With the exception of a largely uncritical account of Carl Jung as founding father of imaginal psychology, relatively little attention has been paid to assessing the contribution of Western cultural figures whose voices have been hailed as shamanic. (1) This could, of course, be because the Tungusic term shaman (pronounced shamarn, and now incorporated as a loan word in many languages) is often invoked loosely. However, discussion of a shamanistic element in the poetry of Ted Hughes relates substantively to his long standing beliefs, practices, and commitments. Fifty years after Hughes reviewed Mircea Eliade's landmark text Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, fascination with shamanism shows little sign of abating. (2) We, in the postmodern West, now have ready access to discussions of the complexity and diversity of both traditional and neo-shamanic practices, debates about authenticity and appropriation in relation to the latter and critical commentary on leading theorists and practitioners in the field. (3)

Ted Hughes would have been intrigued by the Graham Harvey's influential promulgation of 'new' animism. Harvey argues that we now need a functional definition of 'shaman' that specifies the roles a shaman plays within animist communities. When Seamus Heaney responded to Hughes's appointment as Poet Laureate by proclaiming him 'shaman of the
tribe', he argued that his friend's role would be to put an English audience 'in vital imaginative contact with the geological, botanical, historical, and legendary reality of England itself'.(4) My intention here, then, is to re-consider the sober-suited laureate, and his younger selves, as precursors of today's multifariously be-cloaked, be-feathered, and sometimes multi-qualified neo-Shamans, review his shamanistic practice – and its critical reception – in relation to the poetry, and argue for his continuing relevance to contemporary animism. In the light of recent critiques of Eliade, I also want to consider whether – given the notorious difficulty of delineating shamanism, and that the term has become so freighted with unhelpful associations – Ted Hughes's practice, and the poetry forged from it, might more helpfully and accurately be described as animistic.

Reclaiming Animism

In 1871 Edward Tylor formulated animism as 'the belief in souls or spirits', a religious category error typical of childlike 'primitive' peoples, but also definitive of religion per se, that would be eradicated by the advance of scientific rationality.(5) New Animism draws upon a newly respectful postcolonial and post-Cartesian ethnography in order to reconceptualise animism in terms of relational (or personalist) epistemology. The work of Irving Hallowell, who wrote about the Ojibwe communities of the Berens River in South Central Canada between the wars, has been pivotal to this project. Hallowell coined the term other-than-human-persons in order to convey his Ojibwe informants' sense of sharing the world with a wide range of animate beings. Non-human animals, plants, rivers, clouds, stones, and ancestors, were regarded as persons, insofar as they showed a propensity to communicate and relate.(6) Harvey writes 'Animists live in […] a community of persons all of whom are capable of relationship, communication, agency, and desire. There is no mute or inert “nature” but only the many competing conversations of a multi-species cultural community'.(7) Within such communities shamans may work as specialist mediators, not least where hunter gatherers need to kill and eat other-than-human-people. This new paradigm has attracted considerable support, but the term animism has also been valued in the 'old' etymological sense of referring to an en-souled world (from the Latin anima, soul, air, breath) by, for instance, the archetypal psychologist James Hillman, who, like Hughes, was influenced by neo-Platonism. I have argued elsewhere for a postmodern hybrid conception of animism that combines both kinds of understanding.(8) Since both Hughes and his early critics relied quite heavily upon Mircea Eliade's subsequently contested interpretation of shamanism, I want to begin by revisiting some previous readings of Hughes's shamanistic poetry.

Robert Wallis concludes that 'Mircea Eliade's implicit agenda was to search for examples of celestial ascent, a Supreme Being and comparable themes […], to authenticate his belief that all shamanistic religions displayed a global ur-Christianity'.(9) Because Eliade's universalising metanarrative depicted traditional shamanisms as edenic and downplayed their sociopolitical diversity, his portrayal of the shaman as a charismatic magico-religious exponent of techniques of ecstasy has paved the way for various decontextualised, depoliticised, individualising, and psychologising, neo-Shamanisms. From this perspective, and in this respect, accounts of shamanistic themes in Ted Hughes's poetry by Stuart Hirschberg, Graham Bradshaw, Michael Sweeting, and Paul Bentley, are problematic. For Sweeting, the shaman's song was based upon energy/ecstasy, myth/ritual, and catharsis/abreaction (my italics highlight key psychologising terms in this section). The
goal of the poetry was 'interaction with the reader/patient'.(10) For Bradshaw, 'the projected bird-beings' and hallucinatory psychic landscapes in 'Cave Birds' corresponded with a healing psychotherapeutic process'.(11) Hirschberg made a doubly problematic association between the shamanistic element in Hughes's poetry and the poet's early 'identification with powerful, violent, predators', and contrasted this with 'trickster' and 'scapegoat' themes that, he believed, reflected later stages in the poet's spiritual journey. This is, of course, open to question, both in biographical terms, and in relation to theorising shamanism, or indeed predation.(12) Seamus Heaney, for instance, argues that the 'divining spirit' of the younger Hughes sought out creatures, plants, and people (such as the horse, snowdrop, and bull) that had 'the capacity to bear their predicament'.(13)

Paul Bentley seeks to overcome 'the sheer remoteness in space and time of the primitive shaman from the contemporary Western poet' – the colonial era term 'primitive' is resuscitated here to accentuate difference – by invoking the universalising structuralism of Lévi Strauss, in which forms imposed by 'the unconscious mind' are 'fundamentally the same for all minds'.(14) Bentley pursues analogies between shaman and poet on the basis that both are 'simultaneously products of, and manipulators of, a system of representations (i.e. culture)'. Where Hughes talked about the power of 'a religious or visionary imaginative faculty' to connect inner and outer worlds, Bentley describes Cave Birds as 'an imaginative charting of the inner world'. Leonard Baskin's illustrations, in Eliade's terms, give form to the 'supernatural inhabitants of the [...] unknown and terrifying world of death', and ultimately render death 'familiar and acceptable'. Compare this with Hughes's own discussion of 'an underswell of divination' in Baskin's work, in which a shamanic element reflects 'the modern cataclysm of Jewishness'.(15) Bentley then conflates Eliade's account with Lévi Strauss's internalising assertion that the shaman cures by providing a language by means of which hitherto inexpressible 'psychic states' (rather than experiences or biographical events) can be expressed. Lévi Strauss's much cited and critiqued formulation has encouraged the widespread framing of crisis experiences and/or therapeutic transformations as shamanic journeys.(16) Its use here effectively secularises, interiorises, psychologises, and ultimately medicalises Hughes's sacred connecting power of imagination. Bentley concludes that the esoterica of Cave Birds is best understood as the poet's shamanistic negotiation with 'an experience that in fact bears all the marks of depression'.(17) Although Leonard Baskin found Ted Hughes, three weeks after Sylvia Plath's death, in 'a great depressed state', and tried to rouse him by commissioning a poem based upon his crow engravings,(18) and although Cave Birds was conceived as a continuation of Crow, it was clearly more than just a self-healing project, legitimate as that might have been.(19) There were pressing social reasons why Hughes needed to deal with his 'embattled grief' obliquely, and he had, of course, witnessed the effect of autobiographical disclosure on Sylvia Plath.(20)

The younger Hughes didn't foresee that Eliade's emphasis on techniques of ecstasy and spiritual ascent would encourage psychological reductionism, but was clear that a shaman deals with souls and spirits 'in a practical way, in some practical crisis.'(21) Although he eagerly embraced Eliade's suggestion that the shaman's pre-ecstatic euphoria was a source of lyric poetry, his entire poetic trajectory arguably worked against the grain of Eliade's transcendental orientation. Keith Sagar, for instance, picking up on Leonard Scigaj's comments on the prominence of imagery of light in the late River poems, wrote 'Nature here is not clothed in celestial light, has no need of any borrowed glory. It is wholly constituted
of earthly light. All life is matter radiant with spirit.' Whilst contemporary animists might quibble about this paradoxical use of dualist terminology, and particularly the much debated term 'spirit', most would immediately recognize Hughes's 'ecological animism'.(22) In 1970, Hughes wrote an impassioned critique of 'the guiding ideas of Western Civilization', derived from 'the subtly apotheosised misogyny of Reformed Christianity', that assume the earth to be 'a heap of raw materials given to man by God for his exclusive profit and use'.(23) Much of his work was concerned with healing 'the mind exiled from Nature'.(24) Conceived in relational terms, animism foregrounds interdependence and ethical responsibility, and draws attention to the shaman's role in ecological negotiation. Hughes's observation that 'while the mice in the field are listening to the universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stand [...] shareholders, impatient to cash in on the world', reminds us that despite his enthusiasm for Eliade, the values that informed his poetry were closer to those of contemporary animism.(25)

Biographical Matters

Because shamanic sensibility is culturally specific, often awakening during periods of existential crisis, and because a vortex of public stories constructing Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath as quasi-mythic figures inevitably influences the reading of work already informed by biography, the poet's personal life, in which a prolonged and almost unimaginable sequence of bereavements was pivotal, is by no means peripheral to the question at hand. Indeed much of the poetry, arguably, cannot be understood without at least some sense of the biographical matrix from which it emerged. Advocates for the importance of Hughes's work have reviewed the tangle of controversy surrounding an eventful and remarkably productive life. As might be expected, the published material has often been partisan, sometimes to the point of breaching good biographical practice, but with the passage of time a more nuanced picture has emerged of a complex and heart-rending story.(26) The poetry of Wodwo, Crow, Gaudete, Cave Birds, and beyond, undoubtedly emerged from contested terrain, but much of it, arguably, emanated from a younger Hughes's The White Goddess-inspired proto-pro-feminist attempt to heal and resolve anguish on both personal and collective levels.(27) There are many testimonies to Hughes's generosity and kindness. He was arguably well ahead of his time in taking his first wife's work as seriously as his own, in attending the birth of their children, in establishing an egalitarian childcare routine with her, and engaging closely with them, in refusing to medicalise her expressions of distress, and in his environmentalism.(28) I count myself amongst those readers who empathise with both Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, whilst recognizing that both were human-all-too-human. The hubbub of factional biographical commentary shouldn’t distract us from appreciating and critically responding to Ted Hughes’s considerable achievements as an eco-animist poet. Nor should it prevent us from acknowledging that his enormous oeuvre includes some problematic areas.

Until Stalinist persecution drove a remnant tradition underground, Siberian shamans typically worked with 'spirits' during dramatic public performances. This distinguishing feature has been attributed to an unusual degree of social acceptance of gifts that probably occur in all human communities, but have been culturally marginalised in the West.(29) Since the advent of European modernity however, the very shamans once caricatured as superstitious savages have been recuperated as all-wise healers, in a reverse discourse
reflecting Western yearnings for a Golden Age of primordial intimacy with nature.\(^{(30)}\) It might, therefore, be argued that Seamus Heaney was invoking the talismanic property of the term 'shaman' in response to accusations directed against Hughes since the suicides of both his first wife Sylvia Plath, and subsequent partner Assia Wevill. He would certainly have wanted to convey 'the level of seriousness with which Hughes regarded his poetic calling, the spiritual dimensions within which he conceived of it, and the responsibility which he felt to and for it'.\(^{(31)}\)

The protective aura cast around the s-word by our collective sea-change in values has, of course, been somewhat eroded by the recent critical undertow, not least because some exponents of neo-Shamanism have depicted the shaman as a feral 'wild man', far removed from the fluid expressions of gender embedded in some indigenous traditions.\(^{(32)}\) As Castaneda's Don Juan put it, 'a man of knowledge is free ... he has no honour, no dignity, no family, no home, no country, but only life to be lived'.\(^{(33)}\) Far from protecting Hughes, then, the term 'shaman' might appear to associate him with a regressive masculinist magical tradition. This would be misleading – profoundly so if used to infer that his practice was either daft or malevolent – but we don't have to re-invent Ted Hughes the Superstitious Savage as an all-wise healer in order to appreciate either his eclectic shamanistic explorations, or his often astonishing poetry. Indeed, the story behind much of his poetic work might usefully be read as a reminder of the kinds of cultural resources from which any Western neo-shamanic or animistic sensibility must be forged. Interestingly, in his later essay on Hughes, Heaney doesn't use the word 'shaman'.

**The Formative years**

Hughes often mentioned his early preoccupation with making plasticine animals, and sketching animals. As a young boy he had a robust introduction to the natural world. His older brother Gerald would tell stories about American Indian hunters whilst shooting small creatures in the Calder Valley countryside, and sending an eager Ted to retrieve their bodies. Young Ted kept a 'tom-tom drum' hidden in a local wood, where they would sit drumming.\(^{(34)}\) He was introduced to his lifelong passion for fishing, taken to a local pub to see Billy Red killing rats with his teeth, and made three attempts to keep foxes, once seeing his cubs torn apart by dogs. In a letter to his boyhood friend Donald Crossley written in 1985, Hughes wrote that whilst camping at Crimsworth Dean in 1937 or earlier (aged seven or younger), 'I had the dream that later turned into all my poetry'.\(^{(35)}\) A first person story, based on the brothers' last expedition, recounts a dream in which 'a little old woman' appeared, summoned him to rescue a fox cub and vanished as soon as he had done this.\(^{(36)}\) When the family moved to Mexborough, Gerald left home to become a gamekeeper in Devon. Ted was bereft, but continued trapping and killing small birds and mammals, sold mouse skins at school, and developed an obsession with pike. One day he climbed a bank and found himself within inches of a fox that had been climbing up the other side. Hard as it is to imagine in the era of 'Springwatch', he felt as though he had the animal world to himself. All of this might have been expected to equip him to become a conventional scientific naturalist, had it not been accompanied by vivid and recurrent dreams, two of which were his first memories. When he was eleven *Tarka the Otter's* North Devon became his magical landscape, projected over the fields of Old Denaby. From about the age of twelve, he became 'infatuated with folklore' and was writing poetry. During his mid-teens he began to see creatures 'from their own point of view'. In adult life he came to regard poems as
comparable to animals, insofar as they have lives of their own, and believed that if a poem was good enough it could summon the spirit of a real animal. (37)

As a student at Cambridge in the 1950's, Hughes had a powerful dream in which a burned and bleeding fox-headed figure walked into his room, leaving bloody paw prints on the page he was struggling to write. Sceptics might argue that, given his boyhood experiences, this was an unsurprising image for the frustrated poet's angst, but the dream undoubtedly galvanised his commitment to poetry and, significantly, prompted him to abandon English Literature for Archaeology and Anthropology. (38) The literature of shamanism seemed to encompass everything that was already important to him, his passion for wild creatures, and for folklore, his vibrant dream life, even poetry. During this period he would have come to understand the fox dream as a visitation from his animal helper in spirit form, and presumably as a call. (39) In 1964, Hughes became an early populariser of Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*. Taking his cue from Eliade's concluding eulogy to the power of lyric poetry, he claimed that initiation dreams, shamanic flight, and encounters with otherworldly figures, were also fundamental to 'the romantic poetic temperament'. A broadly defined shamanistic poetry would address the alienated soul-state of Western civilisation, a state of separation from both outer nature and our own animal/spiritual nature. (40) From this point on, Hughes consistently linked poetry with shamanism, emphasising the healing and regenerative function of both. (41)

**Skulls, Bones, and Spirit Music**

Piers Vitebsky describes shamanism as 'a cross cultural form of religious sensibility and practice'. (42) Neophytes, chosen by spirits, typically undergo an initiatory period of illness or madness involving terrifying visions of dismemberment and reconstitution. They then learn to make soul journeys on behalf of their communities, or for individual clients, in order to heal, protect from harm, facilitate hunting, or in some contexts, kill enemies. Although this is a definition Hughes would have recognised, none of these features, apart from a period of withdrawal (which is common in non-shamanic traditions) were universally present across Siberia. Even the commonly recognised pattern of call, training, and acceptance, varied considerably. (43) Since shamanistic, divinatory, or magical, phenomena occur close to, or beyond, the limits of human language, and are often legitimately circumscribed by injunctions against casual disclosure, they cannot be rendered conveniently as data, nor readily articulated. Furthermore, not least since visionary experience often seems to accompany personal anguish, there is a need to protect sensitive auto/biographical material from inappropriate scrutiny. With these caveats in mind, I offer the following tentative comparison between Hughes's practice and indigenous shamanisms in order to assess the relevance of the term 'shamanistic' to the poetry. (44)

Like most shamans, Hughes was protective of the intimacies of spiritual practice, and regretted, for example, that he'd gone public about the burnt and bleeding fox-figure dream. Like many shamans, he was also alert to the possibility of hostile magic, and for this reason discouraged publication of his photograph, and probably falsified astrological details in *Birthday Letters*. (45) Seen from this perspective his reticence was not simply a matter of temperament or gendered habit. In an interview conducted in 1970 – the year in which he set out his radical ecological perspective in the review of the Max Nicholson book – Hughes talked about the shaman going to the spirit world in search of a cure, or to request some
urgent intervention in community affairs. How were poets to accept the call in a culture that invalidated even the possibility of such work? During the previous year – when he had experienced an appalling personal nadir, and abandoned *Crow* 'at the lowest and darkest point of his adventure' – he had asked his brother for eagle claws and fox skulls, reported keeping a dead badger's teeth for a 'rosary' and its bones for 'sundry operations, anklets, drumsticks etc', and commissioned an Irish friend to make a Bodhran. Recalling their early adventures together he told Gerald he'd like to end up looking like a 'red Indian shaman'. Make of this what you will, but in some ways Hughes's world-view already resembled that of a shaman.

Like many indigenous shamans Hughes believed that occult powers could run in families. His psychically gifted mother's ancestors included a martyred sixteenth century bishop and a founder of the religious community of Little Gidding. He identified with her Celtic heritage, and with creatures revered in that tradition, such as the hawk and salmon. According to Eliade, one of the functions of the shaman is to contribute towards an understanding of death as a rite of passage. Even before his own exceptional and harrowing experiences of bereavement, Hughes began guiding readers to contemplate their own death. Like many indigenous shamans, Hughes accorded great importance to dreams. One of his most persistent recurrent dreams was of a plane crashing, often in flames, and turning into a spectral creature, such as the visionary swan/angel evoked at the culmination of *Remains of Elmet*. From adolescence there were also recurrent dreams of pike, salmon, and probably foxes. In 1961, when working on an oratorio of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, a filmic dream with verse subtext was repeated twice in its entirety, and became the basis for a radio play. Whilst none of these concerns and practices are unique to shamanism, taken together, there is certainly a family resemblance.

Some commentators emphasise performance as a distinguishing feature of shamanism. Although theatrical experience can be powerful, the association with fantasy and make-believe risks undermining the shaman's belief in an ever present and very real 'spirit world'. Even without an overt shamanic element, Hughes's readings could evoke strong responses. Terry Gifford reports having seen people in the audience faint when ‘February 17th’ was read. The poem, transcribed from Hughes’s farming notes, records an occasion when he had to cut the head from a lamb that had been strangled during birth, in order to save the mother. I’m reminded of Graham Harvey’s pointed query as to why, when there are so many urban workshops on shamanism, there are none on Pennine shepherding, or its associated religion. A commemoration of the inaugural performance of *Cave Birds* at the 2013 Ilkley Literature Festival included a recording of the much publicised moment when the original 1975 reading (by actors) was interrupted by a protracted and full blooded scream, emitted by a woman at the back of the auditorium, who also vomited in the foyer. She reportedly laughed about this afterwards and said that the ‘involuntary howling’ had been released more by one of the Leonard Baskin bird figures that were being projected on stage. Hughes later likened Baskin’s prints to a calligraphy 'improvised from the knotted sigils and clavicles used for conjuring spirits'. The text of *Cave Birds*, with its finely wrought evocation of the mysteries of incarnation, embodiment, death, and an afterlife, might also awaken panic (from the god of wild nature, Pan) and disorientation in a receptive mind. Strangely, the opening poem in the Viking Press edition is called ‘The Scream’, and ends with a vomited scream. Ted Hughes was, of course, drawing on widespread lore linking birds with death and rebirth, so it was also striking, and poignant, that his friend
Keith Sagar, who was to have presented this rare airing of the recording, died four days before an event that consequently became a tribute to him. Whilst all of this attests to the power of the poems and images, the 1975 event clearly hadn’t been – and not least since Ted Hughes's readings were often disrupted by radical feminists who blamed him for the deaths of Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill, could hardly have been expected to have been – conceived as an overt shamanic performance.

If David Abram is right, the core function of a tribal shaman is to mediate between human and more-than-human worlds. Many oral cultures respond to 'the shifting sounds and gestures' of the animate earth, but the shaman specialises in dissolving perceptual boundaries and transcending the constraints of ordinary language. This dangerous work enables her to negotiate with non-human intelligences and keeps the perceptual membrane of the culture open to the presences, powers, and mysteries of the natural world. Abram's description recalls Hughes's notion that the key element in human language is 'animal music', and his belief that certain virtuosic creatures can catch the attention of spirits. It suggests he was doing similar work, albeit in a very different context. Abram also argues that countless anthropologists have overlooked the crucial ecological dimension of the shaman's craft. Some of Hughes's keenest advocates are eco-critics who celebrate his biocentric perspective. Terry Gifford, for example, developed the notion of post-pastoral poetry, a key feature of which is a recognition of the processes of death inherent in a creative/destructive universe, in relation to Hughes's work, and argued that it was epitomised in Cave Birds. Taking up Gifford's invitation to improvise upon his post-pastoral criteria, we might adapt them in an eco-animalist direction by emphasising other-than-human personhood, sentience, agency and ecological dialogue and relationship rather than identification. Amongst Hughes's collected poems there are, of course, many contenders to challenge the human-centric Cave Birds poems as exemplars of animism. Abram's perceptive definition of shamanic work could almost have been devised as a description of Hughes's poetry, which is replete with engagements with other-than-human 'persons', presences, and powers.

Vital Imaginative Contact

Hughes's contemplative identification with sentient more-than-human worlds was often reciprocated. There are reports of occurrences that some, following Jung, would call synchronicities, and others might call signs, but which, partly in order to keep psychoanalysis at arm's length, I prefer to call showings. For example, in January 1955, when writing about the snarl of a caged jaguar, Hughes imagined a fly getting into a sleeping sheepdog's nostril, and the dog trying to bite it. As he was writing this down, a blue fly crossed the very cold room, where no fly had flown for several months, and lodged in the poet's nostril. Hughes extracted the insect and pressed it into his Shakespeare. This was the only time a bluefly ever got up his nostril. He was twenty four at the time, and hadn't yet published a book of poems. The co-existence of contradictory impulses, voices, or selves is, however, clearly evident in the young adult Hughes, who was also researching the viability of running a mink farm as a way of attracting his brother back from Australia. Critical responses to his first collection, which included ‘The Thought Fox’, provoked a determination to develop a distinctive voice rooted in lived experience. Once again, Hughes turned his attention towards animal manifestations of the sacred, and incorporated magical and divinatory procedures into his writing practice. The resulting series of poems for his
1960 collection *Lupercal*, includes ‘View of a Pig’, written in the manner of crafting a spell, and his signature poem ‘Pike’, evoking a 'magically solid' creature, both ancestral dream figure and ordinary living fish.(64)

‘An Otter’ was written specifically at the suggestion of Pan, a spirit Hughes contacted using a ouija board. Pan was apparently dissatisfied with the poet's initial draft and offered to help. Some days later, when Hughes was working on something else, he became aware of a scroll hanging in the air to his right. The barely discernible text turned out to be the complete second part of the poem.(65) He had yet to read Eliade who tells us that the amphibious otter is venerated by Ojibway shamans, but given that part two of ‘An Otter’ celebrates the animal's ability to remain undetected at the water surface, alert to messages from other worlds as it were, this act of attunement arguably prefigures an encounter that happened a few years later, shortly after Hughes and Plath had moved to Devon.(66) On the first morning of the 1962 trout season Hughes was approaching the River Taw at dawn, when an otter jumped out of a ditch, bobbed along ahead of him, and disappeared into the water. Since river otters are notoriously elusive this was an auspicious introduction to the river he would later spend many years campaigning to save from agrochemical pollution. Moreover, because the Taw was one of Tarka's two rivers, it could hardly have been more biographically resonant. Hughes was apparently shocked by the realisation that he had entered his boyhood dream. He never saw an otter there again during thousands of hours fishing, both night and day, until some were re-introduced in the early 1990's.(67) Fishing remained a focus for Hughes's poetic magic. *Earth Numb* was written on the eve of a fishing season to lure salmon. As a hunter's prayer, it emphasises the emotional and energetic drama of predatory encounter rather than elements such as reciprocity, gratitude and communality, that characterise tribal first salmon ceremonies.(68)

**Cross Currents**

This preoccupation with individual encounter, and with the reality of violence – an unavoidable aspect of other-than-human nature, but a pressing and endemic problem within patriarchal human culture – runs through many of Hughes's poetic explorations of shamanism. *Wodwo* includes animistic depictions of a caged jaguar, and a rat caught in a trap, but Daniel Hoffman noted its protagonist's isolation from tribe or community.(69) The narrative section of *Gaudete*, with its surreal scenes of misogynistic violence, parodies a disastrous attempt at shamanism in a culture with no shamanistic tradition. Supportive critics found too many 'facile poems of violence and apocalypse' in *Crow.*(70) Although *Crow* was written in the wake of the holocaust and the atomic bomb, with propitiatory intent, Hughes's 'incorporation of a horrific vision of woman into his discourse', and again his graphic depiction of phallic violence, coupled with an essentialist Jungian conception of a female principle – expressing the natural, procreative, and non-rational – were at the very least, tactically questionable.(71) Keith Sagar points out that *Crow* can't be understood without reference to the exceptional circumstances of its production. Its mythopoetic protagonist was to have been rescued by an Eskimo shaman, but the second major tragedy in Hughes's life left *Crow* abandoned in an underworld of intense negativity.(72) Given that Hughes was experiencing 'psychological meltdown' at the time, it would not be surprising if he had felt ambivalent about the violence he was critiquing. Unfortunately, the 'Plath Wars' isolated him from emerging feminist and pro-feminist analyses. An animist reading of *Crow* would evaluate Hughes's adaptation of indigenous stories, and consider the figure of Crow in the
context of human-corvid relations, as a 'totem' of England, and in relation to Hughes's birthplace, Mytholmroyd, where two Crow Hills 'stand like sentinels on either side of the valley'.(73)

The few early poems that appear to use animal analogues to affirm violence as a Nietzschean liberation of instinct may have been written as an antidote to the cultural inhibitions of the 1950's, but, for example, after second wave feminism, ‘Law in the Country of the Cats’, looks like a naïve endorsement of a mute and violent masculinity.(74) Hughes's sense of the necessity of honouring a Gravesian Goddess by liberating a repressed animal-spiritual sensibility needs to be assessed in relation to the cultural context of his time, and re-considered in terms of present day conditions and understandings. Keith Sagar traces Hughes's evolving attitude towards hunting in relation to several works featuring two brothers, and emphasises the healing resolution that he eventually found in farming (and recorded in *Moortown*). 'On the farm miracles so clearly issued out of the dirt and the body's jellies. Hughes’s affirmations are fully paid for'.(75) For at least some of Hughes's feminist detractors, resolution was found in the intimately cathartic personal poetry of *Birthday Letters*. (76) Hughes, though, remained, in some respects, a quite culturally conservative figure. His account of his native Calder Valley, for instance, fails to register a remarkable history of political resistance.(77) Whilst these contradictions and omissions need to be acknowledged, I don't think they detract substantially from what he did so well.

**Shaman of the Tribe?**

Because the term shaman has been appropriated and used profligately, Harvey argues that Westerners should give it 'extra pay' by, for example, raising awareness of injustices faced by indigenous communities, using it only in relation to phenomena that differ from individualising and interiorising psychotherapy (for example where people relate to 'spirits' rather than just inner images), or engaging in ecological activism or environmental education.(78) Hughes arguably earned his right to use the term by setting up the Sacred Earth Drama Trust to promote ecological awareness amongst children, and through his environmental campaigning, not least because he was able to engage with both 'spirit' worlds and the science of water pollution.(79) Although Hughes's individualistic eclecticism might be better described as animistic, the terms 'shamanic' or 'shamanistic' evoke the process of psychic dismemberment, reconstitution, and crucially, reconnection with a vibrantly more-than-human world, 'the fundamental poetic event' at the core of his practice. What matters, perhaps, is that the terms chosen – and the Celtic 'bard' and 'awenydd' are also relevant – are used carefully. Hughes's ability to interweave, juxtapose, or fuse, detailed naturalistic description, ecological and esoteric references, critically re-imagined lore, and personal concerns, makes his work profoundly relevant to contemporary animism. Conversely, current debates about animism and neo-Shamanisms may open up new questions about his often extraordinary poetry.

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17 Scigaj, Leonard. Critical Essays on Ted Hughes, 163.

18 Sagar, Keith ed. Poet and Critic, the Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar, British Library, 2012, 34. In a letter to Sagar dated 21/4/77 Hughes refers to Caprichos not having the same 'magical operation on my dream-works' as Cave Birds.

19 Seamus Heaney, Suffering and Decision, 224.

20 Ted Hughes, Winter Pollen, 1964, 56.


23 Ibid.


27 The significance of Sylvia Plath's nightmarish encounter with modernist psychiatry at the high water mark of incarceration has often been overlooked. See Hughes, Letters, 523-4. Stevenson, Anne. Interview, 2002, 62-14, and Bitter Fame, 294ff. Many accounts compound the injury by labelling her and/or her work as 'neurotic', 'hysterical', 'schizoid', 'bi-polar' etc.

28 Hutton, Ronald. Shamans.


33 Hughes, Gerald, Ted and I, 26.


Hutton, Ronald. Shamans, 73-74.

Jenny Blain uses 'Shamanic' to distinguish practice sanctioned by a community (in Nine Worlds of Seid-Magic, Ecstasy and neo-Shamanism in North European Paganism, London, Routledge, 2002,3). I take 'shamanistic' to imply a looser relationship with origins, that usefully sidesteps claims of authenticity and accusations of appropriation.


Roberts, Neil. Ted Hughes, 73. Note that although Hughes wrote hundreds of Crow poems, he commented that what he had got down on paper 'seemed such a small part of what he concerned himself with'. Sagar, Keith ed. Poet and Critic, 22. Letter to Keith Sagar, April 1969.


Hutton, Ronald. Shamans, 69, argues that Eliade played down this aspect of Siberian shamanism.


Ted Hughes. Winter Pollen, p. 86.

Ted Hughes, Cave Birds, New York, Viking Press, 1978. The Scream had been written at the time of the 1975 performance (Ann Skea, pers comm). I don't know whether it was performed that evening.


Roberts Neil. Ted Hughes, 9, citing an interview with Hughes, Times Literary Supplement 1 October 1971.


'Phenomenology' derives from the Greek phainomenon, that which shows itself' (from phainô to bring into daylight, and pha- light or brightness). Heidegger, Martin. Basic Writings, London, Routledge, 1978, 93-73.

Hughes. Letters 586-588 and 26. In another incident copulating flies landed on the nib of his pen.


Hughes. Letters, 868, 724-5.


Hoffman, Daniel, Shenandoah 19, Summer 1968, cited in Gifford, Ted Hughes, 103.


Sagar, Keith. Laughter of Foxes, 26-27, 125-126.


Sagar, Keith. Laughter of Foxes, 147-151. 139-140.

For example, Germaine Greer expressed embarrassment at feminist treatment of Hughes, on the 1999 Whitbread Book of the Year Awards, on B.B.C. television.


Harvey, Graham. Listening People, 107-118.

Gifford, Terry. Ted Hughes, 22-3 and 25-6.