

What is the Truth? Ted Hughes, Childhood, Memories and Stories

Claas Kazzer

"Well, as far as my writing is concerned, maybe the crucial thing was that I spent my first years in a valley in West Yorkshire in the north of England ..."¹

A few years ago, on one of my first trips to Yorkshire researching Ted Hughes' childhood, I talked to Keith Sagar, the renowned Hughes scholar, who told me about the pond that appears in the poem "Pike." He had heard that apparently it wasn't very big – and had I seen it, and did I know of any hints of a monastery there? The pond is, in fact, fifteen to twenty yards across and quite shallow, certainly not "as deep as England," as the poem states.² Sure enough, there are some old stones by its side, a few sandstone pillars from fences and the like, but no sign of a monastery. Yet, as I would learn later, Ted and his friend John once caught a sizeable pike there. I was intrigued. Here were what I thought were Ted's memories, stories of monasteries, frighteningly deep ponds, huge pike – there were the places I saw and experienced, and soon I would hear the stories people told me who had been there with him at the time. Some converged, others never quite did.

I remembered, that several years earlier as I was reading Ted Hughes' *Creation Tales* I had already wondered about consistency in his stories.³ I had wondered why, for example, he would abandon the opportunity of building a consistent 'early world' in favour of presenting conflicting narratives, such as the three tales of the creation of Woman. There were two contradictory stories of the creation of Man, and at least two contradictory accounts of the creation of human offspring in the stories, depending on how you count. It also bothered me that there seemed to be factual error as in one of my favourite stories, where bee was male and had a sting (male bees, called drones, can't sting simply because they don't have stingers – at least where I come from). And I could go on. There was so much care in the construction of these stories, then how could he suddenly become so careless? Were accuracy and consistency secondary to the pure joy of storytelling, to the drama of the narrative? Or was he making a point in presenting a rather unstable, vulnerable and multiple 'truth' here – not the kind of veracity I had somehow expected from his origin myths?

¹ Ted Hughes and Drue Heinz, "The Art of Poetry: LXXI," *The Paris Review* 37:134 [Spring 1995]: 58.

² Ted Hughes, "Pike," in *Lupercal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), 58.

³ By "Creation Tales," I am referring to the stories from *How the Whale Became* (1963), *Tales of the Early World* (1988) and *The Dreamfighter and Other Creation Tales* as well as a story published separately in Michael Morpurgo's *Muck and Magic* (both 1995), which are set at the beginning of the world and in which God plays a central role.

Then I read *What is the Truth?*, in which God's son wants to visit the earth to learn something from humankind. After much ado, God takes his son to earth and summons sleeping villagers who tell them what they know about certain animals – and each villager tells a different story. There is no single, universal 'truth' in their tales but many different ones, each valuable and accurate and beautiful in its own right, reflecting a particular slant or mindset. Something clicked in my mind.

Soon after, I read *Crow* and because of my previous reading I began to enjoy the different accounts of Crow – such as those describing his birth/creation. It was fascinating, and I began to sense there was a method behind this, even though I could not yet quite grasp it.

So, back in Yorkshire, as I was again puzzling over the inconsistencies I was running into, researching Ted's childhood, I remembered the Creation Tales, *Crow* and *What is the Truth?*. I realised my problem was that I had read Ted's more or less biographical pieces in search of a single, consistent 'truth,' occasionally to the point of losing sight of the beauty of the actual story told. In order to really get somewhere, to make interpretive sense, I had to rediscover them: His 'autobiographical' pieces were *stories*, and they demanded to be read as such. Once I accepted this, biographical truths shone up behind them.

Ted's stories were evading a reading for 'truth' as a simple one-to-one correspondence. They contained historical and emotional truths, or 'inner' and 'outer' truths, if you will, to which he added the intrinsic truth of a good story. The collection *Remains of Elmet* and its later revision *Elmet* show this quite beautifully. There is the poem "Mount Zion," for example, in which Ted describes the colossal chapel which stood opposite his childhood home. His description is apparently from the perspective of a child: a looming black mass "above the kitchen window," "blocking the moon" and "darkening the sun of every day."⁴ In the story which the poem tells, the child is marched into the chapel to experience impressions of terror, death and conviction. Ted juxtaposes these images with that of a cricket chirping in the chapel wall, which an unnamed group of people try to drive and dig out of the "religious stonework."⁵ Quite clearly, however, this is not Ted the boy writing, but Ted in the 1970s, his concepts colouring, or even overwriting the biographical experience of the child who, as we will see later, apparently liked going to the Chapel, which was an important social centre of the neighbourhood and a meeting place for the children.

⁴ Ted Hughes, "Mount Zion," in *Elmet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 73.

Most readers, however, will not know such details, and if, as I had done, they give to reading stories that come clothed in the guise of autobiography as 'truth,' they will end up with a very different picture of author and setting.

As if this weren't complicated enough, there is yet another vital aspect to the inconsistencies in Ted's storytelling. This, I discovered when I studied his interviews and biographical essays. It all began with the fact that it seemed impossible to get an exact date from these for the family's move south in the 1930s – even though Ted frequently portrayed that move as traumatic. Sometimes he says he was seven, sometimes eight. But it was only when Ted's best friend of that time, Derek, told me that he must have been almost nine that I finally noticed. It was something so obvious that its importance had never occurred to me. I was dealing with memories! And memories are notoriously unreliable. They change as we change, and, like stories, they grow as we grow. We adapt them to what and where we are at the time of telling or remembering. And we adapt them to our audience, if we have one.

Memory is key to identity, though it wasn't until I understood that crucial hint from children's book critic Peter Hollindale, that I realized the links I could make between the different truths in Ted's storytelling. Hollindale argues that "we depend for our identity on our sense of personal continuity in time, and that we express this to ourselves by storying our lives."⁶ We arrive at our sense of identity, says Hollindale, "through constant dialogue between experience and memory in which *both elements are unstable*. We construct our personal continuities, but we do not remain the same people: we evolve." And he continues: "Only by memory can we cope with our own personal evolution, but memories are not constants: we revise or alter them to fit our present needs."⁷ That seemed as true to me of my own life, as it was of what I found regarding Ted's childhood. Surely, Ted used landscape and experiences of his childhood and youth quite freely to tell a good story – but he was also 'storying' his life through memory, as we all do.

Equipped with my findings, I wandered deeper into Ted's childhood landscape – or what was left of it – several times visiting the valley where he was born as well as the place where he spent his youth. And all the time, I kept trying to match his accounts with what I saw, experienced and heard, to see what I would find.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Peter Hollindale, *Signs of Childness in Children's Books* (Thimble Press, Stroud, 1997), 69.

I met many fascinating people along the way, who told their stories with great affection, and as they did, the beauty of the experience remembered became palpable. There were many very moving moments, and more than once I was deeply touched by what the narrators unfolded before me – "as if it were yesterday." There were many funny little anecdotes and much laughter, too, and all stories were told with honesty and directness.

So, let me piece together here a summary of some events from Ted's childhood and youth as told by his contemporaries and culled from his own comments – a sketch that will enrich and sometimes question the stories which his poems, stories, essays and interviews tell.

Ted Hughes remembered growing up in a small village at the bottom of a valley surrounded by moorland, rising gently but high up into the sky. In the story "The Rock" from a series of autobiographical pieces commissioned of authors by the BBC, he describes the village and its surroundings. He points out that on the opposite side from where he lived, the gentle slope of the moors broke off into a brooding cliff, "half-way up the sky."⁸

The cliff is called "Scout Rock," and he describes its powerful and threatening presence, watching him from his first day, "a towering gloom over my perambulator" and "infiltrating the very light of my room with its particular shadow." He also writes that the "oppression cast by that rock was a force in the minds of everyone there" and that "we valley-dwellers were stuck looking at the dark hairy wall [...] and the final sensation was of having been trapped."

The name of the village where Ted grew up is Mytholmroyd (pron. /'maiðəmroid/). The valley is quite wide in most places around the village. There are several smaller valleys opening to both sides. Most of them have small streams coming down from the hills that can turn into raging torrents when it rains. In some places, the main valley's river Calder and the canal compete for space with the houses, roads and the railway line. A handful of mills survive along the canal, but their number has dwindled to a mere shadow of the valley's industrial past.

When I first went there, I was surprised how small and far off Scout Rock was, except when you were right beneath it: Even from the vantage point of a child it could not have been that much more

⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁸ Ted Hughes, "The Rock," *The Listener* (19 September 1963), 421. The following quotes are from the same source.

impressive. I tried ducking down, cowering, crouching (How tall was he at seven or eight?), remembering how I saw things when I was little, but Scout Rock didn't get that much bigger. I looked at it in rain, fog and sunshine – all it did was look bleaker at times. I walked the path so accurately described in "The Rock," through the fields up to the moors, and Scout Rock became even less significant. In the end I gave up trying to see it as Ted described it – it was impossible for me.

Though I am inclined to read "The Rock" as quite an accurate 'memory snapshot,' a flash photograph of Ted's time in the valley taken from the vantage point of 1963, the story opens up to other possibilities too. "The Rock" makes a good story. It has drama, suspense and that eerie sense of unease that often comes creeping into Ted's early stories. It even seems to be leaning toward the reader a bit: Here is a 33-year-old writer who has just published two acclaimed collections, remembering his early childhood in a rain-sodden, dramatic environment. That natural drama and vitality played out in the poems must come from somewhere, mustn't it? How could it be otherwise! Is "The Rock" part of the answer? Reading the story as such it seems to be – though in the end, it is a story which could easily be clothed quite differently.

Over time I found out that, on the surface, Ted's was by all means quite an ordinary childhood in a Yorkshire country place in the 1930s. He was the youngest of three children – his sister Olwyn was two years and his brother Gerald ten years older than him – and their parents weren't that much different from their neighbours. But at the same time, it wasn't an ordinary childhood, and memory played its part in that. Memory kept it palpable, shifted, reordered, weighted, and on occasion brought it intensely alive with its inherent flashbeam clarity and persuasive highlighting.

When Ted grew up in Mytholmroyd, there was a tram-line connecting Hebden Bridge with Halifax (replaced by buses in 1936), which went through the village. The valley's main road was a major east-west connection (it still is), and countless mills along the valley bottoms and on the hillsides, provided employment. Work in most mills and other trades was Monday to Saturday lunchtime (one o'clock). Saturday afternoons were off. On Sundays, there was church (for those who went), and in the afternoon there was Sunday School for most children. It was a time when swings and seesaws in the recreation grounds got chained up on Sundays, so the children would respect the day of the Lord.

Ted's family lived on the south-facing slope of the valley in a small estate by the name of Banksfields. It lay at the bottom of fields coming down from the moors, next to the canal. At the top of

the estate was a small path that led past what the children called "chicken pens" and little gardens to Redacre Wood – a steep strip of light oak forest by the side of the valley with old trees and a brook at the far end. Ted's sister once described it so vividly, with its bluebells and anemones and birdsong, that I could see the sun dancing through the leaves – something I was to witness there several times for myself. It was a favourite spot of the children when Ted was little.

Ted's father, William Hughes, was a very jovial man, one who liked the company of his friends. He worked as a carpenter in the town of Hebden Bridge, two miles down the road. He was a good footballer, playing centre field in his youth, and a bigger regional club had wanted him as a professional player. But those were times when professional football paid comparatively poorly, so he chose the carpenter's trade instead.

William was one of only 17 survivors of an entire battalion of the Battle of Gallipoli (1915), and Ted's sister Olwyn remembers climbing into his bed on Sunday mornings together with Ted and asking their dad to tell them about the war – which he did in grizzly detail. She also had a kind of "rosary in squarish mother-of-pearl beads, heavy and beautiful" given to her by her father, which, she always knew, was a string of prayer beads taken from a dead Turkish soldier.⁹ Like many men, William Hughes returned home from the war much changed by what he had experienced and seen. Occasionally, he would shout in his sleep, dreaming of 'the Turks' coming over the trenches.

William had family in and around Hebden, and his mother lived in Mytholm, down Todmorden way. When Ted was little, they went there for tea most Sundays. Mytholm was also where William once took Ted to a pub, called Stubbing Wharfe, by the canal, opposite the house where he was born and where his grandfather used to go. It is the place where the story "Sunday" is set, recounting an event from Ted's early childhood.

Ted's mother, Edith (née Farrar), had family in and around Mytholmroyd, several of them living just a few houses up or down the road. She first saw William in a photograph of the local football team in the window of a photographic studio in Hebden and 'took notice' – or so the story goes. Edith read, including poetry, and her Wordsworth was one of her favourite books. She also told the children stories "that she

⁹ Letter by Olwyn Hughes, 17 January 2008.

made up, mostly," and she brought in the occasional book, such as "a sort of children's encyclopedia" with folktales in it.¹⁰

Like her mother before her, Edith occasionally saw ghosts mainly at times when there were deaths in the family and she spoke openly about it – something which the children grew up as "just a normal part of life, like everything else."¹¹ Ted mentions several of these occasions from when he was a little older in "The Deadfall," all of which are supported by stories Olwyn told.

Like many women of that era, Edith stayed at home while the children were little, occasionally helping out in the clothing factory of her brothers Tom and Walter when they were short of machinists. Ted's sister Olwyn remembers that she was a "good walker and a good swimmer" and "very good at many other things." She took the children on outings, showing them places such as the shallow pools and rocks in Cragg Vale, occasionally taking them as far as the "high roads" along the top of the valley with beautiful vistas all around.

Occasionally, the whole family would go on trips a little further afield, to Hardcastle Crag, for example, with its little restaurant where tea and coffee were served, and where Olwyn remembers Ted and herself fishing off the stepping-stones in the river with little nets. And she remembers that at Easter, they went up the hill, past Ewood, a Farrar residence in past centuries, to Midgley to watch the pace-eggers doing the mystery plays.¹²

The house in 1, Aspinnall Street was a typical British end-of-terrace house with a narrow strip of garden in front¹³, a living room downstairs and a small kitchen by the back door. The parents' and Olwyn's bedrooms were on the first floor and the boys' room was in the attic. It had a small roof window

¹⁰ Ted Hughes and Drue Heinz, "The Art of Poetry: LXXI," *The Paris Review*, 37:134 [Spring 1995], 59.

¹¹ This and the following quotes of Olwyn Hughes from notes taken over several visits between 2002 and 2004, and other material kindly supplied by Olwyn Hughes between 2000 and 2005, unless noted.

¹² Pace-egging is an old Easter custom, apparently once widespread throughout England and Europe, and probably pre-Christian in origin. The word 'pace' derives from the older English 'pask', 'paas' or 'pasch' meaning 'Easter.' Pace-eggs are specially decorated eggs, often wrapped in onion skins for colour and boiled. They were eaten for breakfast on Easter Sunday, used as ornaments or for games, and handed out to the pace-eggers – mummers with blackened faces and wearing animal skins who went through the streets, singing the traditional pace-eggers' song and extracting eggs or money as tribute.

The content of the pace-egging plays is similar to mumming plays that were traditionally performed around Christmas. At the centre is a death and rebirth cycle involving a fight between the hero (usually St George) and the villain (who usually goes by the name of Old Tossplot), who is often portrayed as a foreigner such as the Turkish Knight. The corpse is then revived by a doctor and there usually are appearances by other characters too.

¹³ Letter by Olwyn Hughes, 17 January 2008.

facing south, and you had to be quite tall or stand on a chair to look out of it as a child. If you looked left, past the towering shoulder of Mt Zion Chapel (now demolished) you could see parts of Scout Rock on the other side of the valley.

The imposing Mt Zion was a Methodist chapel looking on to the canal. Its side faced the side of the Hughes' house, and two downstairs windows and one on the first floor would look directly onto it. Olwyn remembers the road between "house and chapel was quite wide" so that "at least in summer at a fairly early hour, the chapel did not hide the sun."¹⁴ And while Ted would later describe Mt Zion as dark and oppressive – a "Satanic Majesty,"¹⁵ "a deadfall" mass,¹⁶ – his sister chiefly remembers the chapel as a warm place, cheerful even, a place where the local children met, and a social place for the families who took part in chapel activities.

The Hugheses were no fervent chapel-goers, but Olwyn remembers that their mother "used to go and sing her heart out." William however, hardly "ever went except for funerals and things." She also mentioned: "We used to be in the choir, you know, on Easter Sunday, and it was great – it was a great place, that chapel, looking back. I think I didn't realise it until I went up there and saw it had gone. It was like the heart of the whole area gone." The people who looked after Sunday School were all middle-aged, "very good-natured Yorkshire people who knew one's parents," and "there was a lovely atmosphere there. It was very, very nice. And it was where all the children used to meet."

At Sunday School there was usually something in the offing, "like a concert that we would be trained to sing little songs for, or some days somebody would sit down and form a little group and tell us a biblical story, and that sort of thing." But what the children really liked, of course, were "the occasions": "They used to have evenings where they sat there and where all the local housewives would bake tarts, you know. It was a very nice centre." Olwyn also recalls that "there was a lot of kindness there. I do just think of it as a sort of very warm, sweet place to go."

Gerald though had had a very disappointing experience with the people running Mt Zion when he

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "The Canal's Drowning Black," in *Elmet* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 61.

¹⁶ "Mount Zion," *ibid.*, 73.

and a group of friends, all around 14 or 15, in some noisy game when leaving the chapel, upset the people running Mount Zion and where barred from attendance. My mother urged the boys to go and apologise which they all did. But it was thought they had come to cause trouble and, their apologies unheard, they were sent away again.¹⁷

But Ted, even though he may not have liked chapel as much as Olwyn, "was always perfectly okay, he was always there. He used to like Sunday School."

In front of the house was a little square, called the 'Plot Dam', deriving its name from its use for the bonfire and celebrations on Guy Fawkes Night (5th November). Ted's best friend of the time, Derek, remembers that the local children would go "proggin'" in Redacre Wood and similar areas, collecting whatever dry wood they could come by, hauling logs with ropes, "anything that burned," to build the fire.¹⁸ And they would always have "a massive plot!" 'Plot raiding' was a common sport, so the plot had to be guarded lest other gangs of children steal your wood or even light your plot before Plot Night. In spring, the children would go 'docking' – collecting the young 'dock' leaves (bistort) in the hard-to-get-to places by the bank of the canal for the valley's now famous Dock Pudding. And they sold the docks to buy 'spice' (sweets) or a cream bun from Toothill's Bakery. Derek remembers: "The grown-ups didn't use to go through that hedge [by the bank] and we could crawl in between and get all the best ones, you see." And: "We used to go sellin' them, these docks, in carrierbagful, for about sixpence for a carrierbagfull, and Teddy used to do that as well." Because, after all, "you could buy a little ship like a lollipop for a penny or a ha'penny or somethin', and we'd sell these docks all up Banksfields and everywhere."

There were several residents of Banksfields who, like Derek's father, had little allotments and hen pens at the top of the little estate where the children frequently played.

Teddy, as his friends then called him, and his best mate, Derek 'Bunny' Robertshaw, were the same age and lived just around the corner from each other. Other boys roughly their age included Brian Seymour who was a year older than Teddy and Derek, and Donald 'Croc' Crossley, who was about a year younger. Among the events that stand out in Derek's mind is building "ocean liners" of wood that they sailed on the brook at the far end of Redacre Wood near Broad Bottom Farm. Derek's was the "Queen Mary," and Teddy sailed the "Mauretania," "and nobody used to bother us." As Teddy wasn't into "footballin' or cricket," they played there quite often, hanging ropes from trees with a bit of stick at the end

¹⁷ Letter by Olwyn Hughes, 17 January 2008.

¹⁸ This and the following quotes of Derek Robertshaw are taken from an interview with Derek and Phyllis Robertshaw in August 2002.

– "that were our swings" (something the children are still at today). They looked at birds' nests or rabbit holes and climbed in the little quarry above the wood. "We used to go up the moors as well. On the Midgley moors. There was the grouse and all the shootin' butts, and we were lookin' in there, and see what we could find, if there was anythin' different." They even ventured "right over to the reservoirs – there's some reservoirs further over – we'd go there. Anythin' like that. We used to make our own pleasures, you know." And he goes on: "I wouldn't say Teddy was a footballin' or cricket fan, because he wasn't. [...] We used to do more in nature, you know. [...] Up them moors it was the pheasants you see, and the curlews."

The moors were also where they'd go to collect sheep wool or gather bilberries. "We were always out, even if it rained," says Derek, though, of course, they played in each other's houses too. But that's a story told often before, so I won't repeat it here.

They were a lively bunch, no doubt, making their own adventure games, once torturing a member of their little gang in ill-perceived American Indian fashion, tying him to a tree and lighting a fire beneath him – with, as one version of this story has it, Olwyn coming to the rescue just in time. Some of the locals still tell of events such as Teddy putting a frog down a girl's back and banging on it, or a mouse. Ted in his turn remembered that the girl whom he gave the 'frog treatment' was once trying to stone him. Generally though "we didn't bother with girls much," says Derek.

Fishing in the canal with nets made of curtain mesh was as much part of the boys' pastime as was hauling stones from the higher bank across the canal to hit the skylights of the defunct Empress Foundry on the other side, and they played in the foundry's "black sand." Derek remembers them going to the long canal tunnel under the main road to look for fish: "We used to go under there, and there were fish, I don't mean the little ones, there were some about that long [indicates 10–15 cm], I think they were roach." To get at the fish, "we used to feel them with his finger right in the cracks and they used to come out and you could catch them sometimes. [...] They come out when you tickle them, and you could catch them with your hand." Then, "we put them in jam jars with water, but they always died. We used to think we could keep them like goldfish, but you couldn't."

From the age of five, Teddy went to Burnley Road Primary School in Mytholmroyd. "Three hours of mostly readin', writin' and arithmetic" in the morning, says Derek, taught by Susie Farrar. Then trooping

home for lunch up the small path next to the canal, a period of 'sleep,' and more lessons till four p.m. in the afternoon.

From quite an early age, Ted's brother Gerald took him on outings and excursions, such as camping in the valley at the far end of Redacre. Gerald had developed the pastime of shooting over the hillsides on land whose owners he knew, often getting up at the crack of dawn to do so: "He was already an obsessive pursuer of birds and animals – hunting them, shooting them," remembered Ted. "There were rabbits, crows, and magpies. But he was absolutely alone in it." Shooting wasn't "a common sort of pastime among people he knew. He somehow just invented it himself. My father had no interest in it. Nor any of my relatives. Yet he was totally obsessed by that world." Ted entered that world at quite an early age, remembering that "*from the age of two or three, I lived completely in the world of this fanatic. His hunting was getting up at 4 o'clock every morning to go up the hillside. Sometimes he'd take me with him*" [my italics].¹⁹

With the adventures came Gerald's stories, stories of primitive hunters, clan chiefs and warriors, making for a truly magic experience. In another interview Ted said that his

early memories of *being three and four* are of going off with him, being his retriever. I became completely preoccupied by his world of hunting. He was also a very imaginative fellow; he mythologized his hunting world as North American Indian – paleolithic" [my italics].²⁰

On two occasions they went into Redacre Wood to dig up or raise the ghost of an Ancient Briton allegedly buried there as described in "The Deadfall" and the poem "The Ancient Briton Lay Under His Rock." There are in fact two close contenders for the Briton's gravestone in Redacre, one massive, carved with graffiti near the brook (which Derek remembers, too), and another, smaller one now chucked halfway down the hillside.

Among the events that also stood out in Ted's memory was an outing with Gerald, camping in the 'happy valley,' as they called it, Hollins Valley up Crimsworth Dene – their campsite being a spot which apparently their mother's brothers had already had as a favourite before the First World War. The story "The Deadfall" memorably refers to this event and Ted would later write to Donald Crossley that he had had a dream there which became all his writing.

¹⁹ Ted Hughes and Tom Pero, "So Quickly It's Over," *Wild Steelhead & Salmon*, 5 (Winter 1999), 54.

²⁰ Ted Hughes and Drue Heinz, "The Art of Poetry: LXXI," *The Paris Review*, 37:134 [Spring 1995], 59.

In September 1938, the Hughes' sold their house in Mytholmroyd. Edith Hughes had come into a small inheritance when her mother died, and Ted's parents had bought a newspaper and tobacconist's shop in Main Street in Mexborough, opposite St George's Church. Mexborough was a mining town very different from what they'd known. The children hated it so much that Olwyn remembers crying for a fortnight. Gerald left to work in Devon as assistant gamekeeper for a year, then moving on to do his service in the RAF. The move also ended the friendship between Ted and Derek, who told me: "I was in tears, when he left. I was lost, you know," – and they never saw each other again.

When Ted wrote about his childhood in Mytholmroyd, he frequently referred to it as a crucial time. The loss of that world was traumatic, and I'm sure that memory served in dealing with it all. The valley became a haven, a paradise lost, the pleasures and adventures, the freedom – precious almost beyond compare. Sealing it off, as he called it, it became a source, a refuge, somewhere he could return to and something he could later turn into stories and poems. The powerful link to this childhood world goes right down to the level of language. An interviewer once asked him about the special dialect from where he grew up, the language of West Yorkshire:

Which I don't speak any more really, you see it disappeared somewhere. But writing verse, it's what I hear. And, maybe because it has disappeared and maybe because it isn't the language of English culture, maybe it's enabled me to keep hold of what was associated with it in the beginning. [...] those first things – that I can hang onto in verse, and make something of in verse [...] were sealed off and so stayed out of it, were unaffected – as if they were a different language, I suppose.²¹

In Mexborough, Ted soon enough found new 'secret' places with magic all of their own. The most important for his first few years there was Manor Farm, Old Denaby, where, he remembers, he spent every spare moment of his life between 1939 and 1944. He also mentioned in 1992, that this was a piece of land that he knew better than anywhere on earth.²²

Manor Farm, today a fancy restaurant, lay across the river from Mexborough and became the setting for the stories "The Rain Horse" and "The Harvesting." It was a place where one could roam, shoot an air rifle, stalk animals by the river and in strips of light forest.

²¹ Ted Hughes, Stan Corey and Robyn Routledge, Interview for Lateline, unpublished, ABC (No. 525) 8 July 1976, transcript by Ann Skea.

²² Referred to in Ted Hughes, Box 115-27. Notes on published Works, TS, March 1992. Ted Hughes papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare

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My whole free time, except for after school in the evenings, when I played with kids in town, was getting away to these places for shooting and fishing. [...] I've got diaries that I kept when I was 11 and day after day I'm killing wagtails and robins and wrens and grass snakes – everything that moved. It was a total obsession, worse than Darwin or Audubon.²³

Ted also recalled that on Manor Farm, "I used to trap mice. I had a trapline for mice throughout a big farm. I used to skin these mice and cure the skins. I'd keep them under the lid of my desk at school and sell them for a penny and maybe tuppence for a good one [laughs]." Later he "evolved to gin traps" for "stoats, weasels and water rats – for their skins. This went on until I was 14 or 15. I was obsessed by shooting first, and then gradually fishing came into it. I'd always fished, but gradually the pike fishing took over. That went on really until I went to university."

When Ted was 13 or 14 he met John Wholey through Olwyn (they were in the same class), and John's sister Edna, three years older than Ted. They were the children of the Head Gardener of Crookhill Estate several miles off. Crookhill had a walled garden (now a golf course) of about three acres, with a pond and ancient trees and land of around 100 acres in total. The Head Gardener's house, The Lodge (now demolished), stood by the gate, next to the drive to the main house (torn down for safety reasons). At the time, Crookhill was a terminal tuberculosis hospital. "There were patients within the [main] building and then a row of about 14 wooden chalets and two beds in each chalet, because fresh air is said to be the cure ... The people who came there never went away alive, because it was a terminal place," remembers Edna. "But we used to ... Ted used to shout poetry to them, Shakespeare. To which they used to ...: 'All right lad,' in their broad York ...: 'All right lad! [...] That's fine! Let's hear some more!'"²⁴

Soon, Ted came to Crookhill regularly, often staying over night, sometimes camping out on the estate in a small tent in the summer.

He came on Fridays, from School. My mother used to say: 'Oh, you staying the weekend, then?' 'Yes please.' 'Right, put your things in the ...' – we had a big cupboard on the step – 'Put your things in there and go and do your homework.' And they boys used to: 'Oh well, you know, it's absolutely ideal for fishing at the moment!' They didn't want to do their homework. [...] That was them. He fitted into the family."

Book Library, Emory University. He had apparently returned in 1982, when Manor Farm had become mostly ploughland.

²³ This and the following from Ted Hughes and Tom Pero, "So Quickly It's Over," *Wild Steelhead & Salmon*, 5 (Winter 1999), 54.

²⁴ This and the following quotes of Edna Chilton from an interview with Edna and Joe Chilton, 2 August 2002.

John and Edna's father was always willing to share his knowledge of nature and animals with the children. He was a quiet, kind, but strict man. Edna remembers that he always made sure you saw things that happened around them: "If there were badgers about ... It didn't matter if it was two o'clock in the morning, he would come and quietly wake you up: 'Get dressed, be very quiet,' and take us." She recounts that her father "used to be able to walk without any sound [...] and he taught the boys to do it, and sit down and watch the badgers play." When they came back, they had a hot drink and went to bed. And "every year the frogs came from this pond in Edlington to our pond, and they crossed the drive at about, oh, ten or twelve yards, solid of frogs, and you could hear them, coming across the fields." And her father would make sure the children saw it, likewise the pheasants, and partridges, "when they got chicks, you know. He'd take ... you weren't allowed to touch them or weren't allowed ... he'd take you to watch them, and to see how they were and that sort of thing. He was very good in that way."

Moreover, Edna's and John's father seems to have reinforced a strong sense of responsibility for one's actions, as when Ted once brought an owl to The Lodge: "He had an owl, you know. It was on the road. And I think it had been injured, so he picked it up and brought it up, and dad had some outbuildings, not at The Lodge but at the top of the drive, and they put it in there." And Edna remembers her father saying: "Right. You got this animal – you look after it.' Because that was his philosophy [...] if you did anything like this. And so he had to feed it. Dad said: 'I'll do it while you're at school – when you're here, you ...'" And then, Ted "used to sit and talk to it for hours! [...] as if it was another person! Till John used to ...: 'Oh, come on, let's go fishing!' [...] But he had a great regard for animals, even as a youngster."

On the other hand, the boys tried out all sorts of things. Once they threw a hedgehog into the pond because they had heard that hedgehogs could swim. "I mean that was quite hilarious, really, [...] for two boys to chuck a hedgehog in the lake and then see the poor thing trying to get back to land." Seeing the animal struggle for life, they got quite upset, "got it back and then he took his pullover off and wrapped it in it, took it up to The Lodge – it was an old house and it had a big range [...] – there was this pullover with this very wet hedgehog on the path, being dried. Mum went mad ...!" That was the sort of thing Edna remembers the boys doing.

And they used to catch frogs where the pond is and string them up on the barbed wire [...] all the way round the pond. And if they shot rooks or anything, they got hung on the [wire] ... But then they'd be sorry about it – quite normal, you know – that it wasn't quite the sort of thing to do. Then we used to have a funeral

It was in Mexborough at around the age of eleven that Ted had made his first attempts at writing, and Edna remembers his inclination to exaggerate in order to tell a good story. She also remembers walking with him, asking her opinion of what he'd just come up with: "At fifteen, he was quoting his own poetry." Sometimes, when John wasn't there, he used to say:

'Right. Come on, let's go round the fields.' And, I mean, we were so free and easy then, we were out all day, and [...] we had a bottle of lemonade, and [...] he'd say: 'Listen to this.' I couldn't make head or tail of it. And I used to: 'Ted, I don't know what you're talking about!' 'Arrgghh,' he'd shout, 'arrgghh!,' you see, and then he'd go off at a tangent, you wandering along, and then he'd say: 'Alright, listen to this!' [...]" Sometimes she'd say: "Oh yeah, well that sounds quite nice,' [...] But some of it was ... I could not understand. But he knew what he was ... [after].

Edna also recounts that

once he got that owl he used to write all sorts of things about it. [...] And he would leave them stuck in the [...] post in the shed, in the barn where the owl was. And he used to [...] write bits of poetry and put them in knotholes in trees. He always had a pencil and some paper in his pocket. Always. From being very young. And if he wrote something [I did not understand/like], as I say, he'd get one of my hairgrips out of my hair and stick it in the knothole in the tree.

Now, that I've sketched out parts of that 'ordinary' childhood and youth based on reconstructions from friends and visits to places, let me return to Ted's own writing – even though there are several other such stories worth telling. How did Ted go about writing autobiographical stories? Is it possible to trace the transition between biography and fiction there? Where does biography end and story begin?

Ted's first poem and the draft outline for a short story, "Harvesting," both appeared in the school magazine "The Don and Dearne" in June 1946. "Harvesting" is set on Manor Farm and based on Ted's experiences. In his notes on published works from 1992, he writes: "I often took part in those harvestings – in fact, I rarely missed a field."²⁵ The draft of 1946 outlines the sequence of events of a shooting at a harvest, very accurately observed, and exhibits Ted's gift at expressing action with powerful, gripping words. Yet, it merely contains the basic ingredients to a story, nothing more. Joe Chilton, Edna's husband, explains:

²⁵ Ted Hughes, Box 115-27. Notes on published Works, TS, March 1992. Ted Hughes papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

In those days, if [...] you have a field of corn – [...] you cut it, by machine if necessary, or they used to cut it by horse – you have to have or you should have, half a dozen men round, with guns. Because in the corn is perhaps, oh ..., fifty rabbits! I've known eight foxes in a field of corn, and we got the lot! Or rather the men got the lot, cause I was a boy then.²⁶

Of course, there were economic aspects behind it, with rabbits and hares to eat and to sell, and with the fur to be made into pieces of clothing.

In Ted's draft story, one hare gets away, and we learn that the keeper is secretly stashing away two rabbits. In 1959 Ted rewrote the story, as a spin-off of a series of autobiographical stories about his boyhood that never fully materialized. Now called "The Harvesting," it runs over several pages, much enhanced with detail and with a good pinch of magic to it. At the moment when the protagonist, who is exhibiting signs of sunstroke or heart attack during the story, shoots at the last hare, he turns into a hare himself, wounded, furiously and vainly trying to escape the hounds. This is quite a long stretch from the autobiographical experience – but as opposed to the draft, we suddenly have a good story full of excitement that leaves ample room for the reader to identify with individual characters and/or animals.

Another autobiographical piece set at Manor Farm is "The Rain Horse," written in 1958. Again Ted uses events from memory freely and imaginatively. In the notes that accompanied his sale of manuscripts to Emory University, Atlanta, he clearly differentiates between the biographical background and the fiction it becomes:

The story combines an experience of my Mother's, which was strangely repeated twice in my own life, and an exactly similar [*sic*] experience that my brother had with a mad cow. On each occasion, the animal kept pretending to attack, or really did attack but kept shying off at the last moment. The cow really did attack, demolished several walls, and had to be shot. None of these incidents happened at Manor Farm.²⁷

It doesn't seem too remote, to also link the "Rain Horse" storyline to an experience Ted had while doing his national service, which he wrote about in a letter to Edna. She recounts that he seemed to be very miserable for most of his time in the army, and on that day, "it seemed to be forever raining." He was

²⁶ Joe Chilton, from an interview with Edna and Joe Chilton, 2 August 2002.

²⁷ Ted Hughes, Box 115-27. Notes on published Works, TS, March 1992. Ted Hughes papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

coming back at night from somewhere, and [...] describes going across this field and hearing ... thick fog and he can't see anything and he can hear the bulls' breath behind him. He walked quicker, so they walked quicker, and he ends up galloping towards the ... and throwing himself over the fence!²⁸

But while this is an amusing anecdote one might recount to entertain a circle of friends or family members, it has none of the deeper human drama which Ted infused the published story "The Rain Horse" with. His audience here are not family or friends, but a wider anonymous readership who, I dare say, are less likely to care for a personal anecdote or relate to it.

As a final example of the transition between biography and fiction, let me return to the story "The Deadfall." Ted's manuscripts and notes give a good insight into the kind of struggle that went into the telling of his autobiographical *stories*. In the foreword to *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* he states that "The Deadfall" was written in 1993, when he was asked for a contribution to a collection of ghost stories for children: "By chance, an early experience of my own filled the requirements, and I wrote it out, with a few adjustments to what I remember [...]."²⁹ Simple and straightforward, it seems. But Ted's manuscripts tell a slightly different tale. The published version sets out announcing that it will tell the story how the first-person narrator came by a tiny carved ivory fox in one of the strangest incidents in his life. It then goes on, immediately recounting events of his mother seeing ghosts. In Ted's biography, these events happened when the family was living in Mexborough, and the story gives a hint or two to that location (such as St George's Church lying across the street). The next little sub-story is an account of how the narrator and his brother tried to raise the ghost of an 'Ancient Briton' in a strip of forest (Redacre Wood). It is only then, that Ted gets to the main story about a camping incident in Crimsworth Dene during which the narrator found the ivory fox.

The Archives at Emory hold a batch of typescript and manuscript pages of "The Deadfall," with some details of those "few adjustments." That batch makes clear that we should beware of reading entire stories as 'true' autobiographical narrative and careful when linking his first-person narrators to Ted. But the line between autobiography and fiction is very thin, blurry even.

²⁸ Edna Chilton from an interview with Edna and Joe Chilton, 2 August 2002.

²⁹ Ted Hughes, "Foreword," *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (London: Faber and Faber 1995), ix.

The script begins with Ted telling that his mother often told them about the ghosts she had seen.³⁰ A later addition, scribbled in a gap, is almost identical to the text of the first paragraph of the published version.

In a second batch he seems to abandon that beginning and suddenly sets out to tell his father's strange story. Yet another page titles the story "My Father's Ghost, a story almost true." Here, Ted begins that his father claimed to have never seen a ghost. Ted then starts over again, changes "a ghost" into "a proper ghost," and continues that his father once saw a ghost of some kind. He tells us that his father spoke about how he saw dead men by the thousands in the Great War, that he lived with them for months³¹ – but never a real ghost. He continues that his father nevertheless mentioned seeing a very strange thing which might have been a ghost. Asked by the boy what it was, he would never tell, until one day ... Which is, it seems, the point where all previous versions would converge again – on the story about the camping event and the fox carving. But the draft breaks off here.

The manuscript goes on like this for several pages, beginning, breaking off, searching for connections, circling the thread, telling about music, which the father hears inside him, and that he told him how he first heard it. Then Ted comes back to the beginning about the ivory fox and writes that his father gave it to him and only years later told him how he got it. Then Ted goes on telling how the narrator's father and the father's brother one evening pitched their tent in Crimsworth Dene, just like the narrator and his brother do in the published version of the story.

It doesn't matter much whether that "story almost true" really was an experience Ted's father had, or his mother's brothers, or whether Ted was trying to distance himself from a very personal story in the manuscript. He occasionally did, as when he 'hid' stories that he felt needed telling but were very personal, in full view, so to speak, by publishing them in children's books – like "Orpheus" or "A Solstice."

What matters most here, to me, is that the published first-person narrative of "The Deadfall" is a gripping story. It resounds with the intensity and authenticity of childhood experience. As it is, lifted out of the realm of personal anecdotes, it may connect with the desire of many child and adult readers for

³⁰ This and the following references are based on Ted Hughes, Box 111-16. "The Deadfall," MS. Ted Hughes papers, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library, Emory University.

³¹ Incidentally, if this is a true account, it would mean that we should rethink William Hughes' alleged silence about the war, which is often referred to in books; see also Olwyn's mention of her asking her father to talk about the war, in the first part of this essay above.

experiencing something special, something out of the ordinary in their personal lives, such as seeing ghosts, camping out in a forest at night or sharing an exciting tale.

After all, it was stories Ted wanted to get across, not autobiography, which right until the end of his life he was reluctant to share. As much as we may miss him in person, and as much as we may curiously hanker after knowing more of his personal life – he knew that a good story has the power to live on independently and, as it is, take on a life of its very own. After all, wasn't it Ted who said: "Trust the story, not the storyteller?" Or do I misremember?³²

³² I would like to acknowledge the generous help of (in alphabetical order) Andrew Armitage, Edna and Joe Chilton, Donald Crossley, Olwyn Hughes, Lissa Paul, Frances and Geoff Robinson, Derek Robertshaw, without whom neither my research nor this article would not have been possible.