



## Neil Roberts: *Hughes, the Laureateship and National Identity*

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In 1978 Philip Larkin and Ted Hughes were commissioned to write quatrains celebrating the Queen's Silver Jubilee, to be engraved on a stone near the Faber offices in Queen Square, Bloomsbury. Here are the verses they produced.

Larkin:

In times when nothing stood  
but worsened, or grew strange,  
there was one constant good:  
she did not change.<sup>1</sup>

Hughes:

A Soul is a Wheel.  
A Nation's a Soul  
With a Crown at the hub  
To keep it whole.<sup>2</sup>

Neither of these is a very memorable piece of verse. But as the work of the poets who were to be the two main candidates for the Laureateship when John Betjeman died in 1984, they give a fascinating insight into what kind of Laureate each might turn out to be. Obviously they are both conservative poems, but that was to be expected: a poem celebrating a royal Jubilee is bound to be conservative. In 1892, when the Laureate Tennyson died, the most celebrated living poet was undoubtedly Algernon Charles Swinburne. Even the Queen said to Gladstone, 'I am told that Mr Swinburne is the best poet in my dominions.'<sup>3</sup> What the Queen had not been told was that Swinburne was a passionate republican. Gladstone,

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London, Faber, 1988, p210

<sup>2</sup> Ted Hughes, *Rain-Charms for the Duchy and other Laureate Poems*, London, Faber, 1992, unnumbered page. Subsequent page references in text. In the text actually engraved and printed in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 June 1978, p367, the first two lines are reversed.

probably rightly, judged that he was unappointable, and successive governments prevaricated until 1896, when the post was given to Alfred Austin, a mediocre poet but a prominent conservative journalist and close associate of the then Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury. This was the last time that a Laureate was so obviously chosen on political grounds, but in the lead-up to the most recent appointment it has been obvious that several of the best qualified candidates would reject it on those grounds. Early in 1999 a shortlist of four poets was published, allegedly with official authority. The poets were Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Carol Ann Duffy and Andrew Motion. It is surprising that those responsible for this shortlist hadn't been told that Harrison once published a poem on the abdication of King Charles III, or that Seamus Heaney had protested against being included in an anthology of 'British' poetry.

So it's not surprising that the Jubilee poems are conservative. What is interesting is the difference between them: the different kinds of conservatism they represent. Larkin's poem is based on a temporal image, Hughes's on a spatial one. Behind Larkin's poem is the tradition of lament for the mutability of earthly life, and the yearning for constancy, traditionally attributed to the stars. The Queen is merely a symbol of this constancy. As an historical comment on Elizabeth II this is of course untrue. The monarchy changed enormously during her first twenty-five years, mainly through her decision to open up her family life to the media. But this is irrelevant to Larkin's poem. It is the idea of constancy that matters. The poem belongs ideologically with an advertisement for the *Daily Telegraph* which appeared a few years ago, combining a Constable-like rural scene with the slogan 'Times change, Values don't.' If we want to know what more precisely lies behind the poem, we don't have to look far. It will be forever shadowed by another quatrain that Larkin wrote in the same year and circulated privately, entitled 'from an unwritten Jubilee poem to HM':

After Healey's trading figures,  
After Wilson's squalid crew,  
And the rising tide of niggers—  
What a treat to look at you.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Edmund Kemper Broadus, *The Laureateship: A Study of the Office of Poet Laureate in England with Some Account of the Poets*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1921, p197

<sup>4</sup> Philip Larkin, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin, 1940-1985*, ed. Anthony Thwaite, London, Faber, 1992, p557

So we know what it was that 'worsened, or grew strange'. In 1984 Larkin was offered the Laureateship but turned it down. He died in 1985 and these verses were published in 1992, the same year, as it happens, that Ted Hughes published his collection of Laureate poems. Larkin's reputation as a poet has survived the scandal of his racism, but it would be interesting to speculate on what would have happened if that scandal had engulfed the Laureateship, the monarchy, and the whole network of conservative institutions of which the Laureateship is a very small part.

Whereas Larkin adapts a traditional figure of mutability and constancy for the purposes of the petty right wing politics of the time, Hughes's poem, based not on a temporal but a spatial image, is more plausibly universal. His association of the metaphor of the wheel with the Soul and the idea of Wholeness shows the influence of Jungian psychology. For Jung the wheel was an example of the mandala, a symbol of spiritual wholeness or, as he called it, individuation.<sup>5</sup> It was for him and no doubt for Hughes as well an archetype, transcending history. That Hughes shares this perspective is evident in his notes to his most ambitious Laureate poem, the Masque for the Queen's sixtieth birthday, where he writes that

The Crown... does not belong to historical time and the tabloid scrimmage of ideologies, but to natural time, where the flower of five million years ago is still absolutely up to date.... The Crown...is the reminder and the presence of this mystery in life—that historical time comes second. (54-55)

Later we shall be seeing that Hughes doesn't consistently hold to this extreme anti-historicism. At present I just want to consider that however archetypal, his image of the Nation is vacuous unless it informs history, including those historical changes that Larkin so unarchetypally referred to in his unofficial Jubilee poem. The mandala image of the wheel is very much elaborated in the Birthday Masque, where as we shall see Hughes explicitly, if glancingly, alludes to Black and Asian immigration. But an even more pressing historical problem is raised by the fact that Hughes's image of the nation as a spinning wheel kept whole by the hub of a Crown very obviously echoes some of the most famous lines of twentieth-century poetry, the opening of Yeats's 'Second Coming':

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer.  
Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold.

Yeats's poem was written in the context of the Irish Civil War, which reminds us that, for Hughes's compatriots, the idea of the nation is not a simple one, and is certainly not transcendent. To put the question at its simplest, what nation is the Laureate the national poet of? The institution of the Laureateship has seen the two Acts of Union, between England and Scotland in 1707, and between Britain and Ireland in 1801. Ted Hughes's earlier poetry does not often refer explicitly to nationality, but when it does so most resonantly the nation in question is England. In the Laureate poems however he consistently calls it Britain. One of the most ambitious of them, 'A Masque for Three Voices' written for the Queen Mother's ninetieth birthday, maps the history of the twentieth century on to the Queen Mother's life. One of the voices explicitly ponders the question of 'British' national identity at various points in the century. At first this voice is deliberately naïve and confused:

Being British is the mystery. Can you see  
That it is you or you or you or me?  
I do not understand how this can be.

When Britain wins, I feel that I have won.  
Whatever Britain does, I feel I have done.  
I know my life comes somehow from the sun. (30)

What enables this voice to answer its question about national identity is the Second World War:

Being British was no mystery when man's future  
Depended on one nation's soul—a creature  
No zoologist ever glimpsed in nature. (38)

However, in the notes to his published collection of Laureate poems Hughes reveals that being British remains, as E.M. Forster might have said, if not a mystery then certainly a muddle. There he speaks of 'the Celtic common quarrel with the Norman-Anglo-Saxon

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<sup>5</sup> C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*, Volume 12, *Psychology and Alchemy*, tr. R.F.C. Hull, London,

dominance, which eventually pulled Southern Ireland out of the marriage-truce, still keeps Ulster uncontrollable, and yet has produced the energy of some of Britain's greatest personalities, as well as the steady flow of her cultural wealth' (62). So here what binds the 'soul' of the nation is a 'truce', implying that the normal relationship between its members is one of war. Yet in the same note Ireland is erroneously described as part of 'Great Britain'. It seems then that Hughes was a rather confused Unionist, and in this respect he was probably representative of his fellow-countrymen—by which I mean of course his *English* fellow-countrymen. A Scottish, Welsh or Northern Irish poet would surely have a clearer sense of the complications in 'British' national identity.

Hughes is in good company. Shakespeare was never Poet Laureate, but John of Gaunt's famous speech in *Richard II* would probably answer most people's idea of what a Laureate poem should be:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise;  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war;  
This happy breed of men, this little world;  
This precious stone set in a silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happier lands;  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England. (II, i, 40-50)

When *Richard II* was written Scotland was a separate kingdom with its own monarch and a long history of conflict with England, but Shakespeare clearly imagines *England* as an island, as did Tennyson in his first and greatest Laureate poem, the 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington'.<sup>6</sup>

Hughes's Laureate poems have been dismissed by most commentators as ludicrous. In my opinion the poems collected in the volume *Rain-Charm for the Duchy*, at least the

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Routledge, 1953, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1968, pp95-223

<sup>6</sup> In this poem Tennyson originally wrote, and published in successive editions from 1853 to 1862, 'Thank Him who isled us here, and roughly set/ His Saxon in blown seas and storming showers.' He later corrected 'Saxon' to 'Briton'. See Christopher Ricks, ed., *Tennyson: A Selected Edition*, Harlow, Longman, 1969, p494.

two long 'Masques' written for the sixtieth birthday of the Queen and the ninetieth birthday of the Queen Mother, represent a project as serious and ambitious as his great mythological works of the 1970s such as *Crow* and *Cave Birds*. If Hughes's Laureateship was a failure it was an heroic and, let us hope, a meaningful one.

In 'A Birthday Masque for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth's Sixtieth Birthday', Hughes develops three images which enormously elaborate on the crown mandala of the Jubilee quatrain. The first of these is a crown of flowers, giving rise to the comment I have already quoted about natural time taking precedence over historical time. The third is an image of a birthday cake with sixty candles, representing thirty pairs of birds, which correspond to the protagonists of the Persian epic *Conference of the Birds*, in which the birds' quest for the Divinity ends with their finding it in themselves: so, according to Hughes, 'the birds of the British Isles... find their true selves (their spiritual selves) by finding the spiritual unity of the Islands' (55). As one might expect, the evocation of the living world in these poems gives us many examples of Hughes at his best, such as the Gull who

Flips over, a scream and a scarf in the sea-cliff's  
Wheel of wind. Or down there under the wind  
Wing-waltzes her shadow  
Over the green hollows. (19)

The idea of 'the spiritual unity of the Islands' however brings us back to the confused Unionism that I have already discussed. But Hughes is not a narrow and petty nationalist. The middle section of the Masque is based on the image of the 'ring of the people', borrowed from the celebrated Sioux shaman Black Elk, for whom this image, according to Hughes, 'embraced, finally, all the different peoples of the earth, not only his own tribesmen' (55). Hughes's version of this ring is, inevitably, a Crown, but one that is forged 'out of laminated metals' representing 'the past and present invading groups that make up modern Britain'. The thought of the more recently arrived groups as 'invading' may be an uncomfortable one, but Hughes is merely putting them on a par with the Celts, Saxons, Danes and Normans. They are represented in the poem itself by these lines:

And here in the boil the peacock oils  
From Siva's thumb.  
The Hoopoe's cry

From the tower. The seed-flame  
From the eye-pupil's  
African violet. (15)

This may not be the most resounding poetic affirmation of multi-culturalism, but it confirms that Hughes's spatial metaphor of the wheel is more accommodating than Larkin's temporal one of constancy and mutability. Whatever skeletons are discovered by Hughes's biographers, I doubt that there will be any racist ones among them.

Hughes's second Laureate poem of major ambition, 'A Masque for Three Voices for the Ninetieth Birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother', attempts to use the Queen Mother's life-span as a frame for narrating the history of the twentieth century and, within that, a developing consciousness of 'British' identity. I have already commented on the fact that, in his earlier poetry, Hughes used 'England' rather than 'Britain'. One of these earlier poems, 'Out', first collected in *Wodwo*, is particularly relevant to his Laureateship. I think it is one of his most revealing poems, though it is one of his less well known. Its first section, 'The Dream Time', begins by evoking the continuing trauma suffered by his father years after the First World War:

My father sat in his chair recovering  
From the four-year mastication by gunfire and mud,  
Body buffeted wordless, estranged by long soaking  
In the colours of mutilation

and goes on to portray the effect of this on himself as a young child:

I, small and four,  
Lay on the carpet as his luckless double,  
His memory's buried, immovable anchor,  
Among jawbones and blown-off boots, tree-stumps, shell-cases and craters,  
Under rain that goes on drumming its rods and thickening  
  
Its kingdom, which the sun has abandoned, and where nobody  
Can ever again move from shelter.

The third section, 'Remembrance Day', takes as its central image the poppy. Hughes writes, 'It is years since I wore one' (the wearing of the poppy on Remembrance Day is one of the signs of a patriotic British citizen), and the poem concludes:

So goodbye to that bloody-minded flower.

You dead bury your dead.

Goodbye to the cenotaphs on my mother's breasts.

Goodbye to all the remaindered charms of my father's survival.

Let England close. Let the green sea-anemone close.<sup>7</sup>

Remembrance Day is of course a *British* institution, but the nation on which Hughes turns with such passionate intensity at the end is 'England'. We should not be misled by the fact that the passion is one of renunciation and repudiation. Such outbursts are characteristic of many twentieth century writers deeply involved with their sense of Englishness, from D.H. Lawrence to John Osborne. For me the word 'England' has a resonance in Hughes's writing that 'Britain' never has: compare the pond 'as deep as England' in 'Pike'. Above all that final line, beautiful, powerful and mysterious, has a memorableness that obliterates the laboured symbolism of the Laureate poems. The figuring of the nation as a 'green sea-anemone' conflates the sea-imagery of John of Gaunt's speech with the 'green and pleasant land' of Blake's 'Jerusalem'. At the same time there is something faintly disturbing about this animal with a plant's name, a crossing of natural boundaries which is emphasised by the word 'green'. Sea-anemones are a pretty colour but they are amorphous and primitive and when they 'close' they devour their prey. This line brings to a pitch of metaphorical intensity a feeling of national identity that is burdensome and historically determined. And that national identity of course is 'English'. He may later have adopted a more inclusive sense of nationality, but I am sceptical about the way, in the 'Masque for Three Voices', he retrospectively claims that it was a 'British' identity that was confirmed for him in the Second World War.

The first of the 'Three Voices' in Hughes's Masque takes us on a breakneck tour of the twentieth century in a jaunty ballad metre that is intended to be humorous but risks the very banality that it seems to be satirising:

Einstein bent the Universe

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<sup>7</sup> Ted Hughes, *New Selected Poems*, London, Faber, 1995, pp72-74

To make war obsolete.  
Ford swore his wished-for wheels would rush  
The century off its feet.  
The Soviet Butcher Bird announced  
The new age with a tweet.

As Bleriot flew to Dover Cliff  
Through a solid wall of sea  
Woman unlocked her freedom.  
An atom none could see  
Opened its revolving doors  
Into infinity. (31)

The mechanical rhythm cuts the verse up into two-line units resulting in an unfortunate double-take in the second stanza, where 'An atom none could see' may first be read as an image of woman's freedom. The second voice meditates quietly on the Scottish moorland landscape of the Queen Mother's birthplace, while the third, which is perhaps the most autobiographical, traces the development I have already described from puzzlement to affirmation of British national identity. It is in this section that Hughes invites comparison with one of the few great Laureate poems, Tennyson's 'Ode on the Death of the Duke of Wellington'. I will quote again, at greater length, the passage in which, for Hughes, the Second World War solves the mystery of being British.

Deafened ears and seared eyes found how war  
Sanctifies King and Queen until they are  
One sacred certainty that all can share.

Eyes in the round glow of the burning earth  
Saw what mattered, and how much it was worth,  
That King and Queen must bear, like a new birth.

Being British was no mystery when man's future  
Depended on one nation's soul—a creature  
No zoologist ever glimpsed in nature. (38)

And here are some lines from Tennyson's poem.

A people's voice! We are a people yet.  
Though all men else their nobler dreams forget,

Confused by brainless mobs and lawless Powers;  
Thank Him who isled us here, and roughly set  
His Briton in blown seas and storming showers,  
We have a voice, with which to pay the debt  
Of boundless love and reverence and regret  
To those great men who fought, and kept it ours.  
And keep it ours, O God, from brute control;  
O Statesmen, guard us, guard the eye, the soul  
Of Europe, keep our noble England whole,  
And save the one true seed of freedom sown  
Betwixt a people and their ancient throne,  
That sober freedom out of which there springs  
Our loyal passion for our temperate kings.<sup>8</sup>

Of all the Laureate poems ever written, this is the only one that Hughes can have seriously considered as a model for poems such as the Masque for the Queen Mother. In the passages I have quoted there are obvious echoes: the preoccupation with the nation's wholeness, the collective image of the soul and the idea of Britain's responsibility to Europe or the world. Tennyson's poem commemorates the hero of Waterloo, which took place when the poet was six years old. It was written thirty seven years after the battle, in 1852, when the Napoleonic dynasty had recently been restored in France, to considerable agitation in Britain. Hughes's poem celebrates a more symbolic heroine of the early years of World War Two, which began when the poet was nine years old. It was written fifty years later, when Britain did not face the kind of threat that Tennyson feared, but when many historical developments, most obviously devolution, European union and multi-culturalism, threatened the concept of nationhood as a spiritual unity, which is the theme of Hughes's Laureateship. One can easily imagine Europhobes being roused by Tennysonian phrases such as 'lawless Powers' and 'brute control'.

But a comparison of these passages shows that Tennyson is much more in command of his idiom than Hughes. Despite the solemn rhetoric that dominates the poem his language is nuanced and appropriate to the constitutional reality of Victorian Britain. His greatest praise for the monarchy is that it is 'temperate'. It is Hughes who seems the more anachronistic,

reaching with his words 'sanctified' and 'sacred' for a concept of monarchy that was killed off with Charles I in the seventeenth century. Anyone who has read *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* will know that he thought this was a historical disaster. This also explains his liking for the 'Masque' form, which died with the divine king that it celebrated.

Tennyson's phrase 'a people's voice' refers back in the poem to a collective voice honouring Wellington through the ages, but when it is repeated it clearly also refers to the poem itself. Valerie Pitt has commented that when he became Laureate he had the advantage of 'a body of common sentiment' but there was 'no available poetic convention in which to express it,' and that his 'Laureate verse is not... the verse of a complacent poet working in an outworn convention, but the vigorous creation of new forms for a new national consciousness,'<sup>9</sup> and Matthew Campbell has described Tennyson's new form as a mixture of 'the elegiac, heroic and civic modes of Victorian culture.'<sup>10</sup> Such a mixture is well exemplified by my extract from the Wellington Ode.

By contrast Hughes's idiom seems personal and even eccentric. However, he has helped us to understand the perspective from which the poem—and indeed his whole Laureate project—was conceived in a 'note' that amounts to one of his most important and illuminating essays. It is certainly more illuminating than the poem, and was originally published, like the poem, in the *Weekend Telegraph*, as a response to a reader who found the poem 'incomprehensible'. The poem is written, he says

from the point of view of the son of an infantryman of the First World War. This qualification defines the outlook of an offspring of that war, one for whom it was virtually the Creation Story, and such a shattering, all-inclusive, grievous catastrophe that it was felt as a national *defeat*, though victory had somehow been pinned on to it as a consolation medal.... Possibly, among the survivors and the children of the survivors of the industrial horde, that sense of paralysing defeat, the shock of massacre, was sealed by the years of the Great Depression. Yet that numbed mourning for the First World War was ominously enlivened, at a deep level, by a prophetic expectation of the Second.... One who was born of the First World

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<sup>8</sup> Tennyson: *A Selected Edition*, pp494-95

<sup>9</sup> Valerie Pitt, *Tennyson Laureate*, London, Barrie and Rockliff, 1962, pp194-95

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Campbell, 'Memorials of the Tennysons', Matthew Campbell, Jacqueline Labbe and Sally Shuttleworth, eds., *Memory and Memorials, 1789-1914*, London, Routledge, forthcoming

War, who spent his first nine years dreaming of the Second, having lived through the Second went on well into his thirties expecting the nuclear Third and the chaos after. Since these wars were felt to be defensive—against the threats of tyrants and their ideological police-state tyrannies, in which, perhaps, one might not last long—all social theories and even half-political ideas were instinctively screened.... This would help to explain how the evangelism of ideological dialectics, of alternative, ideal points of view, which were so attractive to a generation born just before the First World War, and became so attractive again, in more sophisticated forms, to a generation born after 1940, sounded to those born between less like the freed intelligence than like the tyrant's whisper.... In a way, it foreclosed our minds against the great European intellectual debate of the next forty years.... The British outlook that I describe here, I realize, is now almost entirely limited to those born after the First World War but before the late thirties.... (58-59)

Hughes goes on to say that in a time of crisis every nation needs a resource such as 'a constitution, or a Holy Book, or a tradition of heroic leaders', which has to 'be there at the spiritual level as a sacred myth' which in the particular crisis in question 'turned out to be the Crown':

As it happened—helped, maybe, by a memory of Elizabeth the First, more surely by a memory of Victoria—the mantle of this palladium settled on the Queen Mother, who was then Queen. A decisive circumstance, it could be, or one that counted heavily, was the accidental fact that for those who fought in and survived the First World War, and entertained brief hopes in the twenties, she was the generation of their wives, and for those who fought in the Second and expected the Third she was the generation of their mothers. And this enhanced the mythic role of King George VI. Passing time has made it clear that she not only wore the symbol of that 'ring of the people', but, being who she was, rose to the occasion in such a way that she became the incarnation of it. (60)

Hughes is writing a distinctive kind of history here, both analytic and interior, both material and mythologising. It helps us to see that his Laureate project is conceived from the point of view of the son of the First World War infantryman who wrote the poem 'Out' about his father being masticated by mud and cenotaphs on his mother's breasts, and who called on the 'green sea-anemone' to close. But by historicising his project, Hughes also subverts it: this discourse contradicts that of the note I quoted earlier, in which he claimed that the Crown 'does not belong to historical time'. We can also see that, unlike Tennyson, Hughes is

not creating 'new forms for a new national consciousness' but constructing a personal myth, which may be shared by some, though I suspect not all, of his generation.

Hughes turned out to be a very different kind of Poet Laureate than might have been expected. When he was appointed in 1984 many of his admirers, including myself, thought it incongruous. Hughes, the celebrator of everything in nature that threatens the decorousness of human arrangements, who had pronounced civilisation an evolutionary error, as a 'member of the royal household' seemed like Emily Brontë as lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria. His first Laureate poem, published immediately upon the announcement of his appointment, was 'Rain-charm for the Duchy, A Blessed, Devout Drench for the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry'. This is a much more characteristic Hughes poem than the later ones that I have been discussing. Even in its title there is a tension between its inspiration and the occasion that it serves: the pagan rain-charm and the Christian baptism. The monarchy, of course, is a Christian institution, the Queen is the head of the Church of England, required by law to be a Protestant; the occasions that the Laureate is called on to celebrate are Christian rituals that take place in Christian churches. And this Laureate was pagan in the strongest possible sense: he had described the Christian God as 'the man-created, broken-down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion'<sup>11</sup> and thought the legend of the English national saint represented a vicious relationship with the forces of nature.<sup>12</sup> This poem evokes a tremendous thunderstorm and the exultation of the personified rivers of Dartmoor

Thunder gripped and picked up the city.  
Rain didn't so much fall as collapse.  
The pavements danced, like cinders in a riddle....

What a weight of warm Atlantic water!

The car-top hammered. The Cathedral jumped in and out  
Of a heaven that had obviously caught fire  
And couldn't be contained....

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<sup>11</sup> Sleeve-note to *Crow* (read by the poet), Claddagh CCT9-10, 1973

<sup>12</sup> See 'Crow's Account of St George' and 'Myth and Education', *Children's Literature in Education*, 1, 1970, pp55-70.

I was thinking  
Of joyful sobbings—  
The throb

In the rock-face mosses of the Chains,  
And of the exultant larvae in the Barle's shrunk trench, their filaments ablor  
like propellers, under the churned ceiling of light....<sup>13</sup>

Hughes almost certainly wrote this poem without any thought of the Prince's christening, but the decision to use it for this occasion was an inspired one. It acquires a new dimension: throughout it runs a sense of the contrast between this 'drench' and the sprinkling that the Prince will receive in Church, the feebleness of the echo of pagan fertility symbolism that survives in Christian ritual. There is nothing confrontational about this: the implied comparison is warm, humorous and mannerly. At the time, in an essay welcoming Hughes's appointment, I wrote, 'if he is able to sustain the poise and integrity of this first poem he might turn the Laureateship into an organ for creatively exploring the role of religion, ritual and mythology in our society.'<sup>14</sup> He probably believed that, in such poems as the Masques for the Queen and the Queen Mother, this was what he was doing. However, I am sure that the vast majority of readers will find this first poem, which wears its Laureate role so loosely, far more successful than the very deliberate pieces that followed it. The intriguing facts that Hughes made it the title poem of his Laureate collection, and that it is the only poem from that collection in *New Selected Poems*, suggest that he may have thought so too.

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<sup>13</sup> *New Selected Poems*, pp285-87. The phrase 'devout drench' alludes to Larkin's poem 'Water', and may be taken as a gracious acknowledgement of his rival. This subtitle was in the original publication and the reprinting in *A Rain-charm for the Duchy* but omitted in *New Selected Poems*, perhaps in response to the ungenerous attitude to Hughes revealed in Larkin's letters and biography.

<sup>14</sup> Neil Roberts, 'Ted Hughes and the Laureateship', *Critical Quarterly*, 27, 2, 1985, p5. I have silently incorporated a short passage from this essay into the present one.

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