

Edward Hadley: "Ted Hughes as an Elegist: The Vegetation Deity and Fertility Rites in 'Lupercalia'"

It is curious that despite the wide and varied nature of Ted Hughes's verse, his elegiac tendencies have gone largely unnoticed despite the motifs of violence and death playing prominent roles in many of his poems. His verse shares in common many characteristics with elegy, he is complicit with many of elegy's practices and traditions, but he is also a reformer and renovator of elegy, writing invigorating verse which brings the realities of mortality closer to the reader. In doing so, he reaffirms the significance of life and how this life might be better lived in closer harmony to poetry and contemporary ecological urgencies. A poem such as 'The Day He Died' and the series of poems which comprise *Birthday Letters* are obvious contenders when considering Hughes's elegiac oeuvre, but elegiac characteristics are to be found in some of the poet's more obscure verse.

Of the poem 'Lupercalia',^[1] from *Lupercal*, Ekbert Faas writes: 'It shows the first traces of a long search for symbols and rituals that might still be alive under the debris of present-day civilisation. Yet despite the use of the present tense throughout and a lack of direct historical references, there is little to relate these symmetrically patterned and finely drawn miniatures into our present situation.'^[2] Whilst it is beyond the remit of this study to verify whether or not the connotations and symbols of 'Lupercalia' have a bearing on today's society, one might suggest instead, that one need not look any further than *Lupercal* itself to justify the presence of the title poem. Several Hughes scholars have analysed the ancient Roman Lupercalia festival and related it to Hughes's poem, 'Lupercalia', for obvious reasons.^[3] The intention here, however, is to understand how the festival, and indeed the poem, might relate to a core principle within elegy. The festival of Lupercalia ritual shares characteristics with the figure of the vegetation god whose role, according to Peter Sacks, is not only crucial, but integral to works of lament; the presence of this god is 'latent beneath the figures and conventions that we otherwise take for granted.'^[4] To decipher these similarities, we first need to understand what actually occurred at the festival and what these practices represented.

The Lupercal cave is said to be where Romulus and Remus suckled on the milk of the wolf-mother as a part of the myth which tells of the founding of Rome. The significance of this place, what occurred there, and the subsequent festival, which this myth gave birth to, is summarised by Hughes:

The Feast of Lupercal was a Roman festival held on the 15th of February, in honour of Zeus as a wolf. Nobody knows how it originated, but it came from Mt. Lycaon in Greece, and combined sacrifices of goats and a dog (originally of a wolf, I suppose) It was mainly a fertility rite.^[5]

The details of this rite vary slightly according to different accounts, but it seems that at the Lupercal cave stood an altar to the god, Lupercus (the Roman god of shepherds, often associated with dogs and goats. In terms of elegy, we can perhaps link these shepherd figures to the early pastoral tradition of elegy) where the Luperci (the 'wolf-brothers') presided over the practice of the festival. There, two goats and a dog would be sacrificed and their blood would anoint the foreheads of two young patricians. Part of the goat's skin would be fashioned into a thong and worn by the Luperci, whilst another part of the goat skin would be formed into a whip which was used to strike those the Luperci encountered

as they ran through the streets around the Palatine hill. Both infertile and fertile women would hope to be struck because it was believed that this would encourage both fertility and unproblematic childbirth.

Already, one can draw parallels between the festival and principles behind the vegetation deity. Sacks writes, 'The immortality suggested by nature's self-regenerative power rests on a principle of recurrent fertility.'^[6] The Lupercalia festival, with its most immediate origins in Greek/pagan mythical culture, was held on what was believed to be the first day of spring; as Sacks suggests, by human figures indulging in their festival, they are not so much replicating nature's power, as transferring it into the tangible, and recognisable human form, 'Since individual humans are no more than mortal vehicles of this regenerative power, the particular human figure can represent the principle of sexuality only by appearing to undergo a succession of extinctions and rebirths'.^[7] With the Lupercalia festival, the Luperci made 'extinct' a dog and two goats, whose blood and skin were marked upon them. In this respect, the Luperci were marked with death. But by wielding their leather-like straps of skin and whipping the barren women of Rome, they are mimicking the natural processes of death followed by regeneration. Furthermore, Sacks writes, 'The vegetation deity, and especially his or her sexual power, must be made to disappear and return.'^[8] Again, we see this in practice at the festival; the initial rites of the ceremony occur in a cave, out of sight, so in this sense, the Luperci (who embody this version of the vegetation deity) disappear before very publicly returning to complete the ceremonial, sexual flagellation of women. One must recall that these infertile women are prone to the disappearance of their reproductive sexual power and hope that by being struck by the 'reappearance' of the Luperci/vegetation god, they too will be physically touched by divine power. We read in Hughes's poem the point at which the Luperci struck these women:

... Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man
Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one. (IV, 13-6)

Hughes's poem, although not an elegy as such, bears these ancient and elegiac core principles of death and the *post mortem* associations of regeneration, as Stuart Hirschberg observes: 'In this poem we have an intuition of Hughes's conception of an energy at the heart of creation that is both divine and destructive, a power that is indistinguishable from the 'rank thriving' of the goats or the 'blood heat' of dog ... [both] have a primal physical force ... that the Luperci hope to pass on through the ceremony to the waiting women.'^[9] What is of interest is the fact that, in this fertility festival, it is claimed that the men covered their genitals with the thong fashioned from the goat's skin; furthermore, when we recall that the women are infertile, they are too, in this respect, without genitalia. Perhaps this is a latent acknowledgment of the role of castration, which is present in several early myths and elegies as Sacks reminds us: 'Persephone is raped or abducted by Death. Adonis is killed by a tusk wound to the groin. Atthis castrates himself and dies. Orpheus is torn apart and decapitated by women. Daphnis dies after being blinded by a jealous Aphrodite.'^[10] Sacks calls these figures 'representatives of undeterred desire'^[11], so perhaps it is the case that on the basis of these (or similar) myths, the runners and the women of the Lupercalia festival were eliminating sexual desire by being covered, because nature does not know

desire, only functional reproduction and fertility, which the Luperci as vegetation gods hope to symbolize.

The above lines from Hughes's poem (IV, 13-6) are probably its most significant. However, earlier in the poem, Hughes points to the fact that what we perceive as natural 'wholeness' (represented in the poem by a wheel) is made incomplete by infertility. One of the infertile women is 'a surviving / Barrenness' (ll. 1-2) who is 'flung from the wheel of the living' (ll. 3). As Keith Sagar writes, 'The athletes run not to distinguish themselves but to snatch the lowliest, the barren women...back into that wheel, into 'the figure of the races'.'^[12] But of what importance is female fertility to Hughes's poetry? One answer may be found in the poem 'Song' from *The Hawk in the Rain*, a poem which is perhaps Hughes's most explicit evocation, in his early verse at least, of the goddess who rules his poetry. The poem, according to Neil Roberts, is 'marked by imagery that is reminiscent of *The White Goddess*'.^[13] This 'beloved' female muse of the poem is 'blessed by the moon, caressed by the sea and kissed by the wind; the stars swim in her eyes. Her power is such that the poet is in her shadow, and when she turns away, her shadow turns to ice ... her combination of desirability and destructiveness is exactly that of Graves's goddess'.^[14] Her fertility is important to Hughes's poetry because, as his muse, she gives birth to his imagination. Evidence of this can be found in an interview conducted several years after *Lupercal's* publication, in which Hughes remarked that 'Almost all the poems in *Lupercal* were written as invocations to writing. My main consciousness in those days was that it was impossible to write. So these invocations were just attempts to crack the apparent impossibility of producing anything.'^[15] This gives further credence to the idea that, with a poem such as 'Lupercalia', Hughes is invoking the aid of the great Goddess who represents the manifestation of Sacks's vegetation deity. Nicholas Bishop writes, 'The most obvious invocation to writing in the volume is "Crag Jack's Apostasy"'.^[16] Bishop cites the following lines:

... you, god or not god, who
Come to my sleeping body through
The world under the world; pray
That I may see more than your eyes
In an animal's dreamed head; that I shall
Waking, dragged suddenly
From a choir-shaken height
By the world, lord, through its dayfall –
Keep more than memory
Of a wolf's head, of eagle's feet.^[17] (9-18)

The final two lines are arresting; they typify the wealth of symbols related to the Goddess which feature in many of the *Lupercal* poems. The identification of these symbols can be found in Robert Graves's study *The White Goddess*. He writes:

Why the cat, pig and wolf were considered particularly sacred to the Moon-goddess is not hard to discover. Wolves howl to the moon and feed on corpse-flesh, their eyes shine in the dark, and they haunt wooded mountains. Cats' eyes similarly shine in the dark, they feed on mice (symbol of pestilence), mate openly and walk inaudibly, they are prolific but eat their own young, and their colours vary, like the moon, between white, reddish and black. Pigs also vary between white, reddish and

black, feed on corpse-flesh, are prolific but eat their own young, and their tusks are crescent shaped.^[18]

A pig is to be found in 'View of a Pig', though according to Hughes's poem, this dead creature is apparently incapable of transfiguration in death because it appears to be 'too dead' (13). Cats feature prominently throughout *Lupercal* in a variety of forms; in 'Things Present',^[19] the tramp is without 'Cat or bread' (5); in 'Esther's Tomcat',^[20] the cat has 'his mind on the moon' (22);^[21] in 'Of Cats'^[22] we are 'all held in utter mock by the cats' (21). However, it is on dogs (wolves) that Graves seems to place an emphasis in the above extract, and accordingly, we see this in Hughes's verse. The very title of *Lupercal* has etymological roots in *Lupus*, the Latin for 'wolf'; indeed several poems use canine imagery. Of these, 'February'^[23] is the most striking. The title of this poem has immediate links with the Lupercalia festival which occurred in February. Sagar writes that 'the pure spirit of the wolf ... is captured in "A photograph: the hairless, knuckled feet / Of the last wolf killed in Britain"'.^[24] He continues, 'There are no wolves in Britain, no large predators at all to make the nights dangerous. And we like to think we have got rid of the wolfishness in our own natures.'^[25] As an emblem sacred to the goddess, it is unthinkable that, not only should this be the 'last wolf' in Britain, but that we should build barricades against our own inner connections with nature's (indeed, the vegetation deity's) spirit. It is here that the poem can be correlated directly with 'Lupercalia', and recall that it was believed that Romulus and Remus suckled from the wolf in the Lupercal cave, where the festival was subsequently celebrated. Their suckling connects them to this emblem of the Goddess, but also to their inner 'wolfishness', which went on to create Rome. The conclusion of 'February' reads:

Now, lest they choose his head,
Under severe moons he sits making
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world. (22-4)

Sagar interprets this as a 'final image of the world held between the teeth of a wolf-mask'^[26], that is to say, that the suppressed wolf-spirit remains in the jaws of nature and things not dreamt of in our philosophy. By comparison, part one of 'Lupercalia' concerns the dog that is to be sacrificed at the festival: 'It held man's reasonable ways / Between its teeth. Received death / Closed eyes and grinning mouth.' (l. 8-10). The lines seem to acknowledge the final lines of 'February'; at the point of sacrifice, the dog grips man between its teeth, but like 'February' Hughes does not signify that the jaws ever snap shut, even if the potential is there. So as the dog undergoes its transfiguration rite, the reader is asked to recall that creation is locked in the jaws of destruction, and that awareness of these extreme energies puts us in a more attuned consciousness with the surrounding world.

Through Sacks's insistence that the vegetation deity is present in most, if not all elegies, one can identify that in reading Hughes's poetry this deity is a woman, an embodiment of the Goddess herself. In *Remains of Elmet*, she plays various roles, including an angelic-swan creature, Mother Nature, and is partly manifest in human form in the figure of Hughes's mother. In *River*, she is several personalities, most notably a sexually proactive incarnation of the rivers. She is apparent in the figure of Plath when one considers the creative-destructive nature of her life. There is no need to identify every occasion where the Goddess is present in Hughes's poetry, but as one can see with his war-elegies, where even out of mass slaughter comes life, the Goddess inhabits a metaphysical world of

extremes. The poem 'Lupercalia', with its emphasis on fertility and regeneration, might be read as a furtherance of matters raised in and by 'Song'; for if the Goddess ceases to be Hughes's muse, then his imagination is barren, and his poetry is bereft. The continued presence of the Goddess/vegetation deity for Hughes not only produces a 'fertile' poetic, but also quietly imbues his elegies with the requisite trope of natural regeneration brought about by the healing powers of poetry.

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- ^[1] Ted Hughes, *Lupercal* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960) 61.
- ^[2] Egbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Black Sparrow Press, 1980) 62.
- ^[3] Highly recommended are Ann Skea's essay 'Wolf-masks: From *Hawk* to *Wolfwatching*,' *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*, ed. Leonard M. Scigaj. *Critical Essays on British Literature* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co, 1992) and Stuart Hirschberg's section on 'Lupercalia' in *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Portmarnock, Co. Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981) 23-7.
- ^[4] Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: John Hopkins U.P., 1987) 27.
- ^[5] Hughes, 'To Olwyn Hughes,' Summer 1959, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber 2007) 148.
- ^[6] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.
- ^[7] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.
- ^[8] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.
- ^[9] Hirschberg, *Myth*, 25.
- ^[10] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.
- ^[11] Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 27.
- ^[12] Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Chatham: Cambridge U.P., 1975) 59.
- ^[13] Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006) 17.
- ^[14] Roberts, *Literary Life*, 17.
- ^[15] Faas, *Unaccommodated Universe*, 209.
- ^[16] Nicholas Bishop, *Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology* (Hemel Hempsted: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991) 70.
- ^[17] Hughes, *Lupercal*, 56.
- ^[18] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*.
- ^[19] Hughes, *Lupercal*, 9.
- ^[20] Hughes, *Lupercal*, 23.
- ^[21] The moon is of course one of the Goddess's most powerful symbols.
- ^[22] Hughes, *Lupercal*, 32.
- ^[23] Hughes, *Lupercal*, 13.
- ^[24] Sagar, *Art*, 55.
- ^[25] Sagar, *Art*, 55.
- ^[26] Sagar, *Art*, 55.