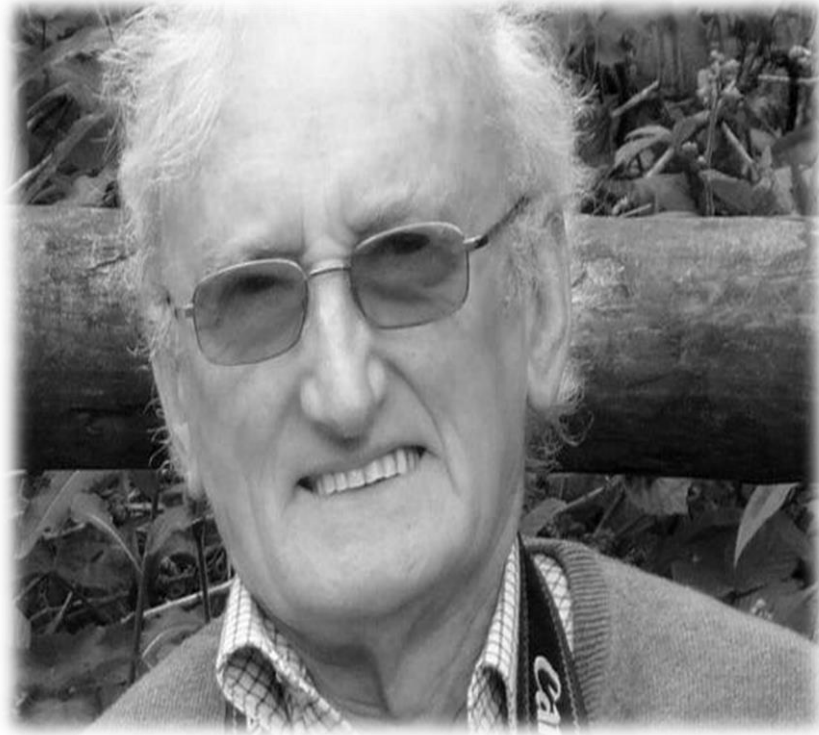


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A Note on Ted Hughes and Jonathan Swift

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Ted Hughes, three months before he died, when he had completed the huge project that became *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992) and the two long original essays in the collected prose of *Winter Pollen* (1994), complained that he had spent too much time writing prose. He even believed that this had somehow destroyed his immune system (*Letters* 719). He wrote that, avoiding the issue of engaging with the material in what became *Birthday Letters*, he 'took refuge in prose' (ibid). Certainly his major poetry collections were behind him (with *River* in 1983). He described his late absorption in prose with a reference to an image from an iconic, not to say mythologised, moment from his days as a Cambridge undergraduate: '5or 6 years nothing but prose – nothing but burning the foxes' (ibid). In his famous record of a dream he was writing his weekly essay on the English course, this time on Samuel Jonson, and a fox had appeared with burnt paws which he planted on the page and said 'You are destroying us' (see *Winter Pollen* pp. 8-9). Hughes switched, as was actually not uncommon amongst English students, to Archaeology and Anthropology for his final year.¹

So it is something of a surprise to find in the *Letters of Ted Hughes* (20) a letter addressed to his older sister, Olwyn, (who dated it 1952 for the publication of *Letters*) from the Cambridge student that encourages the reading of the prose of Swift as an aid to improving one's own prose writing: 'Swift is the only stylist.' At this time Hughes was very interested in establishing practices or disciplines that were helpful to the writing process. His advice in later letters to his own children at school were to recommend similar suggestions for disciplines or exercises. At Cambridge he established a routine of rising early to read from Chaucer and Shakespeare before beginning his day. Later in life he advocated learning passages of great writing by heart (as in his anthology *By Heart*, 1997). Ironically, this letter is, perhaps, a brilliant example of the early prose of Ted Hughes, conveying insight, enthusiasm and originality of expression. Neil Roberts, noting that in the Emory archive there is also evidence of Hughes' interest in Blake's prose in 'An Island in the Moon', has written, 'There may be a case for arguing that one reason why his poetry didn't advance at Cambridge is that he was more interested in writing prose' (email to TG, 17 Jan 2012).

Hughes did not name any specific prose work in this letter but *Gulliver's Travels* is the most obvious candidate, and, by the time his library was sold to Emory, Hughes owned at least three different editions: 1939 (Macmillan, edited by F.E. Budd), 1947 (Hamish Hamilton), and 1949 (Oxford University Press). The last also included *A Tale of a Tub* and *Battle of the Books*. However, as an English undergraduate, he was presumably aware of

¹ See Neil Roberts, 'Ted Hughes and Cambridge' in Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford (eds), *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 19.

the multi-volume series of Swift's prose works that Herbert Davis, the Reader in Bibliography and Textual Criticism at Oxford, had been editing since the 1930s. By the time of Hughes's graduation in 1954, eight of the eventual fourteen volumes had been published, including *Gulliver, Tale, The Drapier's Letters*, and all of Swift's English political writings. (*A Modest Proposal*—which Hughes later identified as essential reading—had to wait until Davis's edition of *Irish Tracts 1728–33* which appeared in 1955.)² Hughes would have had access to Harold Williams's 1937 important edition of the poems and may too have been tempted by *Journal to Stella*, Swift's intimate correspondence with two young women, which Williams had published in 1948.

Swift's great champion in Cambridge was, of course, F.R. Leavis who opened his famous 1934 *Scrutiny* essay on Swift's irony with the declaration that 'Swift is a great English writer' (which presumably came as a bit of a surprise to those on the other side of the Irish Sea). Hughes may have been influenced by this essay, in its recommendation that those seeking Swift's most 'critical' or 'intellectual' uses of irony should look to his 'pamphleteering essays', such as *Argument against abolishing Christianity* and *Modest Proposal*; however, Hughes's claim that Swift had a talent for 'clarity[,] simplicity and power' is not one echoed by Leavis here.

Actually the 'two excerpts' of the published letter to Olwyn is a transcript of all that remains (as the footnote to this page of the *Letters* explains) of the letter to Olwyn in the Emory archive (MSS 980, Box 1, FF2). It is a scrap of blue paper, torn at the top, written in holograph in blue ink. The second paragraph is written on the verso of the paper and its opening two sentences are omitted from the *Letters*. They are: 'The feeling is to bury the sentence in you, then bring it out, as if you were thinking it yourself. This, besides acquiring a style, is about the most stimulating exercise I know, but you have to do it intensely.'

Olwyn Hughes has recently written about these two paragraphs:

'I have always thought the two paras on Swift were a golden moment in Ted's letters to me. This happened obviously from some mention that I was thinking of writing a novel – possibly around publication of Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse* that (deceptively) seemed so simple and easy to write. (I've only the haziest memory of this and never actually tried to write a novel.) Curiously I read recently that Virginia Woolf was in the habit of writing out passages of Swift before settling down to write.' (letter to TG, 6 Jan 2012)

At the top of the Emory letter Olwyn has written 'early 1950s'. Since Olwyn has more recently pointed out that Sagan's novel was published in France in 1954, she now believes that this is a more accurate date for this letter from Cambridge, in the year of Hughes's graduation (letter to TG, 21 Feb 2012).

In the Spring semester of 1958 Hughes was teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, a class of eight Creative Writing students and

² We cannot know whether the poem titled 'A Modest Proposal', with its rather startling first two lines, may, or may not, have been in the half of the poems that would go into *The Hawk in The Rain* already completed when Hughes met Plath, as Hughes told Sagar: Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006): 53.

here he put into practice the techniques of learning directly from Swift's prose that he had earlier recommended to Olwyn: 'The way I taught grammar was to write a fairly simple but not too simple sentence from Swift on the board, and had them write five sentences copying the structure etc exactly, but with different subject & words. Quite dumb people do this very easily, and the example goes like magic through all their writing – if you do it regularly. This is the only successful method of teaching grammar I've used' (*Letters* 120). One might be tempted to speculate on whether Hughes's sense of 'the divine state' of animals was influenced by Swift and especially *Gulliver's Travels*. In *The Lives of Animals* (London: Profile Books, 1999) J.M. Coetzee makes the connection and offers through his protagonist, Elizabeth Costello, an interesting discussion on rationality and the hierarchy of the divine ('gods, beasts, and men') by examining Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* and the case of the Houyhnhms:

On the one hand you have the Yahoos, who are associated with raw meat, the smell of excrement, and what we used to call bestiality. On the other you have the Houyhnhms, who are associated with grass, sweet smells, and the rational ordering of the passions. In between you have Gulliver, who wants to be a Houyhnhm but knows secretly that he is a Yahoo. All of that is perfectly clear. As with 'A Modest Proposal,' the question is, what do we make of it?

One observation. The horses expel Gulliver. Their ostensible reason is that he does not meet the standard of rationality. The real reason is that he does not look like a horse, but something else: a dressed-up Yahoo, in fact. So: the standard of reason that has been applied by carnivorous bipeds to justify a special status for themselves can equally be applied by herbivorous quadrupeds.

The standard of reason. *Gulliver's Travels* seems to me to operate within the three-part Aristotelian division of gods, beasts, and men. As long as one tries to fit the three actors into just two categories — which are the beasts, which are the men? — one can't make sense of the fable. Nor can the Houyhnhms. The Houyhnhms are gods of a kind, cold, Apollonian. The test they apply to Gulliver is: Is he a god or a beast? They feel it is the appropriate test. We, instinctively, don't. (96-7)

The Houyhnhms are depicted by Swift as 'divine' noble vegetarian horse-like creatures who rule the savage, meat-eating man-like Yahoos. Lemuel Gulliver is placed somewhere in between. Finally the horses expel Gulliver apparently because he does not meet the required standards of rationality, but in reality because he is not one of them. The 'savage indignation' behind Swift's satires stems from his resentment of man's corruption and evil nature and the difference between what man could be *if* he rose to the full height of humanity. Hughes 'divine animal state' appears to be very close to that of Swift. Humans, like Gulliver, do not have the same naked rational beauty as the horses, and throughout history, pushed by our irrational thoughts and unfounded acts we have enslaved others and become, like Gulliver, simply subequine primates. As Hughes says,

The animals, who were created exactly as they are by this Creation, and have never been detached from it, are therefore in a state of 'bliss' – they live a divine life in a divine world. They live in perpetual 'Samadhi', and have never fallen from it into ego-consciousness, into the acculturating, detached cerebration which removes us from it – separates us from the 'bliss' of our animal/spiritual being, & from the 'divine' world in which we ought to be living, but cannot even become aware of except under special conditions, for short spells. (*Letters* 580)

Once humans have lost that divine state, for Hughes shamanism is the only way of regaining that alienated consciousness and recuperating the lost animal/spiritual state:

Shamanism appeared (the man in the guise of a divine animal, or inspired by a divine animal or a Queen of the animals) as a spontaneous collapse of the cultural ego – in some individual – and a simultaneous 'organised' internal plunge back into the animal/spiritual consciousness that had been lost. (*Letters* 581)

In *The Paris Review* interview with Drue Heinz Hughes said that all the forms of natural life were 'emissaries from the underworld'. Asked why he chose to 'speak through animals so often' he replied,

I suppose, because they were there at the beginning. Like parents. Since I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about them more or less, they became a language –a symbolic language which is also the language of my whole life. It was ... part of the machinery of my mind from the beginning. They are a way of connecting all my deepest feelings together. So, when I look for, or get hold of a feeling of that kind, it tends to bring up the image of an animal or animals simply because that's the deepest, earliest language that my imagination learned. (*The Paris Review*, No 134, 1995, 81)

It is usually thought that a phrase like 'the deepest, earliest language that my imagination learned' would refer to folktales and the Yorkshire dialect. But it seems that at Cambridge Hughes actually attempted to school his prose style after the manner of Swift. If animals provided the symbolic language of the young Hughes, Swift offered a machinery for the prose expression of his mind. And if one thinks of the grammar of many of the poems in the first two collections, there is a clear facility for sustaining an extended metaphor within the machinery of a long sentence that may also have benefitted from prose imitations of the elegant sentence structures of Swift.