyatt* which was the result of three years of correspondence and interviews with Hyatt. However, at an exhibition of Hyatt's work at the Art Space Gallery in London last year I talked to his daughter, Sally Gallagher, to discover that she had found no correspondence from Hughes in her father's papers, and in the exhibition catalogue essay Tim Barringer this time makes no mention of Hughes. Intriguingly, *Stone Fires-Liquid Clouds* includes an essay by Hyatt titled, 'Wodwo, Ted Hughes and The Wounded Healer' about Hyatt's reading of Hughes as an inspirational shamanic artist Hyatt writes: 'It's a pity that we can't hold our poets in greater respect for the dangers they go through to make deep poetry'. But he makes no argument for his title and it is left to Woodcock to explain it in his introductory remarks: 'In Hyatt's view, Hughes was a wounded healer, a poet of intense power and shamanic qualities whose recognition was overshadowed by the suicide of his first wife, the poet Sylvia Plath'.

In his book *The Ethnopoetics of Shamanism* (2014), the Brazilian literary scholar Marcel de Lima offers the following definition of the shaman:

> The shaman is the healer wounded by death itself, the one able to restore the mortal evils by means of controlling the spiritual spheres found in the invisible forces of nature commanded by him or her alone. The shaman is indeed the manifestation of the powers of mystical healing […] the shaman acts according to the commandments of nature; he or she goes to knowledge as those who go to war, willing to spill his or her blood on the battlefields.

Here is an explicit endorsement of Hyatt's awareness of 'the dangers [our poets] go through to make deep poetry'. Marcel de Lima is clear that whilst Mircea Eliade's book on shamanism, which Hughes reviewed in 1964 and included under the significant title 'Regenerations' in *Winter Pollen*, was the first historical study of the subject, it was a partial, and even contested one. But its focus upon the individual and his psychic journey enabled Hughes to characterise it as 'one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event' (*WP* 58).

There's something almost innocently positive about Hughes's need to find a 'regenerating drama' in 1964. When twenty years later he came to confront Leonard Baskin's life-sized image of 'The Hanged Man' he struggled, in his Introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, to counter its force, by way of an assertion of 'transformation', with that of 'The Dragonfly'. It is in this essay, also in *Winter Pollen*, that Hughes writes most knowingly about the wound. What Hughes calls '*mana*', and Lorca, he says, called 'the Duende', is divine healing knowledge that comes from deep suffering (*WP* 93). 'It is a common mythological and folklore motif that the wound, if it is to be healed, needs laid in it the blade that made it' (*WP* 95). The experience, the deep knowledge, of both the cause of the wound and the wound itself, is a pre-requisite of possible redemption:

> That moment of redemption, where healing suddenly wells out of a wound that seemed fatal, is not enough. The beauty of it has to blossom. The dead man has to flower into life. And this skinned carcass, so wrapped and unwrapped in its pain, is becoming a strange thing – a chrysalis […] The old terms of suffering have become the new terms of grace. The Hanged Man has become the Dragonfly without having ceased to be the Hanged Man (*WP* 97-8).

So this is not really a transformation, since the wound itself must remain and is not to be denied; it is rather that the quality of pain has become more complex. Or to put it another way, if a version of *Birthday Letters* had been published years earlier, the poems would not have stopped coming, just as Crow could not have avoided a certain kind of laughter: 'The Hanged Man's laughter, that flinging off of everything, deep down among the roots of the unkillable thing in nature, is the voice of *mana*' (*WP* 99).

Of course, *Wodwo* pivots around the radio play titled 'The Wound' about which I wrote in 1978, just as it pivots around Plath's suicide, the poems of the third part being assembled to both engage with it and attempt to emerge from it by ending with 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' and 'Wodwo'. At that time I did not think of the play as a shamanic text, which it obviously is, although I did recognise it as 'an adventure into the realm of dissolution and death' that it shared with the poems and 'the ambiguous moral struggle that Ripley's fight for survival comes to represent'. But my conclusion about what I admitted was a flawed play, now seems prescient:

> Throughout the play he refuses to acknowledge the wound in his head. This is both his limitation and his strength. He instinctively blinds himself to the weakness in himself in order not to capitulate. Thus sometimes with absurdity, sometimes hypocritically, nevertheless Ripley resists and survives at a price […] Ripley is not fully conscious that the forces of dissolution, as well as of life, are exposed by his wound, to be in himself.

When the book was published Hughes had a clear idea of its shamanic function

for himself, as he explained in a letter:

> […] after an undisturbed relationship with the outside natural world, I receive a demand from behind – from a subjective world. The main event of the book - and of my life from 1961-2 onwards – is this invitation or importuning of a subjective world, which I refuse. I think I did refuse – or rather I deferred. And I paid for it quite heavily […] The consequence of the refusal was a mental collapse into the condition of an animal. 'The Harvesting' is a story on the theme […] The 7 years are over – and I think the book has had a great good effect on me. (*LTH* 274)

It seems to me perceptive of Hyatt to take inspiration – inspiration, note – from the notion of Hughes as a wounded healer because this would be one possible way of describing Hughes's life and work There is evidence that the wound was felt to a certain extent before meeting Plath. But then, at the very end of his life, Hughes felt the combined wounds of having lost something in his late commitment to so much prose and the long suppression of *Birthday Letters*.

Hughes must have been aware for years that the suppression of *Birthday Letters* was damaging to himself. Consider his statement in the 1995 *Paris Review* interview: 'Art [i]s perhaps this – the psychological component of the autoimmune system. It works on the artist as a healing. But it works on others, too, as a medicine.' It is the two-way notion of healing that I want to explore here, and a more general sense of Hughes the wounded poetic healer than the obvious wounds of Plath's death in 1963 followed in 1969 by those of Assia Wevill and his mother. Actually, evidence of different forms of the 'wound' are hinted at throughout *Birthday Letters*. In very first poem, 'Fulbright Scholars', Hughes admits to a sense of inadequacy in his early life before meeting Plath: 'At twenty-five I was dumbfounded afresh / By my ignorance of the simplest things' (*CP* 1045). The example that leads to these concluding lines of the poem is his first taste of a peach, but its purpose is to demonstrate a comparatively limited life experience before meeting one of the Fulbright Scholars, who were sufficiently exotic to be announced by a group photograph in a London newspaper. Then, of course, there was the notorious wounding by Plath herself described in the poem 'St Botolph's: 'the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks / That was to brand my face for the next month. / The me beneath it for good.' (*CP* 1052) One might ask how many men have met a woman who enacted such violence at a first meeting; one might also bear this in mind when considering Plath's later accusations against Hughes in a private letter reported in *The Guardian* recently.

Finally, there is the concluding reflection omitted from the published ending of the memoir 'The Rock', broadcast and then published in *The Listener* in 1963. In the Emory manuscript draft of this talk there is a phrase, omitted from the published version, in which what has been called the fatalism of *Birthday Letters* can now be recognised as a kind of wounded foreboding: 'After each walk on the moor or along its edge I must have returned less and less of myself to the valley. This was where the division of body and soul began [that will no

doubt cause me a lot more trouble].' Of course, in Hughes's mind, actually publishing that would no doubt invite a lot more trouble. So when we think of Hughes at the end of his life as sadly regretful not only about the self-harm of not publishing *Birthday Letters*, but also about his years of commitment to prose and in particular *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being,* these regrets echo a lifetime of having a recurring sense of incomplete being that the poet, as the Lumb figure in *Gaudete*, has implicitly been called upon to heal in himself in writing that, of course, includes *Gaudete*.

At this point it is impossible to ignore Hughes's interest in the early arts of healing – those centuries-long traditions of alchemy and the occult arts. Ann Skea's brilliantly useful essay in the last *Ted Hughes Society Journal* draws attention to Hughes's translations in 1992 of Lorenzo de' Medici (1449-92), whose fifteenth-century court in Florence was a centre of Neo-Platonism and Hermetic learning. Hughes translated eleven sonnets that were part of a verse exposition of the Neo-Platonism of Marsilio Ficino (1433-99). Here is the last stanza of one of them:

> Each thing has a moment – that flits,
> For Fortune's a sickness of perpetual motion.
> Nothing is still. And nothing lasts. Only death. (*ST* 100)

These translations were made for an event at the Academia Italiana (now defunct) in London at the request of Gaia Servadio who contributed a Note to Daniel Weissbort's *Selected Translations,* writing, 'I was impressed […] by his familiarity with the work of Ficino and Plontinus and all those philosophers around the Medician dinner-table. He knew about Lorenzo's teacher Poliziano and about Alberti' (*ST* 218). Gaia had sent Hughes, as he asked, word-for-word transcriptions and here is her version of this last stanza:

> Everything is fleeting and last a short time
> Since Fortune in the world is a constant ill;
> Only is still and always lasts Death. (*ST* 219)

Hughes has turned the hint of 'a constant ill' into 'a sickness' and reversed the sense of Death 'only is still' to suggest that the sickness is 'of perpetual motion. / Nothing is still', so that the emphasis in Hughes's version can fall upon 'Nothing lasts. Only death'. The lower case for death, in defusing the anthropomorphic, registers this as the common experience of death, the commonly experienced wound that lasts, as Hughes well knew.

But there is also a positive aspect to these teachings. Ann Skea points out that:

> For both Blake and Hughes, Ficino's teachings about the essential power of the imagination and poetry to link us to the source of creative energies, and the Lucretian and Renaissance Humanist and Neoplatonic emphasis on our ability to control our own lives,

remained of utmost importance.

Ann demonstrates that Hughes first read these ancient texts in Cambridge University Library and that they were so important to him that he later accumulated his own collection:

> Hughes owned a copy of Ficino's *Book of Life*, which deals, amongst many other things, with Nature as a "magician"; "the power of images and medicine"; "The figures of the heavens and the use of images"; the powers that draw "the favours of the heavenly bodies, that is the soul of the world, of the stars and of daemons"; and "the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts".

So this is the moment to turn to Hughes's uses of "the power of words and songs in obtaining heavenly gifts'.

In his poem 'That Morning' from the collection *River* (1983) Ted Hughes presents an image of an ecology in wondrous balance as the salmon run upriver in Alaska to spawn and die just as the bears emerge from their long winter dens, with perhaps newborn young brought down by their mothers who have not fed for up to ten months. Here the bear/salmon ecology is a matter of death giving life and of life ebbing away to death in the seasonal and life cycles of this wild environment. Such cycles and their tensions have always been at the centre of Hughes's work since his earliest statement about his poetic focus: 'What excites my imagination is the war between vitality and death, and my poems may be said to celebrate the exploits of the warriors of either side'. Of course, the poet is also present in this poem and, at the end, so is his son. So, to the balances (or wars of 'perpetual motion') in this poem of bear/salmon and death/life, are added nature/humans and father/son.

The human need to feel embedded in nature, or at least in contact with it, has been called 'biophilia' by the ecologist E. O. Wilson in his book of that name which is subtitled, 'The human bond with other species' (1984). Wilson argued that humans have an 'innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes'. In the early 1980s I began to collect evidence of different social constructions of nature for the first chapter of my study of notions of nature in contemporary poetry, *Green Voices* (2011 [1995]). That Wilson's biophilia has healing properties has been known for some time, but may be hard to apply in institutionalised contexts. In that opening chapter I wrote:

> There is much evidence to show that those of us living in large industrial cities – and that is most of us – need to have unmediated contact with nature. A study of the therapeutic value of trees for hospital patients found that, compared with patients whose windows looked out on to brick walls, those whose windows gave them a view of trees required fewer painkillers and were discharged earlier. The frame here is a healing one. We not only need this sort of contact, we need to communicate it,

> examine it and share its meaning through our symbolic sign-systems. Our semiology of nature keeps us sane by reminding us that we are animals.

At that time I was unaware of biosemiotics, which is what I was describing here – one species making meaning out of the sign-systems of others in a dynamic relationship – or that Wendy Wheeler would title her first book on the subject *The Whole Creature* (2006). Ted Hughes believed that the meaning-making sign-systems of poetry survived precisely because of their potential to heal our alienation from the organic environment upon which we depend. This is the cultural wound that Hughes famously identifies in his review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*: 'The story of the mind exiled from nature is the story of Western Man' (*WP* 129). Ecofeminists will notice that that capitalisation indicates a reification.

The shamanic notion of art as a cultural healing that is also a personal healing requires examining in more detail, and indeed the archives reveal that Hughes did elaborate on his conception of this two-way healing process in what appears to be a draft of an unpublished brief essay. But two more things should be said about 'That Morning'. The last lines of the poem have become iconic in the memory of Hughes, partly, I suspect, because Seamus Heaney read this poem at the memorial service in Westminster Abbey. When Heaney unveiled the memorial stone in the Abbey's Poet's Corner these lines were revealed to be inscribed on it:

> So we found the end of our journey.
>
> So we stood, alive in the river of light
> Among the creatures of light, creatures of light. (*CP* 664)

Standing among the golden bears and silver salmon the human beings are unified with wild nature. They could not feel more alive as fellow creatures as they stand in the flowing, pulsing, lit river. And this is the climax of a journey, not just a fishing trip to Alaska, but a journey towards this kind of embedded lived experience.

But the first thing to say is that, for Hughes, salmon were more than symbolic 'creatures of light'. Hughes wrote to me: 'these fish are simply indicators of what is happening to us', and the collection *River* (1983) gives celebratory attention to that indicator. In his interview with Blake Morrison Hughes said,

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

> really know what bomb has already been planted in the human system.

For Ted Hughes, his poems about rivers and fish also have a sub-text about the links between water quality and public health. What was not known by readers and critics of *River* at the time of its publication, was the extent to which this ecstatic, reconnective poetry was informed by by awarenss of river pollution that would lead to practical political action, including a speech at a public enquiry, on behalf of the rivers in the southwest of England and the importance of their quality for all creatures and organic life there, for river health and for public health.

Second, there are two wounded people in that 'we', which includes Nicholas, son of Ted Hughes, and of Sylvia Plath who had committed suicide in 1963. Mental health issues lie deep under the surface of this journey of father and son. Nicholas Hughes was a fish biologist at the University of Alaska at Fairbanks where he had gained his PhD in salmonid ecology, specialising in the study of Arctic grayling. Sadly, Hughes's sister Olwyn told me just before he died that Nick was 'suffering from the same black depressions as his mother' and, ten years after his father's death in 1998, Nicholas Hughes committed suicide on 16 March 2009. Of course, it was not until the year of his own death that Hughes published his own version of his relationship with Plath in *Birthday Letters* (1998). As we know, he believed that it would have been better for his own health if he had confronted this issue earlier and directly, as he revealed in that long final letter to Keith Sagar three months before his death:

> Though I see now that any traumatic event – if writing is your method – has to be dealt with deliberately. An image has to be looked for – consciously – and then mined to the limit: but not in autobiographical terms. My high-minded principle was simply wrong – for my own psychological and physical health. It was stupid. (*LTH* 720)

The personal feeling of release following the publication of *Birthday Letters* amazed the writer: 'It has worked for me – better than I thought possible [...] I suddenly had free energy I hadn't known since *Crow*' (*LTH* 720). Obviously this release also enabled Hughes to confess to Sagar that his previous 'high-mindedness' about apparently being aloof from the personal resources of autobiography was psychologically unhealthy. Is this what Hughes had in mind when he expressed concern to Ann Stevenson in 1986 that Nick had rejected his gifts as a 'natural very original' thirteen year old poet for life 'on a lonely stream in the Alaska wilderness […] and evading any attempt I might make to bring up Sylvia' (*LTH* 516)? Is there a suspicion of unhealthiness in Hughes's strange statement: 'I wonder if he hasn't searched out too perfect a removal from what the literary documentary dramatists have made of his mother' (*Ibid*.)? But there is no evidence that Hughes was aware of Nick's tendency towards depression.

Many critics use the word 'redemption' about the poems in *River*, knowing, as they do, the poetic journey of Hughes from the trauma of the suicides of

Sylvia Plath and then, six years later, of his partner Assia Wevill, which was closely followed by the death of Edith Hughes. After such dark experiences, to be able to celebrate standing alive in a river of light, a more-than-comfortable part of the creative-destructive cycles in process all around, is a remarkable human achievement, just as it is a poetic achievement. (For example, the repetition of the final phrase in the poem is not just a religious incantation: the first 'creatures of light' refers to bears and salmon, but the second deftly includes father and son without it seeming to be an addition.) So how might one summarise the poetic journey of Hughes's life when it is considered in the light of these issues of personal woundedness and cultural health?

I would suggest that four phases could be identified in one version of the development of Hughes's poetry. The earliest phase would include the first three collections and might be described as satires against self-deceptive protections from nature – culture resisting nature, unsuccessfully, counterbalanced by some overwhelming encounters with 'the war between vitality and death'. Representative of this work is the poem 'Egghead' from the first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The second phase includes *Crow* (1970) and *Gaudete* (1977), but is most comprehensively represented by *Cave Birds* (1978). These mythic narratives put hubris on trial and require the loss of the ego, sometimes represented by dismemberment, and an eventual marriage of a humbled self with nature, symbolised by a female creator who would later come to be characterised as 'the Goddess of complete being' in Hughes's study of *Shakespeare and The Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). This symbolic marriage is always incomplete, or in constant need of renewal, because, as the final words of *Cave Birds* remind us, 'At the end of the ritual / up pops a goblin.' (*CP* 440) Hubris is hard to stop. The third phase includes *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and *River* (1983). These books are celebrations of culture embedded in nature – in both its growth and its decay – and of nature including culture. Mill chimneys rise and fall back to earth like flowers. The hills of the ancient kingdom of Elmet around the Calder Valley, Hughes's birthplace, go on 'shaking their sieve' in which industry, religion, farms and houses are 'sieved' by the ebbs and flows of weather and land (*CP* 470). A late final phase of release might be represented by the translation of the play *Alcestis* (1999) and by *Birthday Letters* (1998). Love, responsibility and their traumas are directly confronted in these last works – the mature, personal, complex explorations of 'the war between vitality and death'.

To slightly reframe these four phases as stages of healing the wounded shaman himself, one might suggest that the first phase is concerned with identifying the nature of the wounds and the wounds in our relationship with nature, inner and outer. Totemic shamanic helpers could be traced from fox to pike to otter. I have, in the past, thought of these creatures as speakers from the animal world who teach, through these poems, examples of self-deceptions, whose instinctive strengths are also their weaknesses. A shamanic approach would ask not, 'What is Hughes saying about these creatures?', but, 'What are these creatures saying to the listening Hughes?' Of course it is impossible to vocalise them except in anthropomorphic terms as in 'Hawk Roosting' and

‘Wodwo’. In the second phase the mythic journeys of descent, trial, and dismemberment lead to reintegration and a repeated image of symbolic marriage. The helper in *Cave Birds* shifts from an arrogant cockerel to Horus, the risen hawk. The third phase enacts cultural healing, imaged in its partiality, with frequent setbacks. Here the white bull of *Gaudete* might be a version of the real helper on Moortown Farm, Sexton Hyades XXXIII. The final phase would be seen as one of personal healing and partial redemption. Here the salmon reigns, embedded with all its inspiring cyclic story of life and death.

So if this poetry ‘works on others, too, as a medicine’ what are the aspects of cultural healing in Hughes’s art? How does Hughes believe that poetry can work on others too? Does Hughes address the issue of illness in his poetry? What do we know about Hughes’s concerns about pollution and public health? In exploring these questions we need to understand that we are dealing with a poet who is much influenced by his reading of Jung and who transferred from the English course (where his supervisor was an expert on the ballads) for his final year as an undergraduate at Cambridge to the social anthropology course that looked at the social function of songs, narratives, myths and rituals. Throughout his work Hughes sought to reconnect the Cartesian dualisms that had riven Western Christian culture and alienated humans from nature, as from their inner selves and their animal life. The quest for the elusive goddess of complete being demands some sense of what complete being might be in its lived form. In the Mytholmroyd journal *Northern Earth* there is an excellent essay by Brian Taylor titled ‘Ted Hughes: Shaman of the Tribe?’ which concludes by suggesting Hughes’s relevance for ‘current debates about neo-shamanism’ in the Calder Valley, including ‘Hughes’ sense of the necessity of honouring a Gravesian Goddess by rekindling a long-lost animal-spiritual sensibility’. However in a footnote Taylor expresses the reservation that ‘[Hughes’s] portrayal of the Goddess seems to preclude her involvement in the rational affairs of public office, or science’. Actually, in reconnecting the whole work of Hughes’s life it is apparent that a range of discourses are deployed in both poetry and prose, and that art is underpinned by activism, just as science informs the art. Such collapsing of the conventional culturally endorsed damaging dualisms is enacted by Hughes’s life and work, as will be glimpsed in the brief examples that there is space for here.

In all of the references to the healing role of the poet that are to be found in Hughes’s interviews, essays, letters and notebooks, he uses the model of the social function of the shaman, about which he must have first learned in his anthropological studies at Cambridge. But he believed that he was prepared for this role in his boyhood identification with the animal world and his teenage infatuation with folklore. ‘It occurred to me – fairly recently – that my preoccupation with animal life, which was obsessively there waiting for me when I came to consciousness, was a gravitation towards whatever life had escaped the cultural imprint’ (*LTH* 724). The clear implication is that conventionally culture separates the inner self from nature, except, of course, in folklore and mythology which Hughes had been reading since the age of twelve. In a letter rejecting an invitation to discuss with Bishop Ross Hook the common ground of the Church

and Poetry, Hughes explains his belief that poetry flourishes where formal religion fails. 'Poetry is forever trying to do the work of religion – as local "healers" are perpetually setting up as an alternative to orthodox Medecine [sic] [...] It's the shamanic streak in the poetic temperament' (*LTH* 460).

Much has been written about Hughes's animals, but to see them as guides or helpers in the poetic process of, as Brian Taylor puts it, 'honouring a Gravesian Goddess by rekindling a long-lost animal-spiritual sensibility' is to read them slightly differently. By way of a footnote I'd like to offer an example of the danger that might be involved in assuming that any reference to an animal successfully expresses an 'animal-spiritual sensibility' by considering a draft of the *Cave Birds* poem 'The Knight', the title of which is followed by 'Has conquered. He has surrendered everything'. So the conquest here is that of the ego which has been surrendered, just as his body has been. An earlier title for this poem was based upon the skeletal Baskin drawing: 'Death Stone Bird'. When John Ruskin first saw Mont Blanc his sense of self was so diminished that he said it left him 'associating fraternally with some ants'. Such a surrender is what Hughes is seeking to suggest here. An earlier version in manuscript has the line, 'Now my instructions come from beetles, from ants'. Learning from ants, taking instruction from ants and beetles is a powerful shamanic notion in the alchemical journey of *Cave Birds*. But in revision Hughes sacrificed this idea for the sake of the ritual itself by changing this to 'Beetles and ants officiate' (*CP* 426). Whilst 'Blueflies lift off his beauty' is brilliantly literal in its symbolism of surrender, 'lift off' enacting flying, 'officiate' emphasises the insects' power rather than the hero's humility, which is the whole point of this stage of the ritual journey. Even a shaman can falsify his dream in the telling of it.

In a notebook containing drafts of the *Crow* poems in the Hughes archive at Emory University in Atlanta there is a draft holograph short essay of several pages that has never been published. Curiously, it is signed with a pseudonym, using his mother's family name, David Farrar (the actual name of Hughes's cousin), suggesting that, if this piece were to be published, it would be too personally exposing to risk his work being held to public account against the essay's statements. At this time Hughes was at the beginning of what I have characterised as his second phase, finding the new and radically different voice of the *Crow* poems. In this draft essay Hughes develops his notion of poetry as performing a healing function in two directions: the personal, for the poet, and the social, for the reader. This draft represents Hughes's most succinct expression of poetry's psychological and cultural function.

Hughes's first striking statement is that the compulsion to write poetry might itself be regarded as a kind of illness which poets need to heal in themselves by the writing of poetry. All poets know that they are different from other people in that they are always alert in a specially attentive way for the next poem. Inspiration has to be sought from a continual discipline of inner attention, or readiness. Hughes regarded this calling as a permanent one that requires a responsibility to the gift, once the calling has been accepted. It may well be painful as it brings deeply hidden matters to the surface, but poets recognise that a successful poem provides a sense of healing from the anxiety that produced it.

There is then, however, a second anxiety about whether and when it becomes a successful poetic communication in the social context of readers, which is addressed by the second discipline of revision and crafting. It is interesting that Hughes's technique for finding a distance from these deeply personal anxieties at this stage of final publication is to be able to retreat behind the persona that is the voice of the poet – what one might call 'the persona in his work'. Actually, when poets take part in workshops of work-in-progress it is a commonly adopted etiquette that the 'I' in the poem is referred to in discussion as 'the speaker' of the poem who is not necessarily the writer of the poem. For Hughes, this 'persona' coping strategy allows for the lonely and personal need for the poet to bring an inner world to the verbal surface to be reconciled with the poet's necessary isolation in a culture which regards the poet as rather odd at best and embarrassingly self-indulgent at worst.

The implication that Hughes is speaking for all artists here is revealed in his assumption that the poet/artist is 'working' on behalf of the rest of society. Interestingly, Hughes's Jungian approach is explained in biological terms. For Hughes the most successful poet is a person who is able to draw upon his whole being as a creature to provide insights to readers that reconnect them to their wholeness. In this they provide a wider healing function in a fractured society. Art, Hughes believed, is nature's cure for the inward repressions of the writer and of the reader. In this role the artist acts as a psychic healer whose function is recognisably that which anthropologists identify as the shaman:

> The only natural cure that has ever appeared is art – and particularly poetry, and particularly the poetic world which opens to the psychic healers which have come to be known as shamans. Shamanism appears in one form or other wherever man has appeared, and his world is always the same and his operations are always the same. ['Or similar' added later.] On his home-made magical flights the myths and superstitions of the permanent religions have accreted and by including [sic] in a piecemeal way, his care of [critic?] psychoanalysis has come into respectability. Poetry can be of many kinds, but the only sort we need derives from the shamanic experience, which is still a more advanced and effective psychic healing technique, for whole communities, than anything devised since our division from the under life of a primitive hunter.

It is easy to understand how Hughes, the poet and former anthropology student, can say that in the narratives of shamanic flights recorded worldwide the myths and superstitions of world religions can be seen to be present, but it is less easy to understand what he means, in the rather scrambled shorthand of these notes, by the suggestion that through these different shamanic narratives a caring psychoanalysis has gained public appreciation. One presumes that the poet's own form of psychoanalysis, appearing in a piecemeal way in his/her poems, appears to be a respectable form of psychological healing for his/her culture.

The fierceness with which Hughes expresses, in these notes, the consequences of repression and the violence with which it needs to be rejected,

echoes of his justification of fishing to me, in a letter written over twenty-five years later, as a form of contact with 'the primitive human animal'. Hughes wrote:

> Think of the many extreme ways in which "civilised" individuals do keep something of that contact? Or in which they remake contact. Having a child, hectic bout of adultery, immersion in pop-music and raves, physically violent sport, high-power predatory behaviour in business, farming stock animals, immersing consciousness in the sexual and killing freedoms of Video and TV etc etc, petty terrorism of some kind, crime generally etc etc. (*LTH* 658)

Much of culture, it seemed to Hughes, including the literary criticism of poetry, represents the mind disconnected from 'the primitive human animal'. Thus the function of true poetry, of the mind that is healing itself, is to reconnect the over-civilised, fractured self to visions reaching for a paradisal order in which, in the final lines of these notes, physical, biological being is at one with spirit life. What Hughes has been speaking of is the possibility of poetry as a cultural healing that is ultimately also an ecological reconciliation between the human animal and the abused, alienated, mysterious, force-field of its home environment.

Here I'd like briefly to consider the children's play 'Orpheus'. In that long letter to Keith Sagar in July 1998 Hughes wrote:

> Orpheus was the first story that occurred to me after S.P.s death. I rejected it: I thought it would be too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation – I was too conscious of that obviousness. I saw my little note about it, the other day. The shock twist was that Pluto answered: No, of course you can't have her back. She's dead, you idiot. Too close to it, you see.
>
> I wrote the musical play in 1971, same time as the Max Nicholson essay, in a farmhouse in North Devon that I'd escaped to after A's & my mother's death, trying to sort out marriage dilemmas etc. (*LTH* 723)

Hughes has the year wrong: the play was broadcast on 29 January 1970 and the Nicholson review appeared six months later. But Lorraine Kerslake argues in her forthcoming book on Hughes's writing for children that Hughes was sometimes able more easily to heal his own wounds in writing for children, 'under the radar' for a schools' broadcast, as it were, than in his high profile Faber publications. It is significant that Hughes associates the writing of the play with a healing retreat at a time of deep wounding and turmoil. And he thinks of it as a musical play:

> And the stones did not dance. But the stones listened.
> The music was not the music of happiness
> But of everlasting, and the wearing away of the hills,
> The music of the stillness of stones,

> Of stones under frost, and stones under rain, and stones in the sun,
> The music of the seabed drinking at the stones of the hills.
> The music of the floating weight of the earth.
> And the deer on the high hills heard the crying of wolves.
> And the salmon in the deep pools heard the whisper of the snows,
> And the traveller on the road
> Heard the music of love coming and love going
> And love lost forever,
> The music of birth and of death. (*THCPC* 105)

Kerslake also argues that this play, in which this final music is the music of Orpheus's unseen wife, exemplifies the two-way shamanic healing of wounds for the writer and the audience. She writes:

> By rewriting the myth in the form of a children's play it allowed Hughes to explore the emotions and feelings of Orpheus by focusing on his own emotional journey without the restraints of writing for an adult audience. Hughes's children's writing is, after all, one that pursues healing truths. Hughes himself recognized that 'Children are most sensitive to the inner world, because they are the least conditioned by scientific objectivity to life' (*WP* 149).

To turn briefly to poems in which Hughes responds to individual cases of ill-health is to also see in practice what he had sketched out in theory in the *Crow* notebook above. Consider, first, how Hughes responds to the news that his old undergraduate friend and co-founder of the journal *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Daniel Weissbort, is suffering from cancer of the jaw:

> My one or two fleeting glimpses of what it's like, to know you've somehow got yourself so ill, gave me a good idea of the rage against yourself, & the fright. Ted Cornish [a Devon healer] always says – the worst (he thinks, the most dangerous) thing about such illnesses is the fear. He thinks if you can control the fright – the imagining of the worst & the resignation, you can get the upper hand, & come out of it. (*LTH* 471)

The crucial idea that the agency of the sufferer is the best tool for self-healing is also present in the poems about illness, even, ironically, when the cause of the illness itself might be in the hands of the sufferer. The poem 'Hands', for example, is about the death of the poet's father-in-law, Jack Orchard, who worked at Moortown Farm when it was bought by the poet and his wife and had hands

> suave as warm oil inside the wombs of ewes,

And monkey delicate

At that cigarette
Which glowed patiently through all your labours
Nursing the one in your lung
To such strength, it squeezed your strength to
water
And stopped you. (*CP* 537)

The moving series of contrasts in these two stanzas, from tractor to dung-forks to warm oil, build an inevitable momentum towards death, delicately nursed by hand and cigarette. In another poem which focuses upon the hands of the dying, titled 'I know well', the hands are, at this stage, too weak to move themselves, but the process of dying is movingly given agency in the sufferer, whom we now know to be Susan Allison, apparently weary from the effort

Of lifting away yourself
From yourself

And weeping with the ache of the effort (*CP* 368)

What is remarkable here is that the 'effort' of this life in its final stages is actually a dignified act of seemingly 'lifting away' life itself from the physical self. Once again the sufferer is not being acted upon so much as acting themselves in the terminal dignity of their dying.

It is not, therefore, surprising to find that Hughes, the author of *River* (1983), acted himself in the cause of public health and river health in the case of the severe pollution of the River Torridge by the town of Bideford in North Devon in the early 1980s, although, until as recently as 2008. Several significant features of Hughes's involvement in this campaign for water quality by a poet who writes about rivers, ill-health and nature are worth remarking upon as characteristics of what I have called, borrowing a notion from the American social theorist Murray Bookchin, Hughes's 'social ecology':

> The dualities that have contributed to the development of the environmental crisis – separations of ways of knowing and communicating such as science and humanities, activism and art, speech-making and poetry – can now be seen to have been brought together in the reconnective practice of Hughes's social ecology.

Something of the interrelationship between Hughes's art and activism can be determined from the following list of campaigns supported by Hughes and his publications concerned with water quality:

1981 - Torridge Action Group formed
1983 - *River*
1992 - River Creedy Campaign
1992 - *Rain-Charm for the Duchy* (see title poem)
1992 - Southwest Water gives £5,000 to research detergents in the River Exe
1993 - *The Iron Woman*
1995 - West Country Rivers Trust formed

What becomes clear from a 'reconnected' overview of Hughes's whole work is that for him a concern for nature was inevitably also a concern for human health and that his pursuit of cultural healing was multidimensional and reintegrating in so many ways. The case of Ted Hughes, the wounded shamanic healer, seems only to increase in significance for our current debates about the ways in which the humanities can address matters of personal, public and environmental health.