

# Wolf Masks: The Early Poetry of Ted Hughes<sup>1</sup>

Stan Smith



## I

'It was a violent time'. Thom Gunn's description of the Elizabethan age ('A Mirror for Poets'<sup>2</sup>) could equally be applied to the 1950s. Again and again the poetry of this decade returned to the central theme of violence, yet, constantly, shrank back from engaging with it. Gunn's own poetry, replete with latent aggression, nevertheless strove to contain its smouldering energy in couplets and formal stanzas and histrionic poses ('Even in bed I pose'<sup>3</sup>) as impersonal and self-disciplining as those nazi uniforms and leather-jackets with which his poems abound. The motor-cyclists of 'On the Move'<sup>4</sup> seemed to offer an adequate parallel to his own poetic stance:

In goggles, donned impersonality,  
In gleaming jackets trophied with the dust,  
They strap in doubt—by hiding it, robust—  
And almost hear a meaning in their noise.

Much of the writing of 'The Movement' tried to explore the barbarous hinterland which recent history had shown lay behind the genteel littoral of western civilisation, but most poems had an air of 'donned impersonality' which seemed to brand them as exercises rather than explorations. The doubt was too profound, the revelation of depravity too recent and too raw, to make total candour possible. For many poets, an ostensibly empirical interest in the quotidian became, in fact, a rationale for escapism. Philip Larkin's picturesque evocations of provincial melancholy, Charles Tomlinson's attempt to transmute Constable or Cézanne into verse—their shared concern with the superficialities of topographical or social landscape—indicate a primary failure of nerve summed in the lame argument, in equally lame pentameters, of Donald Davie's apologia, 'Rejoinder to a Critic':

You may be right: 'How can I dare to feel'?  
May be the only question I can pose. . . .  
'Alas, alas, who's injured by my love'?

<sup>1</sup>This article confines itself, by and large, to the two volumes of Hughes' poetry written in the 1950s—*The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), hereafter *H.R. and L.*

<sup>2</sup>*Fighting Terms* (1954).

<sup>3</sup>'Carnal Knowledge', *op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup>*The Sense of Movement* (1957).

And recent history answers : half Japan !  
Not love, but hate ? Well both are versions of  
The 'feeling' that you dare me to. . . . Be dumb !  
Appear concerned only to make it scan !  
How dare we now be anything but numb ?<sup>5</sup>

Robert Lowell christened the period 'the tranquillised fifties';<sup>6</sup> in a now famous article<sup>7</sup> A. Alvarez spoke of the besetting sin of the age as 'the gentility principle', while, in an essay of the same period,<sup>8</sup> Tomlinson himself criticised his contemporaries for squandering the heritage of Modernism and retreating into 'a self-congratulatory parochialism,' singling out Larkin as a special offender. But Tomlinson's early poetry<sup>9</sup> is itself a product of the same general ethos, for all its gestures towards 'the community of European values' and 'the three great post-symbolists', Eliot, Pound and Yeats. Of the poets of the fifties, only a handful dared to be anything more than numb; and of these, Ted Hughes is, perhaps, the most honest in his attempts to come to terms with the restless and uncomprehended violence that continued to fret beneath the surface of an apparently convalescent European sensibility.

What I wish to suggest here is that the characteristic structures of feeling of this anaesthetised poetry of the fifties are founded in the experience of a particular social universe; that, in an obscure, largely unintentional and mediated manner, they fulfilled an ideological function in that universe; and that, while Ted Hughes' poetry shares in the experience, it is pervaded by tensions and intensities which offer the first signs of an upheaval, which, with the political and cultural revolt of the last few years, has erupted into history.

This experience can best be encapsulated, in the phrase coined by Herbert Marcuse, as the experience of a *one-dimensional universe*. The geo-political settlement, conceived at Yalta and Potsdam, brought to birth at Fulton, and confirmed in the Truman Doctrine, seemed to have created a social universe insulated from historical refutation, in which history itself had come to a stop. Nothing in the future, it appeared, could rescind the status quo established and consolidated by the Cold War. In the post-war era which is the subject of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* :

Technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and co-ordination, created forms of life (and of power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system and to defeat or refute all protest in the name of the historical prospects of freedom from toil and domination. Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change—qualitative change which would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive

<sup>5</sup>The same tone is displayed, but often with greater subtlety, throughout *Brides of Reason* (1955) and *A Winter Talent* (1957).

<sup>6</sup>*Life Studies* (1959).

<sup>7</sup>*Beyond the Gentility Principle* (printed as the Introduction to the anthology *The New Poetry* (1962).

<sup>8</sup>'Poetry Today', in *The Modern Age* (1961).

<sup>9</sup>*Seeing is Believing* (1960).

process, new modes of human existence. This containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society.

This closed political universe necessarily entailed, too, a closed emotional universe. Yet, within the contained present, 'new modes of human existence' were felt as pressing possibilities. Since these modes of being found no point of insertion into established reality, they lacked a language and a set of categories that would make sense of them. They manifested themselves, therefore, as a frustrated and aimless violence, without apparent cause or object, irrational incursions into the world of commonsense. In Ted Hughes' poetry this contradiction, between the established rationality of the status quo, and the nameless and undefined potentialities latent but deadlocked within it, finds its objective correlative in strange, atavistic fantasies of animal intensity. And these fantasies burn their way through the fabric of everyday experience with memories of an older and more terrifying existence. For, as Marcuse suggests :

This ambiguous situation involves a still more fundamental ambiguity. [We] vacillate . . . between two contradictory hypotheses : (1) that advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future ; (2) that forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society. . . .

Both tendencies are there, side by side—and even the one in the other. Both tendencies coexist in the poetry of Ted Hughes : it derives its underlying tensions from the explosive ambiguity of the contradiction, at that precise juncture in the evolution of post-war society ; and, too, it records the first stages in the disintegration of that unstable equilibrium.

## II

The universe of Hughes' 'Pibroch' (first collected in *The New Poetry* (1962)) is mindless and elemental, a barren landscape of sea and rock, endlessly swept by the wind. This is a meaningless world, locked in its own facticity :

The sea cries with its meaningless voice,  
Treating alike its dead and its living,  
Probably bored with the appearance of heaven  
After so many millions of nights without sleep,  
Without purpose, without self-deception.

Heaven, the ideal, is simply an appearance, a frame of stars set forever beyond reach. The world remains imprisoned within itself, beyond surpassing, going nowhere :

Stone likewise. A pebble is imprisoned  
Like nothing in the Universe.  
Created for black sleep. Or growing  
Conscious of the sun's red spot occasionally,  
Then dreaming it is the foetus of God.

The absurd delusion is clearly in some way a parody of human pretensions, as 'meaning' and 'purpose' in the first stanza are equated with self-deception—arbitrary human impositions on a vacuity which precedes rationalisation.

This is, explicitly, a personal vision of a specific landscape; but it aspires to the authority of a more ultimate kind of statement. What Hughes offers here is a *metaphysical* vision, of a *cosmic* order arrested in the perpetual moment, incapable of qualitative change. And yet this apparently metaphysical vision has a more immediate and relative, social significance.

The poem claims to make an inclusive statement on the human condition: but it is most significant in its omissions. Organic life is almost totally absent from this landscape, and that which intrudes is atypical in its sterile futility:

Drinking the sea and eating the rock  
A tree struggles to make leaves—  
An old woman fallen from space  
Unprepared for these conditions.  
She hangs on, because her mind's gone completely.

Insofar as there is change, it is degeneration, the slow erosion of whatever life, and consciousness, remain stubbornly hanging on.

The exclusion of organic life is no accident. For to admit its presence would be to introduce a different conception of nature: of growth, exfoliation, fecundity, of a process in which the material world constantly transcends itself, moving beyond its always temporary present into new forms and futures. Time here is merely an inert perpetuation of the present. A historical, relative experience of social deadlock has been transposed into a mythic dimension beyond human agency. To conceive of the deadlock in such cosmic, and therefore apolitical, terms, is to acquiesce in its totality:

Minute after minute, aeon after aeon,  
Nothing lets up or develops.  
And this is neither a bad variant or a tryout.  
This is where the staring angels go through.  
This is where all the stars bow down.

Any aspiration to grasp a destiny beyond the actual is dismissed as the ludicrous rebellion of obtuse stone or imbecilic tree. Yet a little life and consciousness persist, stirring feebly in the black sleep of a lobotomised reality.

The essentially totalitarian nature of this universe is communicated, in 'Hawk Roosting' (*L.*), through the figure of the arrogant and ruthless hawk which is a recurrent image in Hughes' poetry. The bird, like some prime mover, surveys a landscape which it sees as a mere extension of its own egocentric life. The bird's all-powerful and all-seeing eye establishes it as a type of the vigilant authoritarian State of Orwell's *1984*, which allows its members no privacy or autonomy. Yet the intensity of this vision suggests that it is a projection, not of some future

and imaginary society, but of that paranoia which is the normal condition of the bourgeois soul here and now, in our own apparently 'open' societies :

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.  
Inaction, no falsifying dream  
Between my hooked head and hooked feet :  
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees !  
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray  
Are of advantage to me ;  
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.  
It took the whole of Creation  
To produce my foot, my each feather :  
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly—  
I kill where I please because it is all mine. . . .

This, the ultimate heir of Creation, in whom Creation has come to rest, is the epitome of simple, unreflective power, confident in its own supremacy and confirmed in its confidence, it seems, by the whole weight of an amoral, meritocratic universe which acknowledges the logic of success alone :

No arguments assert my right :  
The sun is behind me.  
Nothing has changed since I began.  
My eye has permitted no change.  
I am going to keep things like this.

Here the perpetuation of the status quo is explicitly identified as an act of will, vindicated by force. But, again, the incarnation of this deadlock in the figure of the hawk takes it beyond the realm of relative human events into that of an inexorable nature. The bird's 'natural right' is, it seems, ratified by the sun itself, which is behind it both literally and figuratively. By converting conjunctural history into the absolute 'Creation' the poem precludes the possibility of refutation.

There seems to be a fundamental contradiction between the function of the hawk image here and its role in the title poem of Hughes' first collection of verse, *The Hawk in the Rain*. Whereas in 'Hawk Roosting' the mastery of the bird lies in its identification with the rapacious reality which it embodies, in 'The Hawk in the Rain' the bird seems set in opposition to this reality, as an image of transcending freedom. The poem is structured around a polarity of images, of eye and mouth, which focuses the central contradiction of Hughes' emotional universe. While the 'earth's mouth' seeks to reabsorb him back into the empiric present, the floundering individual strains after the freedom symbolised by the apparently effortless achievement of the hawk :

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up  
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,  
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle  
With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.

The self struggles to break free from its corporal involution in a one-dimensional reality for which the glutinous physicality of the mud is an adequate symbol. Each moment of action is bought dearly with every ounce of strength from a material reality which spells extinction to the spirit, has the dogged persistence of death itself, and will one day succeed in reappropriating (in the devouring grave) the spirit's futile rebellion.

But now, though this hawk too is said to 'hold all creation', the 'still eye' of the bird seems to suggest the spirit's possible independence from the devouring earth, in its capacity to contain and totalise in vision the landscape from which it has abstracted itself. The transcending eye encompasses its object without consuming it: and, through distance, it insulates itself from engulfment by the universe of which it is an object. Vision and detachment seem to be power, an achieved mastery of stillness in the heart of the flux.

To the self below, incapable of a vision which sees life steady and sees it whole, a 'morsel in the earth's mouth', such poise can seem mere illusion. For, at ground level, the eye is caught up in the immediate violence of a wind that tolerates no bystanding, and is felt with a kinetic, physical urgency:

His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,  
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.  
While banging wind kills these stubborn hedges,

Thumbs my eyes, throws my breath, tackles my heart,  
And rain hacks my head to the bone, the hawk hangs  
The diamond point of will that polestars  
The sea drowner's endurance: and I

Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting  
Morsel in the earth's mouth, strain towards the master-  
Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still.

There is an ironic dimension to 'Hawk Roosting' lacking in 'The Hawk in the Rain'. The bird's implicit hubris in the former suggests the unacknowledged, untested limits of its power, limits which are confirmed in the last stanza of 'The Hawk in the Rain'. For the latter is no more really detached from the violence and oppression of the given than the despotic hawk of the former poem. The mastery of 'Hawk Roosting' resides in its eye; we see it exercised only in fantasy (lines 4 and 13). So, for 'The Hawk in the Rain', freedom is purely contemplative, a momentary and delusory abstraction soon to be destroyed by the loss of inner power and the pull of gravity:

That may be in his own time meets the weather  
Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down  
Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,  
The horizon trap him; the round angelic eye  
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land.

Both hawks assume the freedom of total mastery. But they are free only to identify with the given, the achieved order of things. Though its naive solipsism leads 'The Hawk in the Rain' to see the whole world arranged around itself (so that it's the weather that is 'coming the wrong way', the air which 'falls from his eye', the shires that 'crash on him'), the bird's 'suffering' is not that of a tolerant but masterful martyr but that of a helpless victim. The eyes closed in self-satisfaction in 'Hawk Roosting' are really shut in ignorance—a solipsistic blindness revealed in the bird's readiness to assume that the objective rotation of the planet is a product of its subjective thought :

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly.

Each is equally dependent on that Creation it believes it controls. The 'feet locked on the rough bark' may suggest the despot's grasp but in fact disclose the slave's chains. The meritocratic free spirit is the more securely enslaved by its ignorance of its dependence.

One of the few poems by Hughes which has an explicit political reference seems to justify this interpretation. In 'A Woman Unconscious' (*L.*), history is stalemated, unable to move forward, before the prospect of nuclear holocaust which has eliminated the very possibility of qualitative social change :

Russia and America circle each other;  
Threats nudge an act that were without doubt  
A melting of the mould in the mother,  
Stones melting about the root. . . .

Yet flitting thought . . .

Shies from the world-cancelling black  
Of its playing shadow : it has learned  
That there's no trusting (trusting to luck)  
Dates when the world's due to be burned;

That the future's no calamitous change  
But a malingering of now,  
Histories, towns, faces that no  
Malice or accident much derange.

In its transformation into a mere 'malingering of now' history fragments into innumerable private 'histories', particularised towns and faces that, for all their surface bustle, remain fundamentally unchanged by whatever succession of accidents befalls them. Human agency is stalemated : the self is no more than a 'flitting thought' across the face of an alien and reified society. Russia and America, in all their swarm-

ing human plenitude, are reduced to the falsely concrete and diminished image of two animals in a fight. History again crystallises to instinct. And yet the 'world-cancelling black' is itself the product of human agency, the 'playing shadow' cast by that ephemeral consciousness which flits across the face of history. In this separation of instrument from will lies an alienation whose grotesque disproportion is revealed in that offhand parenthesis, '(trusting to luck)' and in the very ability to ask the rhetorical question with which the poem concludes :

And though bomb be matched against bomb,  
Though all mankind wince out and nothing endure—  
Earth gone in an instant flare—  
Did a lesser death come

Onto the white hospital bed  
Where one, numb beyond her last of sense,  
Closed her eyes on the world's evidence  
And into pillows sank her head.

What is out there, in the meaningless devalued world, haunted by the disabling prospect of its own annihilation, is unimaginable and illusory, compared with the felt intensity of personal life. Within this precarious and always potentially catastrophic stalemate, perspective shifts, necessarily, from the global to the personal, for it is only in personal terms, now, that time itself can unfold. And so the real, individual death is more meaningful, more tragic, than the possibility of a collective death forever deferred into a hypothetical and merely fantastic future. Reality is focussed here, in the immediate moment of joy and pain. And yet it is here too, in the immediacy of personal suffering, that the consequences of this impasse are most harrowing, in Hughes' poetry, and, ultimately, most destructive.

Hughes' poems reach out repeatedly to ambiguous images of the tension between boundless inner potency and an external limitation. The first two stanzas of 'The Jaguar' (*H.R.*) describe a zoo in which time itself seems incarcerated, where animal vitality has rotted in its own inertia. The animals are all, in a sense, redundant—like the boa-constrictor 'coiled like a fossil'—merely decorative appendages to a human world, stripped of the self-defining authenticity of instinct. They have become creatures in a bestiary, for

It might be painted on a nursery wall.

But the spectators, too, share in the futility of the beasts : there is no basic distinction between the strutting parrots and the strolling crowds from whom, 'like cheap tarts', they solicit nuts, or between the apes adoring their fleas and the spectators equally seeking distraction in the admiration of the trivial. One creature alone haunts the vacuous present with a lost and alien intensity :

. . . the crowd stands, stares, mesmerised,  
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged  
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes



On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—  
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,  
By the bang of the blood in the brain deaf the ear—  
He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell :  
His stride is wildernesses of freedom :  
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel,  
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

### III

There is, for the jaguar, no gulf between intention and act : all meaning is incarnate here and now, in the living moment. For the crowd, transcendence is only the inner wilderness of daydream. But the animal's instinctual unity of being acknowledges no gap between inner and outer : its very stride is 'wildernesses of freedom' (in contrast to the restless, forever dissatisfied running of the crowd after new distractions). Yet the paradox of the last line catches the ambivalence of this freedom which depends, for its validity, on the blunting of discrimination brought about by the intensity of the energy released. Instinct is deaf and blind, intoxicated by its own magnificence. And this intensity is in some way potentially self-destructive : the eyes burn like fuses to a powder-keg.

'Macaw and Little Miss' (*H.R.*) makes transparent the symbolic function of caged animals in Hughes' poetry. The poem shudders with a suppressed smouldering energy like that of the bird it describes. The language itself is dense, clustered and stubborn; unfolding slowly and painfully, as if reluctant or incapable of reaching any clear consummation, and with a stifling inertia which duplicates the suffocation of the bird which can only endure but not realise its own diabolical intensity :

In a cage of wire-ribs  
The size of a man's head, the macaw bristles in a staring  
Combustion, suffers the stoking devils of his eyes.

A sentence whose main verb ('hangs') occurs within a line of its beginning nevertheless drags out through the rest of this and another stanza, in a seemingly endless crescendo of grotesque hyperbolic similes which clashes absurdly with the fading gentility of the setting ('the old lady's parlour'), and reaches its consummation in a spectacle of some weird cosmic convulsion which is itself subverted by the final diminishing image of puerile sadism :

. . . he hangs as in clear flames,  
Like a torturer's iron instrument preparing  
With dense slow shuddering of greens, yellows, blues,  
Crimsoning into the barbs :

Or like the smouldering head that hung  
In Killdevil's brass kitchen, in irons, who had been  
Volcano swearing to vomit the world away in black ash,

And would, one day; or a fugitive aristocrat  
From some thunderous mythological hierarchy, caught  
By a little boy with a crust and a bent pin  
Or snare of horsehair set for a song-thrush,  
And put in a cage to sing.

The act of petty vindictiveness which rounds off the whole cycle is not gratuitous. It finds a parallel in the teasing cruelty of the old woman's grand-daughter, in a way which explains the apparently excessive emotion with which the analogies invest the macaw. The girl is herself possessed by 'stoking devils' whose incinerating passions, finding no legitimate outlet, turn back upon her in concupiscent fantasies of violation totally at odds with her genteel context and innocent demeanour. She is haunted by visions of a desired yet terrifying catharsis which would be at once release and punishment :

. . . The girl calls him 'Poor Polly', pokes fun.  
'Jolly Mop'. But lies under every full moon,  
The spun glass of her body bared and so gleaming-still  
Her brimming eyes do not tremble or spill  
The dream where the warrior comes, lightning and iron,  
Smashing and burning and rending towards her loin :  
Deep into her pillow her silence pleads.

The cajoling tenderness of her play with the macaw has a latent sexual ferocity. She caresses the bird only to frustrate its needs, as hers, too, are baffled :

. . . she cajoles, and rocks him gently.  
She caresses, whispers kisses. The blue lids stay shut.  
She strikes the cage in a tantrum and swirls out :  
Instantly beak, wings, talons crash  
The bars in conflagration and frenzy,  
And his shriek shakes the house.

Identity is a carefully sustained equilibrium of inner and outer pressures (the unspilled brimming), in which the self learns to accommodate its boundless possibilities to externally imposed norms and denials. Yet it is an equilibrium achieved only at great and inhuman cost in repression and sublimation. And should that precarious balance be upset, the whole house can be shaken in the conflagration. The pathological yearnings of the girl are the inner consequences of that one-dimensionality whose suffocating sterility (even the aspidistra 'succumbs/To the musk of faded velvet') turns the unfulfilled instincts back upon themselves, in an orgy of imagined self-chastisement. Yet, in such a universe, spontaneity would open the way to a new apocalypse, threatening the house of order and civilisation with a return of that chaos spoken of in 'Famous Post' (*H.R.*) where 'half the world still burned'. What Hughes embodies, here, is the lived acknowledgement of that impasse Davie defined abstractly : 'How dare we now be anything but numb?'

## IV

Hughes' poems seem intensely personal in their febrile energy; yet, on examination, they exhibit a striking impersonality. Repeatedly, an inner urgency is mediated through analogues of animal life which distance the speaker from too intimate an involvement in the experience he portrays. In many of the poems, the speaker seems hardly to have an existence separate from his articulation: often he seems to be speaking out of the very awareness of the creature he depicts, and the language has the harsh, tactile immediacy, the muscular density, of the animal it defines. Yet these bestiaries are never merely means of contrasting animal spontaneity with human apathy. His animals are not usually simple expressions of unalloyed instinctual *joie-de-vivre*. Most of them are in fact deeply ambiguous creatures, poised between two worlds: voracious carnivores in suburban zoos, or, like 'Esther's Tomcat' (*L.*), moving from the everyday, domestic world into a night which is as old as time, and as dark. And, recurrently, the retreat into instinct is associated by Hughes with a return to a feudal ethos of cruelty, superstition, and half-barbarous grandeur in speech and gesture.

'An Otter' (*L.*) is one such creature, whose amphibious nature ('neither fish nor beast') expresses a deep ambivalence in the self. Here, too, the world of primary instinctual awareness is endowed with an atavistic mystery: the otter

Brings the legend of himself  
From before wars or burials. . . .

Yet it is a creature that belongs nowhere, 'Crying without answer' in the night, and its return to the water, fleeing the humans who fear and persecute it, is also a search for a lost world of being:

Of neither water nor land. Seeking

Some world lost when first he dived, that he cannot come at since.

So that the animal itself, as so frequently in Hughes' poems, is invested with the nostalgia that it symbolises. Indeed, it's this which seems the cause of its persecutions. It is feared because it is the symbol of a lost and elusive human identity, forever hounded by the guardians of consciousness, of the super-ego, who would reduce it to 'nothing at all,/To this long pelt over the back of a chair', and evading pursuit by re-immersing itself in the dark stream:

The air  
Circling the globe, tainted and necessary,  
Mingling tobacco-smoke, hounds and parsley,  
Comes carefully to the sunk lungs.  
So the self under the eye lies,  
Attendant and withdrawn.

This recurrent association of animal instinct with nostalgia for a *historically* lost human world, whether feudal or primordial, suggests the glimmering recognition that the dispossession of the self is not a

metaphysical condition. These creatures, in their ambivalence, reflect back to man his own ambiguity, poised, the becalmed master-fulcrum of violence, between two dimensions of being, as the plant in 'To Paint a Water-Lily' (*L.*), lies at the intersection of air and water, 'The two minds of this lady', 'still/As a painting' yet 'nudged [at] her root' by the 'Prehistoric bedragonned times'. 'Pike' (*L.*) is another such image of the ahistoric unconscious waiting its moment to return from the 'Stilled legendary depths' of a pond 'as deep as England' :

It held

Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old  
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished  
With the hair frozen on my head  
For what might move, for what eye might move.  
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods  
Frail on my ear against the dream  
Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,  
That rose slowly towards me, watching.

This is no ordinary fish, but, clearly, a symbol of some archaic modality of being 'so immense and old' the rational self shrinks back from inviting it into vision, into contemplation. And yet, at the same time, the murderous fascination is irresistible. What's more, it is, ultimately, the watcher, not the watched.

When Hughes attempts to deal with human violence directly, he seems impelled to distance himself by writing of fictional or legendary or historically symbolic others, 'Fallgrief', 'The Reverend Skinner', 'A Misanthrope', 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot', 'The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar' (*H.R.*). When a personal relationship is involved, it is almost always mediated, as if direct confrontation might invite the collapse of the self's carefully nurtured stability. In 'Six Young Men' (*H.R.*), even the faded photograph of six war-victims, their smiles 'Forty years rotting into soil', has the capacity to unnerve the speaker with an emotion which can hardly be borne, and which rises from depths beyond history :

That man's not more alive whom you confront  
And shake by the hand, see hale, hear speak aloud,  
Than any of these six celluloid smiles are,  
Nor prehistoric or fabulous beast more dead;  
No thought so vivid as their smoking blood :  
To regard this photograph might well dement,  
Such contradictory permanent horrors here  
Smile from the single exposure and shoulder out  
One's own body from its instant and heat.

The intuition of 'some universal cataclysm' revealed in particular casualties, like those bodies piled into graves in 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers'

(*H.R.*), is a 'Moment that could annihilate a watcher'. It is for this reason that Hughes so rarely writes directly of personal relationships. Any outgoing of the self to others simultaneously exposes it and adds new and unknown factors to its precarious equipoise. For 'The Dove Breeder' (*H.R.*) 'Love struck into his life/Like a hawk into a dovecote'. 'Parlour Piece' (*L.*) admits this, and the very admission has to be itself doubly distanced: by the arch title, and by the use of the third person plural which endows it with a specious objectivity. It is because love is so dangerous that it can be defined only by the conventional imagery of fire and flood, and must be deliberately constrained ('chaperoned') by the banality of its setting. For the personal collapse would seem to have immediately apocalyptic consequences. Emotion is anti-social, anarchic:

With love so like fire they dared not  
Let it out into strawy small talk;  
With love so like a flood they dared not  
Let out a trickle lest the whole crack,

These two sat speechlessly:  
Pale cool tea in tea-cups chaperoned  
Stillness, silence, the eyes  
Where fire and flood strained.

Hughes is certainly obsessed by violence, but his concern seems to be to propitiate, rather than celebrate it. And yet, simultaneously, he is attracted to the ferocity he abhors: it strikes a responsive chord in the self. In 'February' (*L.*) the ambivalence at the core of Hughes' work is acknowledged. An unidentified 'he', clearly the poet, seeks desperately to evade the persecuting fantasies aroused by a remembered photograph of 'the hairless, knuckled feet/Of the last wolf killed in Britain':

These feet, deprived  
Disdaining all that are caged, or storied, or pictured  
Through and throughout the true world search  
For the vanished head, for the world  
  
Vanished with the head, the teeth, the quick eyes—  
Now, lest they choose his head,  
Under severe moons he sits making  
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world.

Hughes' own poems are wolf-masks, with which he seeks to placate the avenging spirit, denied fulfilment in a world which preserves its memory only as photographic trophies. The title of his second book of poems, *Lupercal*, alludes to the Roman ceremony, in February, which sought to ensure the fertility of the flocks by making placatory sacrifices to the wolf, to win him over to protection rather than pillage. Ironically, the poet is pursued because he himself first started to search after a lost vision, for the 'vanished head, for the world/Vanished with the head'. His own nostalgia has summoned up these greedy revenants. Ultimately, it is a nostalgia for the future, not the past.