Review: The Art of Ted Hughes

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When Ted Hughes's first volume of poetry *The Hawk in the Rain* was published in 1957, many critics immediately realized that a major literary event had occurred. He was hailed as the most promising and original voice to appear on the scene for quite a long time. Then, three years later, *Lupercal* was published. It was widely acclaimed as a marked advance on Mr Hughes's first work. Seven years elapsed between the publication of *Lupercal* and the appearance of *Wodwo* in 1967. Although a distinct development was reflected in the latter book, it was, generally speaking, equally well received. When *Crow*, the most recent volume of Hughes's poetry to be released for general circulation, came out in 1970, many critics suddenly discerned in *Lupercal* a fair number of elements pointing to the radical change in mood, tone and subject matter that characterizes *Crow*.

Keith Sagar is the first critic to carry out a full-length study of Ted Hughes's literary output. It consists of an introduction, a bibliographical note and five chapters, one for each volume, and a chapter devoted to *Prometheus on His Crag*, a collection of twenty-one poems published in a limited edition. It concludes with a good bibliography and an index.

*The Art of Ted Hughes* opens on a false note. Although Ted Hughes is widely considered to be one of the most important present-day British poets, a comparison with master-poets such as W B Yeats or T S Eliot would hardly turn to his advantage. Yet such a comparison is precisely what Mr Sagar undertakes and it is evident that in doing so he is grossly unfair to an excellent poet.

In the introduction Keith Sagar sets forth his aims in writing this study and the standards by which he would like to be judged. He has set himself the objective to approach Ted Hughes's work in a fresh, sincere and objective way, to describe it, to follow it step by step and in this process throw light on it, to find out whether it has a coherence transcending its incoherence and contradictions, to explore the meaning of individual poems and their relation to each other and to tradition. Although Mr Sagar sets out to work towards his objectives, he falls short of them. He sticks to the method of discussing each volume separately, seldom bothering to point out links between various poems and even more rarely emphasizing the essential continuity in subject matter, style and tone in Ted Hughes's work. Although he occasionally dwells at length on individual poems, he almost never presents the reader with a thorough analysis. He quite casually throws out hints as to the sources of particular images and references, without going into their significance in the context of the poem.

On the credit side, Mr Sagar has some interesting things to say about several of the more difficult poems in *Wodwo*. His discussion of the elusive 'Gog' is highly illuminating. His argument concerning the short stories included in *Wodwo* is equally perceptive and incisive. However, he seems to
be unaware of the fact that the short story ‘The Wound’ is indebted to the doctrine of shamanism, to which he nevertheless makes a number of references in his discussion of Crow.

Although Hughes’s animals, tramps, plants, and so on, are described in an exceptionally realistic fashion, they do not seem to be there for their own sake exclusively. Most of his poems are a celebration of unbridled vitality. This vitality holds sway over the animals that are the main presences in so many of the poems. It can also be discerned in certain rather primitive men, and is shown as inherent in plants, rivers, and so on. Energy is a life-giving force. Where it is absent, only death is left. Hughes ultimately evokes nothing but this energy, seen as an elemental force which transcends the phenomenal world. In his universe, the struggle for survival is present everywhere. His world is a place where the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth reigns supreme. Each entity lives at the expense of the very existence of another entity. Ted Hughes has sloughed off any pretence of a pursuit of happiness as a realizable ideal. In his universe, the most that can be achieved is a fleeting sense of triumph. Mr Sagar repeatedly touches upon this subject, but he does not give it the attention which it deserves.

Keith Sagar writes most enthusiastically about Crow. Crow is a twentieth-century mythology whose monstrosity is on a par with the most horrifying aspects of modern civilization. In the figure of Crow, Hughes has found a ‘convenient persona for transmitting his view of the world’. The book is an attempt to revise an old mythology, primarily, though not exclusively, that of Christianity as recorded in the Bible. The attainment of reality is so important in a writer’s life that he cannot ignore it, even if it turns out to be almost unbearable. Keith Sagar demonstrates that Hughes felt compelled to re-arrange the world so that he could understand it. This patch-up creation myth focuses upon a crow, a creature which plays a role in several archaic religions, among which that of the Eskimos of Alaska. In addition, there are metaphorical, thematic and philosophical correspondences between the Bard Thodol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and Crow. All this is beautifully brought out in Mr Sagar’s study. However, he fails to notice that Crow also bears the stamp of Hughes’s assimilation of the techniques of the cartoon strip. He is equally impervious to the humour that is patent in a poem such as ‘Crow and the Birds’, with its echo of Wallace Stevens’s ‘The Emperor of Ice Cream’. Furthermore, he might have drawn the reader’s attention to the liberating function of an abstraction such as ‘laughter’ in Crow. The concept of laughter as used by Hughes is akin to the principle of tragic joy in Yeats’s late poems. A refusal to crack up in the face of extreme horror, and praise for the sheer superiority of composure, are implicit in it.

On the whole, it is difficult to be very enthusiastic about The Art of Ted Hughes. If there do not seem to be any blatant mis-readings — except perhaps for ‘A Modest Proposal’ — this is partly due to the general superficiality of Keith Sagar’s discussion. On the other hand, it must be conceded that he never adopts a pedantic tone and refrains from indulging in un-
qualified praise or depreciation. His study will certainly serve the useful purpose of providing the general reader with an introduction to the work of Ted Hughes, but whether it will establish itself as a standard work is a different matter.

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Time, Aspect and the Verb. By Walter H. Hirtle (Cahiers de Psychomécanique du Langage) Québec Presses de l'Université Laval 1975 149 pp Price $8.95

The dangers and traps involved in a study of aspect in present-day English will be obvious to any reader of English Studies, and the Grammar of Contemporary English has not disposed of the problem by defining aspect rather loosely and using the term for two different sets of contrasts—perfective v. non-perfective as well as progressive v. non-progressive. Mr. Hirtle (who mentions Zandvoort's 1962 article in his introduction) does not try to shirk the issue, much to the contrary, he intends to ground his approach on a general theory of aspect and attempts to show 'what common element lies at the basis of the system of aspect in whatever language a system of this sort may exist.' This general theory is avowedly Guillaumean. The reader who is unfamiliar with what has now been termed the Psychomechanics of language is offered a brief outline in the Introduction, together with (in appendix) a translation of Roch Valin's 1965 article 'Les aspects du verbe français,' where Guillaume's views on aspect are further developed. The element common to all systems of aspect is the concept of event time as distinct from general or universe time, the former term referring to a finite stretch of time delimited as a portion of the latter. The two realizations of the category are 'immanent aspect' (actualization within the confines of the event's duration) and 'transcendent aspect' (actualization in the result phase, with the whole of event time seen in retrospect).

This system, Mr. Hirtle claims, is also at work in English. It should, in accordance with Guillaumean tenets, first be described 'in tongue,' i.e., as a mental mechanism, a reservoir of potentialities, from which every actualization 'in discourse' proceeds, so that it can be analyzed not only for its own sake, but as a test of the system. In English, the 'formal significate' of aspect is the distinction between verb forms involving the auxiliary have and past participle on the one hand, and verb forms without this construction on the other, in the author's own words, 'reflection on Guillaume's approach and further observation of usage' have led to the theory of aspect presented in his book. The English verb has a system of aspect involving two positions or moments, one 'endotropic' (the immanent) and one 'exotropic' (the transcendent). As both simple form and progressive form represent event time as endotropic, this opposition, to which, it will be remembered,