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THE MAN IN BLACK ON THE WOMAN IN WHITE : Ted Hughes on Emily Dickinson

This talk begins in a pair of images: On the left is Ted Hughes, in black. On the right is one of Emily Dickinson's white dresses.¹



Here's Ted (forgive me if it seems contrived, but I'm going to adopt uniformly the first-name convention often still used for female poets. As this is a conference on autobiography and poetry, it also seems more intimate). This photograph was taken in 1971, when Ted was in Iran with the British director, Peter Brook and an international troop of actors. They were to perform a play, *Orghast*; Ted was writing in a language he was inventing: the trick was that the play had to communicate in a *lingua franca*, as neither the actors nor the audience had a common language or culture. In the photograph, Ted is seated, outside, in what appears to be a sunshot desert. He is darkly dressed, physically at ease, his new wedding ring visible. It's not long after his marriage to his second wife, Carol Orchard. Ted is not looking at the camera, but he is looking intently at something—something outside the camera's viewfinder.

1. "Ted Hughes in Persia, 1971", in : Sagar, Keith. *The Art of Ted Hughes*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975. Dress Worn by Emily Dickinson, preserved at the Dickinson homestead, Amherst, Mass. USA, Amherst Historical Society.

On the right, is a photograph of one of Emily Dickinson's white dresses. After about 1862, Emily only wore white dresses like this one. She was apparently so uneasy about being touched that she had to have someone else stand for the fittings. As you can see there is no Emily in the photograph, just a dress, a headless, handless, bodiless dress. But the dress invokes Emily: white, still, all but invisible and silent inside her father's house in Amherst, Massachusetts, the house where she wrote most of her poetry, in the smallest room, on a very tiny desk. The house is a museum now, and her dress hangs there, in the house where she lived, wrote, and articulated her whiteness in her poems. As you probably know, only six of Emily's poems were published during her lifetime. The stash, a total of one-thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine poems came as something of a surprise to her relatives, when they found them after her death. Emily had bound groups of the poems into books, fascicles, she had stitched together herself.

When I look at the photographs side by side, I see that Emily is everything Ted is not. Emily is small, American, white, virginal, a private poet, a self-styled exile in her father's house—and, in the photograph, she is absent. She writes in what Ted describes as a "slow, small metre" or in what John Crowe Ransom elsewhere describes as metres "learned from her father's hymnbook", a "folk-line" typical of "English Ballads and Mother Goose" [Gilbert and Gubar 547].

Ted is a public poet, large, dark and most at home when out of doors. His verse forms are dominantly (but not exclusively) in characteristic male lines, long lines: Latin hexameters, Shakespearean pentameters, and heavy-stressed alliterative medieval verse. But Ted admired Emily's poetry, and included comparatively large numbers of selections of it in the anthologies for children he produced over the years. His most explicit analysis of her work is a little selection of her poems he produced for Faber in 1968, *A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse*. It includes an essay-length introduction. The book of Emily's poems was one of three "choice of" books Ted did for Faber, between 1964, when he did *Selected Poems, Keith Douglas* and *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, published in 1971.

What brings Ted and Emily together today is the subject of this conference: autobiography and poetry. When I told a friend that I was going to do this talk on the man in black on the woman in white, he gently tried to tell to me that the topic of the conference was probably confessional poetry. I understood that, I explained, but I thought a talk on confessional criticism might suit Ted better. Until that moment, I'd not thought the term, though I had known, of course, the academic literature on autobiography and criticism. Critics such as Jane Tompkins use the idea to talk about their willingness to

insert themselves in their critical discussions, to accept the importance of a subject position in the development of a critical assessment. But that's not what I'm doing today. I'm talking about the way Ted, in writing critical assessments of other poets offers critical keys to reading his poetry. It is as if he is letting us in on trade secrets—though it is no secret that when Ted writes about another poet he is, in part, writing about himself. Ted's story of Shakespeare's tussle with the Goddess of Complete Being is also, of course Ted's story, as Claas Kazzer beautifully discusses in a talk he gave in Lyons last winter. And Ted's story of Sylvia's poems as "chapters in a mythology" is also—as several critics have pointed out—Ted's story.

Each individual story, the goddess story, the alchemical wedding story, the trickster story, the Sylvia story, makes audible a particular melodic line. In fact, every time Ted tells a story, in any of his works, (poetry, prose, criticism drama, libretto, for adults and children) he is at least partly engaging in a kind of confessional criticism: a working, jobbing poet, if you like, providing a glimpse of how another working poet is thinking. In imagining the creative processes practised by other poets, Ted provides keys to his own creative processes. In his explicitly critical pieces, he makes a kind of cosmic link with a long line of poet ancestors—in a way probably not available to more conventional critics who rely more explicitly on textual or historical evidence.

In order to provide a quick glimpse of Ted's confessional criticism in action, I'd like to offer one of my favourite passages from his big book on Shakespeare. Shakespeare, as you probably know, was a totem poet for Ted. In writing about Shakespeare's construction of "Jacques" in *As You Like It*, Ted analyses the dramatic motivation for the character in the play. By moving quickly through a series of possibilities on Shakespeare's self-reflexive punning plays on his own name, Ted explains that "Jacques" becomes a kind of code for "Jake" as "privy" and "joke." Then Ted goes on for about two pages in a startling series of what come off as jazz riffs, through "Jacques-pierre" and "Jacques-Pere". To a scholarly observer these jazz riffs are necessarily speculative. If Ted's book is read as confessional criticism, as one poet tuned to the resonance of another, then it is revealed, I think, as a particularly brilliant kind of anagnorisis, a kind of recognition scene. But Ted's big book on Shakespeare was read by many critics in the terms of institutional academic criticism—and so they panned it. Although Ted responded only occasionally to printed criticism of his work, he did write a long rebuttal to a review in *The Times* by Eric Griffiths. In the letter, Ted tries to explain to Griffiths that unlike school-based academic critics, he reads Shakespeare's plays "from the more practical standpoint of one who constantly dismantles them . . . examining their parts like an industrial spy, . . . with the sole idea of appropriating, somehow, the secrets of

what makes them work . . .” [“Reply to Review by Eric Griffiths”, *The Times*, 01 April 1994 : 5]. In other words, a book of trade secrets.

My foray into Ted’s big book on Shakespeare is more than a straight digression on his confessional habit of mind. It is a segue into his little book on Emily. Here is a bit of Ted’s introductory analysis of her verse:

There is the slow, small metre, a device for bringing each syllable into close-up, as under a microscope; there is the deep, steady focus, where all the words lie in precise and yet somehow free relationships, so that the individual syllables are on the point of slipping into utterly new meanings, all pressing to be uncovered; there is the mosaic, pictogram concentration of ideas; there is the tranced suspense and deliberation in her punctuation of dashes, and the riddling, oblique artistic strategies, the Shakespearian texture of language, solid with metaphor, saturated with the homeliest imagery and experience; the freakish blood-and-nerve paradoxical vitality of her latinisms; the musical games—of opposites, parallels, mirrors, chinese puzzles, harmonising and counterpointing whole worlds of reference; and everywhere there is the teeming carnival of world-life. It is difficult to exhaust the unique art and pleasures of her poetic talent. With the hymn and the riddle, those two small domestic implements, she grasped the ‘centre’ and the ‘circumference’ of things—to use two of her favourite expressions—as surely as human imagination ever has. [14]

Ted’s poetry bears the trace of some of the features he admires in Emily’s poetry. The “Shakespearean texture of language, solid with metaphor, saturated with the homeliest imagery and experience,” is the one I’ll attend to here. You could probably open any page of Ted’s poetry at random and find examples, but, in the interest of keeping the focus of the paper, I’ll turn to “Wind,” an early poem, and one he writes about in the “Wind and Weather” chapter in *Poetry in the Making*, the collection of radio talks for children he published as a book, in 1967, just a year before his edition of Emily’s poems.

In “Wind” Ted writes about a house (probably the home of his parents) on the Yorkshire moors caught in the storm. The wind, he says in the poem, “Rang like some fine green goblet in the note / That any second would shatter it” [34]. A few pages on, Ted talks about Emily’s New England poem on wind: “There came a wind like a bugle—/ It quivered through the grass / and a green chill upon the heat / So ominous did pass / We barred the windows and the doors / As from an emerald ghost” [36]. Ted invites his listeners to attend to the same green wind, the solid-with-metaphor emerald language, the “slow, small, metre” that informs his own poem. In his *Poetry in the Making* essay, Ted says of Emily that “the landscape [of her poem] comes alive as if the touch of the wind and the strange light had turned it into nightmare” [36].

In turning my attention to Emily’s saturated wind and weather metaphors, I’m returned to Ted’s, to the connections between an outer observation of the world with an inner emotional response: the critical key, as Ted often

says, to making poetry something at once lived, felt—and immortal. It is impossible not to mention that I wrote this section in the midst of a terrifying electrical storm outside my window. At 11 in the morning it was as dark as night and as ominous. My response was to unplug my laptop, for fear of a power surge.

Although I've been talking about Ted on Emily's poetry in a way that codes qualities of his own poetry, Emily is important in another way: as one of mythic 'white goddess' women in his pantheon (mother, sacred bride and queen of the underworld, at once creative and destructive). If Sylvia is the central figure in Ted's psychodrama, then Emily is the poet who prefigures her. Ted, always alert to cosmic connections, makes the link visible.

Emily and Sylvia are defining voices in English poetry by women (it is probably worth noticing that Ted calls Emily an American 'poetess' and Sylvia an American 'poet'), their white-hot bursts of creativity separated by exactly 100 years. Ted draws attention, in his introduction to Emily's work, to the fact that her most creative period, a "conflagration" he calls it, was between 1860 and 1866. He gives her most productive year as 1862, when she wrote, by some calculations, as Ted says, 366 poems. That number differs, incidentally, from the number listed in Franklin's edition of Emily's poems, where the total for 1862 is 227, still one of the most productive years of her life. But 1862 is important for Ted. One hundred years after Emily's miraculous year, in 1962, Sylvia has the most productive, creative year of her life. Many of the poems burned into our minds, including "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," were written in that year, a "conflagration" year. They are the poems that assured her place as "the Poetess of 'America,'" a title to which Sylvia herself explicitly aspired. In her journal of 28 March 1958, she writes:

Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America (as Ted will be The Poet of England and her dominions). Who rivals? Well, in history, Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead. [*Journals* 211-2)

Sylvia wrote those lines when she had returned (with Ted) to teach at her New England alma mater, Smith College, not far from the home of the Belle of Amherst, Emily Dickinson. Sylvia, as we now know, was right.

Because of Ted's emphasis on 1862 as an important year for Emily, as 1962 was for Sylvia (Ted has written about this too), I was led to attend to both the order and content of Ted's choices of Emily's verses. Although Ted's selection of Emily's verse is almost all in chronological order, he has used the licence of the undated poems to construct what I think of as a kind of mythic order that reveals Emily's ghostly prefiguring of Sylvia. A clue seems to

appear right at the start of Ted's choice of Emily's verse. He begins with an undated poem

That Love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love;
It is enough, the freight should be
Proportioned to the groove. [*A Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse* 17.]

Sylvia had intended, as you probably know, to start her *Ariel* collection with the word "love": "Love set you going like a fat gold watch," the famous first line of "Morningsong." Ted could have chosen one of Emily's other love poems, but I think he was tracing the same mythic story in Emily's poetry that he also traces in Sylvia's: a pull towards love and death, the hovering stern, haunting father shadowing the background, the passion for riddling, enigmatic verses, words precisely placed so that the meanings ricochet off one another in a dazzling firework display of technical brilliance. And I think that when Ted refers to the "naked voltage" of Emily's poems [9], the connection with Sylvia has to be present. In "The Hanging Man," for example, Sylvia, alluding to her experience with electroconvulsive therapy writes: "By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me. / I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet" [Plath, *Collected Poems* 141]. Later, in *Birthday Letters*, Ted writes of one of the early encounters with Sylvia:

[...] A great bird, you
Surged in the plumage of your excitement,
Raving exhilaration. A blueish voltage—
Fluorescent cobalt, a flare of aura
That later I learned was yours uniquely. [*Birthday Letters* 22.]

The naked voltage characteristic of Sylvia and Emily must have virtually blinded ordinary mortals, all that volcanic (a recurrent image in Emily's poems) passion, raw emotion and unflinching honesty must have been overwhelming. It was, of course, overwhelming, for both Sylvia and Emily. Beyond the naked, passionate love, there was only one thing. Ted says of Emily, "Death obsessed her, as the one act that could take her the one necessary step beyond her vision. Death would carry her and her sagacity clean through the riddle. She deferred all her questions to death's solution" [13-4]. Sounds just like Sylvia, doesn't it?

Ted ends his selections of Emily's poems with a conflagration of love, death—and the immortality of poetry. Among the last few poems are "Drowning is not so pitiful / As the attempt to rise. / Three times, 'tis said, a sinking man / Comes up to face the skies"; and "Love can do all but raise the Dead"; and a poem that begins "The reticent volcano keeps / His never slumbering plan—" and ends with "The only secret people keep / is Immortality"

[A *Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse* 63-64]. It is difficult to read Ted's comment or any of those lines without seeing the ghostly shade of Sylvia, especially in "Lady Lazarus" :

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like a cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three
What a trash
To annihilate each decade. [Plath, *Collected Poems* 244-245].

And so I'm back to the white goddess white dress: a wedding dress and a shroud, a madwoman's dress, a hospital gown. In 1862 Emily writes of "A Solemn thing—it was—I said—/ A Woman - white -to be - / And wear—if God should count me fit- / Her blameless mystery" [*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 136] or in 1861, in a poem Ted chooses:

Safe in Their Alabaster Chambers—
Untouched by Morning—
And untouched by Noon—
Lie the meek members of the Resurrection—
Rafters of Satin—and Roof of Stone! [A *Choice of Emily Dickinson's Verse* 19.]

Which returns me to Sylvia. Though in *Birthday Letters*, Ted reveals Sylvia in her red and blue living, burning aspect, she is also, like Emily, a woman in white. In "Moonrise": "A body of whiteness / Rots, and smells of rot under its headstone / Though the body walk out in clean linen" [Plath, *Collected Poems* 98]. And in "Tulips": "Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in. / I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly / As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands" [Plath, *Collected Poems* 160]. Ted recognized the strong death pull in the white images. In 1965, alluding to lines from some of Sylvia's late poems, including "The Moon and the Yew Tree" from 1961 and "Edge" her last poem, written just days before she died, Ted speaks of "a strange muse, bald, white and wild, in her 'hood of bone', floating over a landscape like that of the Primitive Painters, a burningly luminous vision of a Paradise. A Paradise which is at the same time eerily, frighteningly, an unalterably spot-lit vision of death [*Winter Pollen* 161].

As I near the end of this paper on the man in black on the woman in white, now conjured as Emily prefiguring Sylvia, there is one more white woman who has to enter the equation before I leave, another Emily who connects all the transatlantic players: Emily Brontë, who like Sylvia, was dead at thirty. Emily Dickinson apparently had a picture of Emily Brontë in her room, and wrote a poem to her:

All overgrown by cunning moss,
All interspersed with weck,
The little Cage of "Curren Bell"
In quiet "Haworth" laid. [*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 73.]

Haworth Parsonage is, of course, the Yorkshire home in which the Bronte children cut their imaginative teeth. Sylvia goes to Haworth with Ted, and says, in the spirit of Emily's small metre, tipping towards love and death:

I found bare moor,
A colourless weather
And the House of Eros
Low-lintelled, no palace [Plath, *Collected Poems* 72].

That poem tilts inevitably back to Sylvia's "November Graveyard," with its invocation:

At the essential landscape stare, stare
Till your eyes foist a vision dazzling on the wind:
Whatever lost ghosts flare,
Damned, howling in their shrouds across the moor
Rave on the leash of the starving mind
Which peoples the bare room, the blank, untenanted air. [Plath, *Collected Poems* 56].

Which leads back to Ted's poem on Emily Brontë:

The wind on Crow Hill was her darling.
His fierce high tale in her ear was her secret.
But his kiss was fatal. [*New Selected Poems* 173.]

My talk on confessional criticism probably seems circuitous. It is. In threading Ted's story of Emily Dickinson through his stories of Sylvia Plath and Emily Brontë, I've not tried to tell one of the major critical operas on Ted's work. Rather I've just tried to tune in to some of the "harmonizing and counterpointing"—as Ted says of Emily in the section from the introduction I cited at the beginning. If criticism is about learning to listen to the music of poetry with a more knowing ear, then that's what I'm trying to do. By tuning into the Emily stories and small metres, as Ted explains them, I learn how to listen, in metre and image, for the connections between the jewel green of the landscape and the white bones beneath; for links between the Yorkshire moors and beautiful, tuneful ghostly America. It seems fitting to end with Emily's words, not selected by Ted, but inevitably true to his eye and ear for trade secrets:

Tell all the truth but tell it slant—
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The truth's superb surprise

As lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind.
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind— [*The Poems of Emily Dickinson* 494].

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