

**The Fisher King, the Grail and the Goddess:
Ted Hughes's aquatic myths**

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Abstract: This paper presents some research for my PhD thesis on fluvial landscapes in the works of Ted Hughes and Alice Oswald. The thesis as a whole aims to explore the relationship between myths of the *genius loci* in the English poetic canon, and the eco-poets' mythology of riverine landscapes in crisis. In this paper, I set out to explore the role of the Grail and Fisher King, favoured figures of T. S. Eliot, in Ted Hughes's river-poetry. The Grail is an object of medieval legend, but this paper contends that Hughes follows the example of Jessie Weston in making it fit into a family of more ancient myths. The fertility myths which Weston views as giving rise to the Grail legend are associated with the aquatic goddess who haunts both Ted Hughes' poetry and his critical work *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. I use a combination of methods – contextualization of Hughes's work with reference to Modernist texts, close analysis of the poetry, and comparisons to the poet's letters and critical works, in order to uncover the myths behind what is often a very modern, environmentally engaged text. I hypothesize that Hughes's use of myth gives his poetry a universal, canonical tenor, with its persona as nameless Fisher King and its muse as an abstract Goddess. However, I conclude that at times his use of myth becomes self-mythologizing.

Contrary to Lacoue-Labarthe's proposal that art and culture begin at the point at which myth ends, Ted Hughes's poetry is spawned by myth. His writing depends on mythic methods similar to those of his Modernist predecessors. Scholarship such as John B. Marino's *The Grail Legend in Modern Literature* places the Grail firmly in the realm of legend. Yet the wellspring of the ideas which inspired Hughes was derived from Jessie L. Weston's work on the Grail, which attempts to trace the original *myths* behind the legends. Myths have a life and function beyond the purely textual, suggests Mary Midgley: 'Myths are not [...] detached stories. They are imaginative patterns, networks of powerful symbols that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world'.¹ The network of symbols which Hughes used was inherited

¹ Mary Midgley, *The Myths We Live By* (2003; Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which in turn was derived from Weston's scholarship. The Grail – and the legendary and literary canon which it has inspired - is *fons et origo*, the fountainhead of *River*. This elusive treasure is also, for Hughes, a symbol of the river-Goddess responsible for all life, all creativity. The wounded Fisher King who will be healed by the Grail is healed by this Goddess, according to pre-Christian, and Hughes's post-Christian, perspectives. Hughes's own vision of the Grail is bound up with his conception of feminine, creative nature and his conservationist agenda. After illustrating how the writing of Weston and others informs Hughes's consideration of the Grail legend, I will trace its evolution in the collection *River*. I shall also examine where Hughes's mythopoesis is self-effacing and universalizing, and where self-mythologizing.

Eliot acknowledged his debt to Weston's scholarship in the Notes accompanying *The Waste Land*.² Sylvia Plath owned and annotated a copy of Weston's book, which Hughes later kept in his own library. Moreover, the Cambridge English Tripos syllabus at the time when Hughes studied it aimed to allow undergraduates to interpret *The Waste Land*. Hughes's change to Archaeology and Anthropology in his final year allowed him to acquire a deeper knowledge of the anthropological texts which provide the structural and mythic underpinning of Eliot's poem. *The Waste Land*, with its aquatic cycle from the stagnant world of the fisher king 'fishing in the dull canal', to the drought where there is 'no water but only rock', to the relief of the 'damp gust / Bringing rain' contributes to the cyclical structure of *River*.³ In a sense, *River* is a reinvention of Weston's theories, whose grouping of widely disparate myths does not stand up to modern anthropological scrutiny. Hughes may include Oriental mythology in the poem 'Japanese River Tales' and Native American totems in 'The Merry Mink', conforming partially to the trend for comparative mythology which lies behind

² T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. by Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 1971), p. 147. All further citations are from this edition.

³ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, pp. 140, 144, 145.

much Modernist poetry. Yet his use of Grail metaphors in a collection of British and Brythonic settings – the Dee, the River Barrow, the Sligachan – grounds his aquatic poetry in Celtic landscapes. As if turning away from Weston’s comparison of medieval French-language legends to Hindu myths, Hughes focuses on the Celtic Grail-myths, real or imagined, from which medieval Grail-legends are sourced.

The theme of male human sacrifice runs throughout Hughes’s work, emerging particularly clearly in his collection *Gaudete*. He was inspired by James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, which linked the sacrifice of the priest of Diana at Nemi to the sacrifice of Tammuz-Adonis and sacred kings from a wide array of world cultures. Such priests and sacred kings appear to have been killed in order to regenerate the land, as Frazer explains in ‘The Killing of the Tree-spirit’;⁴ the Fisher King belongs to the same family of sacrificial heroes. A wound from the Bleeding Lance in the thighs or groin disables him, leaving him to spend his time fishing in the moat outside his castle. A knight – usually Perceval or Gawain – must bring him the Grail and place the Bleeding Lance in the wound it created in order to heal him. This restores fertility to the land, which had become barren when the Fisher King was wounded.

In a footnote to the significance of the Boar in Shakespeare’s version of the Adonis myth, Hughes identifies the Grail and the Lance with aspects of the deity he calls the Goddess of Complete Being:

The sexual wound (piercing both thighs) that made the Grail King impotent and laid the land waste was inflicted by a pagan knight’s spear, on the blade of which was inscribed ‘The Grail’. The submerged but tightly interconnected circuitry of these apparently separate mythic complexes can be glimpsed in this metaphor of the Boar (the spear blade) emerging from the estranged (lost) Goddess (the Grail cauldron) as itself a form of the Goddess (bearing her name, The Grail).⁵

⁴ James Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, abridged edition, with an introduction by George W. Stocking, Jr. (first published in abridged form in 1922. London: Penguin Books, 1996) pp. 356-86.

⁵ Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992. Revised paperback edition: London: Faber & Faber, 1993), p. 431.

What Hughes wrote of Shakespeare applies equally to the personae he adopts in his own work. By drawing on the 'mythic complexes' behind Shakespeare's writing, he situates his own work within the tradition of England's most iconic, and perhaps most mythologized, writer.

The original form of the Goddess is, for Hughes, an aquatic fertility-goddess. It is unsurprising, then, that he should identify her with the Grail: at once a fountain of life-giving water and a vessel brimming with sacrificial blood. Indeed, if one takes the Grail as a Christian symbol, it contains both blood and water. The water it contains is an ancient symbol of birth and rebirth. As Weston notes,

The perusal of [...] *Notes on Celtic Cauldrons of Plenty and the Land-Beneath-the Waves*, has confirmed me in my view that these special objects belong to another line of tradition altogether; that which deals with an inexhaustible submarine source of life, examples of which will be found in the 'Sampo' of the Finnish *Kalewala*, and the ever-grinding mills of popular folk-tale. The fundamental idea here seems to be that of the origin of all Life from Water, a very ancient idea, but one which, though akin to the Grail tradition, is yet quite distinct therefrom.⁶

Yet she proposes a more direct link between the Grail and myths of the origins of life:

But Lance and Cup (or Vase) were in truth connected together in a symbolic relation long ages before the institution of Christianity, or the birth of Celtic tradition. They are sex symbols of immemorial antiquity and world-wide diffusion, the Lance, or Spear, representing the Male, the Cup, or Vase, the Female.⁷

Uniting the Lance with the Grail symbolises the sexual union of male and female; according to Frazerian sympathetic magic, this restores the fertility of the land.⁸ In Hughes's particular *mythos*, which reinvents the Grail legend for an environmentally conscious age, Grail and river symbolize the fecundity of the river-goddess, 'the creative womb of the inchoate

⁶ Jessie Weston, *From Ritual to Romance: An account of the Holy Grail from ancient ritual to Christian Symbol* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920. This edition New York: Anchor Books, 1957), p. 74.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁸ Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, p. 164.

waters'.⁹ When the reproductive capacity of the river-goddess is impaired by pollution, the precious liquid of the Grail is tainted, leaving a sterile Waste Land.

The wound dealt to the persona of Hughes's poetry is at once sacrificial, and emblematic of the multiple dolorous strokes which man inflicts upon nature. Aquatic wastelands appear intermittently in *River*, when winter comes in the song-cycle and the cycle of the seasons, when pollution reduces the creative womb of waters to stagnation. Just such a wasteland opens the collection. The fourth line of 'The Morning Before Christmas' has trees as 'fractured domes of spun ghost', wintry versions of the blasted trees of the Somme or victims of acid rain.¹⁰ The 'blue haze' (l. 3) of Hughes's winter dawn is a different version of Eliot's 'brown fog of a winter dawn', reminding us that that the collection starts off in a postbellum, barren world akin to that of Eliot's *Waste Land*.¹¹ And yet, the 'brand new stillness' of the second line already suggests renewal. With the coming of the sun in the sixth line, the river begins to steam (l. 7), as if it were a Grail-like Celtic cauldron of rebirth.

An interesting parallel to the Grail legend occurs when the salmon are milted into a 'kitchen bowl' (l. 30). This banal receptacle holds the 'treasure' (640, l. 44) of eggs and milt. The kitchen bowl, a humorously humble receptacle when compared with the gold-adorned Grail, takes on a Grail-like role. It is full not of life-giving Redeemer's blood, but of eggs which will restore fertility to the river. The words 'vital broth' (l. 47) lend a sacramental quality to the fertilised eggs, as if anyone who partakes of the salmon which they will hatch could be restored to health like the Fisher King. Nameless men perform the milting; they are Grail-knights, faceless with the universality of myth. The poem ends in a world 'Wrought in wet, heavy gold. Treasure-solid' (l. 68), returning the landscape to the distant timeframe of

⁹ Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber 2003), p. 639. All other citations are from this edition. Page and line numbers are given parenthetically in the text.

¹¹ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, p. 136, l. 61.

the Grail legend. The kitchen bowl has been replaced by a great golden chalice consisting of the entire river basin, a womb whose life-giving, sacramental blood is the river.

By 'New Year', however, there is less hope that the waters will bring forth new life. The persona imagines 'a Caesarian' (l. 3); 'The wound's hapless mouth, a vital loss' (l. 4) replaces the 'vital broth' of 'The Morning Before Christmas'; likewise the 'blue haze' is replaced by a sinister, artificial-looking 'blue glare' (l. 10). Human interference brings 'The intent steel/ Stitching the frothing womb' (ll. 8-9), a cure which entails further wounding. Here, the river-goddess becomes like a female version of the Fisher King: a terrible wound damages her reproductive organs, and the frozen sterility of the land ensues. The persona, too, is a Fisher King, who feels 'in my head the anaesthetic / the stiff gauze, the congealments' (ll. 11-12), in sympathy with the Goddess. This wound is inflicted by humans; they are the reason why the persona imagines 'The lank, dying fish. But not the ticking egg' in the last line. The tone here is more self-mythologizing than before: Hughes's own concern for fish stocks in the Devonshire rivers where he fished (and an awareness of his vilification by feminist critics, which will be addressed shortly) can be glimpsed beneath the surface of this poem.

The river's healing process seems to be accelerated in places where the only human presences are long dead. 'Under the Hill of Centurions' is set in one of Kipling's mythic English sites, whose *genius loci* is the minnow. The minnows of this poem are 'Red-breasted as if they bled, their Roman/ Bottle-glass greened bodies silked with black' (ll 10-11). Their red colour emblematises the Fisher King's wound. They are 'A wrestling tress of kingfisher colour' (650, l. 19); the word 'kingfisher' echoes the Fisher King's title. Both Lance and Grail are evoked by the following line, where they are at once 'Steely jostlings' and 'a washed mass of brilliants': the steel Lance and the Grail encrusted with brilliant-cut jewels.

As the cycle of the seasons progresses and Hughes explores yet more geographical locations, 'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' shows water bringing life out of the dead land. Lines 67-69 describe a salmon emerging from the eye socket of a skull as a 'Gruagach', a 'Boggart', a 'Glaistig', placing this poem in a Celtic mythological world more ancient and sinister than that of the Grail legend. Life in death and wounds in healing reappear in 'River Barrow', where a barrow overlooks a river teeming with life, and trout 'rive a wound in the smooth healing' (657, l.32). The motif of the Lance – or at least a knightly sword – reappears at the end of the poem, as the persona becomes 'an old sword in its scabbard / Happy to moulder' (ll. 45-46). Yet the process of mouldering stops and old legends are re-forged in a furnace of molten creation, in 'West Dart'. The river is a sacramental chalice of 'spirit and blood' (658, l.4). During the storm, the flash of a trout becomes a Grail-knight's epiphany, a 'tumbling out of goblets' (l. 11). Diverse landscapes are universalized, mapped onto the contours of Celtic myth.

'An August Salmon' presents the salmon as 'mortally wounded / By love and destiny' (660, ll. 10-11). The fish is anthropomorphized by his ability to feel 'love', becoming a wounded Fisher King whose 'destiny' is to receive a mortal, rather than a healing, wound. Yet the shape of the salmon also suggests a Lance, and the 'torpedo launch of his poise' (l. 27) is a more modern, mechanized version of the spear which wounds and heals the Fisher King. However, there is an element of his quasi-sacrificial death which references more ancient sources than the Grail legend: ritual rather than romance. The presence of a female figure at the end of the poem recalls the mythic framework of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Waiting 'For execution and death / In the skirts of his bride' (ll. 48-49), he resembles a sacrificial hero waiting to be immolated to his divine lover. Hughes mythologizes and anthropomorphizes the fish to show a masculine order giving way to the

rule of a matriarchal Goddess. It is possible, too, to see this as a metaphor for Hughes's early masculine writing being torn apart and sacrificed by a Maenad-like horde of feminist critics.¹²

A key poem in the River-as-Grail-cycle schema is 'The Kingfisher'. The bird's name recalls that of the Fisher King, but at the same time the kingfisher is a Fisher King in reverse: the inflictor of wounds. Here, the persona is transfigured by metaphorical wounds dealt by the bird. 'Shivering the spine of the river' (663, l. 26), he acts like the Lance, slicing into the fluvial landscape. A more explicit reference to the myth of the Fisher King comes in two isolated lines which describe the way the kingfisher seems to wound its observer. 'He has left his needle buried in your ear' (l. 8) shows that one wound inflicted by the kingfisher affects the auditory faculties of the poet, refining his perception of sound. He 'Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye' (663, l. 16); this is the wound from which imagery springs. Hughes creates a persona whose psychological wounding is part of the process of creation; the personal pronoun 'your' immerses both him and the reader in the mythopoeic process.

With the coming of October, we are reminded of the salmon's past splendour, when he was 'king of infinite liberty' (678, l. 45). Rather than a Fisher King, he was a king among fish. He is gradually returned to the dignity of his 'epic poise' (679, l. 59) which 'holds him so steady in his wounds' (l. 60). In the last poem, 'Salmon Eggs', the 'January haze' (680, l. 6) returns with the spawning salmon. This circularity is reflected in the 'travail / Of raptures and rendings' (l. 30), where wounds and rebirth are juxtaposed in the cycle of sacrifice and resurrection. The bedrock contains 'crypts' (l. 28) and an 'altar' (l. 29), but the salmon egg is

¹² In her poem 'Arraignment' in the collection *Monster* which was withdrawn from circulation, Robin Morgan considers the idea of a covey of feminists breaking into his house to shoot him. She was not the only one to criticize him: in a letter to his son Nicholas, Hughes mentions the 'incessant interference of the feminists' in his affairs because of the death of Sylvia Plath – see *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007). Hughes responds to the feminist fantasy of his sacrifice by dramatising the execution of a male trout by a female agent in riverine form. He implies that the sacrifice of the male by female hands is not necessary, for in the natural world, the male is already destined for immolation. Morgan's poem 'Monster' uses the language of childbirth as a metaphor for the advent of a feminist revolution, which will come only after the labour agony of the feminist movement. There are traces of a response to this poem in Hughes's *River*, whose use of the language of birth shows an awareness of the agency and power of the fecund, feminised earth. Hughes attempts – with partial success – to answer his feminist critics by venerating the feminized riverine landscape.

swaddled by a 'font' (l. 38) whose shape and sacred liquid recall the Grail. Hughes wrote this poem with a figure from pre-Christian Celtic mythology in mind. Sheila-na-gig, an Irish fertility carving, is the mother of the poem: 'I suppose that this woman is our oldest goddess (a death/battle/love goddess) who copulated with her consort standing astride rivers (I suppose, where she also gave birth). [...] So my verses conflate the sculpture, the goddess, the red fish eggs and the swollen wintry river.'¹³ The collection returns to the purportedly universal, prehistoric timeframe of Celtic myth. The last poem establishes the collection in a canon stretching back from Eliot to prehistoric art.

In conclusion, the Grail cycle provides the archetypal structure behind Ted Hughes's collection *River*. Nevertheless, whereas the Grail legend leads its hero to the Grail, the multiple temporal eddies in Hughes's work do not lead to such a neat resolution. This is because it follows the tradition of Weston and Frazer's cyclical, pre-Christian myths of sacrifice and revival, rather than Christian teleological progression. By drawing on Eliot's work and source-text, Hughes would seem to privilege mythic tradition over individual talent. Yet within his mythic method, there are elements of self-mythologization. The river, at times a font full of lustral water, a Grail full of sacrificial blood or a trough of clotting putrefaction, keeps renewing itself, despite pollution. *River* ends with the river's own words, italicized to show that the voice of the Goddess is cited directly: '*Only birth matters*' (681, l. 37). Presiding over both sacrifice and rebirth is the Goddess whose voice is heard as an undersong throughout Hughes's poetry.

¹³ Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Christopher Reid. (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), p. 448.