

A Brave New World After All?

—‘Nature’ in the Work of Some Contemporary Poets—

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...Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear,—both what they half create,
And what perceive; well pleased to recognise
In nature and the language of the sense,
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

Wordsworth, *Tintern Abbey* (1798)

...and I knew
That if I dipped my hand the spawn would clutch it.
Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (1966)

In this essay I would like to look at some of the work of several (mainly) British poets who could perhaps, at least partly, be described as ‘nature poets’, and who have written in the past twenty years. I have resisted the temptation to try and ascribe characteristics to decades, for example, ‘the sixties’, or ‘the seventies’, because an order imposed on an arbitrary period of time is likely to involve as many contradictions and exceptions as it does similarities. Most of the

poems I mention in detail come from the mid-sixties to the late seventies. With some exceptions I have also tried to avoid too detailed suggestions of the lines of development within the work of any poet, largely because we probably need more time to be fully objective about the work of contemporary and very active writers. Each of the poets mentioned has his own vision, influenced as they may sometimes be, however, by each other, of 'nature' or of its automatic corollary 'human nature'. I stop short of suggesting that what I believe I find in the particular poems mentioned here adds up to any total vision or combined view that might be taken to represent a 'modern way of thinking'. Nevertheless, although we should be strictly aware that what we are looking at can only be taken as, in each poet's case, a particular statement in a particular poem, there are sufficient grounds for feeling that many intelligent minds are not looking at the world in the same terms as they might still have been even just before the Second World War. I would also like to beg the question of whether poets can really be thought of as initiators of any new vision, or whether they are at most accurate and sensitive harbingers of changes which they see and feel around them, or even of whether their work reflects the contemporary French philosophers currently fashionable. In any case I feel that what I am certainly not alone in noticing gives us both cause for alarm, and, ironically, cause for satisfaction at what I prefer to think of as a new honesty.

Japanese students who have read 'modern' English poems with me over the last several years, have sometimes expressed the wish to read some 'nature poems' written after 1945, but they have almost always been surprised with what I have, *faute de mieux*, had to show them under that definition. Perhaps some students, certainly not

only in Japan, have the idea that a nature poem should extoll the woods and flowers, or describe the animals in a charming and sensitive manner, with, wherever appropriate, touches of colour or mention of the characteristics and changes of season. My scouring of the anthologies of contemporary poetry has produced very few poems, if any, matching general descriptions of this sort. I will resist the temptation to speculate too extensively on how expectations as to what 'nature poetry' should be, have come about, but I must mention that if William Wordsworth (1770–1850), or other poets of the 'Romantic Period', still represents for some readers the pinnacle of that particular range, then there might be some disappointments to follow. It is clear from a reading of the work of Norman MacCaig (b. 1910), Vernon Scannell (b. 1922), James K. Baxter (1926–1972), Ted Hughes (b. 1930) or Seamus Heaney (b. 1939), the poets whose work I will mainly be discussing here, that none of them identify anything remotely resembling the comfortable Anglican 'moral' influence that pervades and flows from Wordsworth's nature. Wordsworth may have been attempting bold reconciliations for himself or for his time, or have had an inner compulsion that drove him to urge his observations of the influence of the Lake District on the 'moral' development of his selected characters onto his readers, many of whom agreed with him. Yet Aldous Huxley found serious cause for re-thinking the position in his day, expressing his reservations in the essay entitled *Wordsworth in the Tropics*, which appeared in the collection *Do What You Will*, in 1929. Huxley's point was simply that if Wordsworth had travelled outside the comparatively 'tame' natural scenery of Europe, 'he would have learned once more to treat Nature naturally, as he treated it in his youth; to react to it spontaneously,

loving where love was the appropriate emotion, fearing, hating, fighting whenever Nature presented itself to his intuition as being, not merely strange, but hostile, inhumanly evil.' The modern poets mentioned might think that Wordsworth had no need to travel far to see what there was to be seen, because they look once more both at the natural life around them, and inwards into human character, and, by and large, come to quite startling conclusions. But Huxley's essay does make a useful point. There seems to be a world of difference between Michael in Wordsworth's poem of that name, fighting his personal grief against the impressive backdrop of the crags of the Lake District, from which he has derived his unusual strength, and, for example, the figure of Job Davies in the short poem *Lore*, published in the *Selected Poems, 1946-1968* (1973), by R. S. Thomas (b. 1913). Thomas' larger-than-life character is eighty-five and full of vigour. It is not *because of* his life in the rain-swept mountains of Wales, however, that he has this zest, but *in spite of* it, in defiance of 'the slow poison/ And treachery of the seasons.' The final message of Thomas' poem might strike us as rather weak, or at least weakly expressed, when we read: 'What to do? Stay green,/ Never mind the machine,/ Whose fuel is human souls./ Live large, man, and dream small.' Nevertheless there is a palpable difference between Wordsworth's and Thomas' views.

If we find R. S. Thomas' language fails to convince because it is too simple, we might again remind ourselves of the language of Wordsworth, not nearly as simple as he claimed it to have been, and never really free from some of the encumbrance of Milton which dominated his early verse. Neither did Wordsworth attempt to observe and describe in anything like the same way that some later poets did.

For all its enthusiasm in extolling the movement of the flowers, his perhaps too-well-known poem *I wandered Lonely As A Cloud* (1804), for example, contains no hint of the shape, size or texture of the daffodil. It can easily be countered that first the daffodil is too common to warrant such an attempt, and second that that was not the point of the poem. Nevertheless, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844–1889), although he also tried to reconcile his interpretation of underlying influences with what he observed (the discrepancy often providing a tension in his work), and despite the fact that his language could never be described as simple, would have tried. The trumpet shape might have intrigued him, the often exceptional brilliance of the colour, or the velvety texture of the petals. He might have written a note on it, such as the one portraying the equally common bluebell (in the *Journal* as the entry for May 18, 1870) accompanied by a little sketch, or tried to catch an essential quality, as he did in poems like *Spring* or *Pied Beauty* (both written in 1877). For anything like this we would probably comb Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1800) in vain.

Yet, enormous differences aside, for both Wordsworth and Hopkins, each in his own way, 'nature' was a display of the power and energy of the Almighty. Few, if any, post-war poets make or have much confidence in such an assumption, and some, notably Hughes, or Heaney, are sometimes accused of taking, if not the diametrically opposed direction, then at least paths which give considerable cause for alarm to readers who would like to be able to adhere to earlier beliefs. The last part of the short poem by MacCaig entitled *Old Maps and New* (from the collection of the same name, 1978) might focus this point for us when he states: 'though these

days it's only/ in the explored territories/ that men write, sadly,/ Here live monsters.'

Before examining the work of the contemporary poets mentioned, however, it might be useful to look very briefly at some poems by poets of more recent generations than Wordsworth's or Hopkins'. Some reference should be made to the poems of D. H. Lawrence (1885–1930), though his particular vision stands considerably apart. The work of Dylan Thomas (1914–1953), Edwin Muir (1887–1959) and Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978), an order which reflects the completion of their *oeuvres*, also contains poems about 'nature' which are deservedly anthologised. These writers between them might represent some of the 'poles' of nature poetry which will be useful in noting certain characteristics of the more recent poets.

Lawrence's remarkable poetry, like much of his work, reflects his ceaseless and insistent search for principles beneath the world around him. His vivid and special sense and interpretation of nature, which many can appreciate, though fewer may endorse, is caught in his poetry. Like Hopkins before him, but again with his unique vision and particular style, he tries to catch the essence of a flower, an animal or a scene. He strives to capture with accuracy and insight, a touch of colour, a line or texture that concentrates the being. Few readers fail to respond to the brilliance and sensitivity of the imagination shown in *Humming-Bird* (in *Birds, Beasts and Flowers*, 1923) or fail to contrast negatively the shuffling figures of the hunters with the sad carcase of the lion they have shot, in *Mountain Lion* (from the same collection). In that poem Lawrence's skill is shown in the sensitive urgency of lines like, 'Dark, keen, fine eyes in the brilliant frost of her face/ Beautiful dead eyes.' His travels

provided him, of course, with subjects Wordsworth never dreamed of, and his range of observation and the continual freshness of his approach assure him an important place in any account of 'nature poetry'. Poems like *Figs* or *Snake* (from the same collection) take us into regions and hint at worlds we may still be very little familiar with. This is particularly true of the splendid mystery of *Bavarian Gentians* (from *Last Poems*, 1932). We are almost convinced of the viability of his 'underworld' because of the sinuous insistence of the lines and the magic they weave. Lawrence, however, did not win immediate acceptance of his vision of the 'dark gods', or his interpretation of the new relation he saw between man and nature, or the fresh roles he wished to make between men and women. At first he was ignored if not reviled, and then, sadly perhaps, after his death enjoyed a boom in critical acclaim not always reflecting a full understanding of what he was trying to say. George Steiner, in his essay on F. R. Leavis, published in 1962, summarises the weaknesses of Lawrence's work in general rather aptly. 'That there is much in Lawrence which is monotonous and hysterical, that very few of his works are unflawed by hectoring idiosyncracies, that there was little in his genius either of laughter or tolerance—these are considerations that Leavis can scarcely allow.'¹ That Steiner is, for the most part, accurate, if perhaps biased, in this assessment may diminish but cannot destroy the achievement of Lawrence, for whom Leavis is still the intelligent champion.² Leavis appreciates the almost desperate honesty of Lawrence's work, and responds to the enormous energy and sense of life which pervades it, even when readers may refuse to accept all that Lawrence would seem to want them to accept. Still, at his most frightening in the evocation of

powers from beyond, or below, our ken, and in calling on us to recognise or even give ourselves up to influences and forces we do not fully apprehend, Lawrence rarely strikes a wholly terrifying or truly sinister note. We feel that at least he believes implicitly that if we do follow his path and regenerate ourselves in 'nature' or the inner mysteries, we will finally live more fully, enjoy more 'realised' lives. For all his dissatisfactions, Lawrence was in this way an optimist.

The brilliant, rhythmical and lyrical vision of a child's view of nature is captured for ever in Dylan Thomas' *Poem in October* (completed in 1944), and an almost tactile glee in *Fern Hill* (from *Collected Poems, 1934-1952*, 1952). Here, although 'nature' is being described in a unique language and in glowing colours, the accent is at least as much on the fresh and vivid energy of the central figure, whether the child through whose remembrances the past is being recreated, or the adult who can still appreciate what he extolls. Though there are sombre notes at times beneath the exultation in Dylan Thomas' work, it is primarily the reaffirmation of the living energy that comes through. He does not attempt to plumb the depths of the 'mystery', though he celebrates it: 'And the mystery/ Sang alive/ Still in the water and the singingbirds', (stanza 6 of *Poem in October*).

The horses in the well-known poem *The Horses* (from *Collected Poems, 1963*) by Edwin Muir, seem to be a symbol of the past, both of 'wild' nature and of a nature linked with man, but they are no longer men's familiars, and, although they wait 'stubborn and shy', the men find it hard to reach out to them. Man has made his choice: 'We had sold our horses in our father's time/ To buy new tractors...' Muir might be suggesting that the way forward into the later twentieth century is only by taking the way back, away from mechanisa-

tion to the closer relationship with 'nature' that once existed between farmers and their work horses. Though the battle imagery is mainly directed towards the depiction of man's modern world, there might also be something vaguely sinister about the horses and what they stand for, though this is not explored, and it might be too simple to immediately identify them as apocalyptic. Another uncomfortable vision from Muir's late short poem *I see the image* (from the same collection) is of the figure of a 'naked man', suggestive of a human prototype, picking up a smooth stone and throwing it 'backward/ Towards the beginning'. The poet speculates on what will catch the stone, 'Hand, or paw, or gullet of sea-monster?', and the sound at the end of the poem of the stone perhaps ringing against 'the wall of an iron tower', is far from comforting. Muir certainly strikes a note of anxiety in these poems, without pressing deeper into the cause of his discomfort, while Hugh MacDiarmid seems more often content with the inference of the transitoriness, the ephemerality which characterizes all natural life, including man's. Many of his poems in direct praise of his native Scotland are more reminiscent of the nature poetry of an earlier time, though his obvious love of rural Scotland is affecting in a piece such as *Scotland Small?* (from *Collected Poems*, 1962). His praise of the leaves and berries, the tormentil and milkwort, are archetypal 'nature poetry', as is *Bracken Hills in Autumn* (published in 1962), combining a description of the lovely autumnal scenery with the reflection on man's mortality. If MacDiarmid too often progressed to more strident tones in political poems which do not concern us here, he must be remembered for capturing the special flavour of the countryside he was familiar with. Muir did likewise, as did Dylan Thomas and a number of other

mid-century poets. It seems to me, however, that the poets I will be looking at next have elected not merely to celebrate a local scene, though they may well be very familiar with one, but tend to concentrate on looking at nature with new, rather different eyes.

In his, at least on the surface, amusing little poem, *Gone are the Days* (from *Old Maps and New: Selected Poems*, 1978), Norman MacCaig makes the point that we can no longer look either at 'nature' or at people, in the traditional 'courtly' or literary terms:

Impossible to call a lamb a lambkin
Or say eftsoons or spell you ladye.

The modern figure is all too fallible and unheroic, though the poet does 'not regret it'. The sinister note behind what is actually a rather charming love poem, is contained in lines like: 'There are wildernesses/ enough in Rose Street or the Grassmarket/ where dragon's breaths are methylated/ and social workers trap the unwary.' We find the same disturbing invitation to look behind what we see in poems that might seem to be charming 'modern' nature poems, such as *Fetching Cows*, *Movements* or *Sheep Dipping* (all from the same collection).

In *Fetching Cows*, the country life is observed but the poem is not overladen with accurate detail, and it is only the build-up of rather disquieting imagery that makes us realise that what has seemed familiar, may not be so. The fully domesticated animals coming back to the farm are at the same time essentially animal and not, although dominated by man, any the less themselves. Note the repetition of the word *black*: 'The black one, last as usual, swings her head/ And coils a black tongue round a grass-tuft.' The scene takes

place to the backdrop of the sea, and MacCaig surprises us with the image of the sun as a shipwreck: 'Far out in the West/ the wrecked sun flounders though its colours fly.' Perhaps it is the final image of the cow that makes us most uncomfortable: 'The black cow is two native carriers/ Bringing its belly home, slung from a pole.' We are perhaps initially amused at the somewhat grotesque sight of the apparently familiar, angular shape of the cow lumbering homeward, but the implications of servitude and the fact that the cow is merely a commodity to man, continue. The simple language veils a complexity of thought. MacCaig's rather low-key tone can be usefully contrasted to one of the most startling poems of the mid-century. Sir John Squire (1884–1958) dedicated *The Stockyards* (published in *Collected Poems*, 1959) to Robert Frost, and in its remorseless description of a guided tour through an abattoir, he portrays human callousness and insensitivity in treating the animals, and reveals the indifference of the general public in allowing it to continue. After witnessing the unspeakable, there is a terrible irony when the visitor leaves. The final words of this long poem are: 'and again I resumed my life.' Either human capacity to shrug off experience it dislikes is remarkable, or the visitor's life will not be so easily resumed.

Like *Fetching Cows*, MacCaig's short poem *Sheep Dipping* also shows 'domestic' animals and is remarkable for its objective tone, its accuracy of description and the richness and appropriateness of the language. The rather foolish figure of the sheep, after being dipped, standing 'Dribbling salt water into flower's eyes,' may cause us to smile, but, in ways so different from Squire's directness, we are still aware of the fact that this animal is being used by man entirely for his own ends. MacCaig may owe something to Hopkins or even

Lawrence in his approach to observation and description, but he has a distinctive attitude that makes his work something to be reckoned with. He does not shrink from using domestic imagery to describe 'nature', or inanimate or mechanical objects to portray living ones, or vice versa, and the strict control of the rhythm and economy of diction make his lines very compelling. MacCaig's delight in wild animals, especially their movements, is shown in the poem *Movements* with characteristic verbal energy: 'Fox, smouldering through the heather bushes, bursts/ A bomb of grouse.' We might feel that he is somewhat carried away with his own analogies (the diving gannet is 'a white anchor falling' and the 'umbrella heron' landing becomes a 'walking stick'), though the ingenuity is fresh and striking, but the 'emotion recollected in tranquillity' of the last stanza is shocking:

I think these movements and become them, here,
In this room's stillness, none of them about,
And relish them all—until I think of where
Thrashed by a crook, the cursive adder writes
Quick V's and Q's in the dust and rubs them out.

In the somewhat more frightening poem *Flooded Mind* (from the same collection) the language has a disconcerting simplicity. MacCaig begins by describing a man-made lake, with the skeletal shapes of dead trees re-appearing when the water level has gone down. The simplicity of the language and the dry humour draw us easily into the poem: 'When the water fell/ the trees rose up again/ and fish stopped being birds/ among the branches.' But the poet gives a disturbing twist to the development when he likens the rather

strange landscape to the human mind: 'The trees were never the same again, though,/ and the birds/ often regarded him/ with a very fishy eye/ as he walked the policies of himself,/ his own keeper.' The poet describes someone who seems terrified at the prospect of his own mind and the ideas it contains, and the sense of humour has noticeably altered by the closing three lines, to be replaced by a nightmare-like quality: 'No wonder his eyes were/ noticeboards saying/ *Private. Keep out.*' This extraordinary vision continues in poems from later collections such as *The Drowned* (published in *Tree of Strings*, 1977) or *Cock Before Dawn* which appeared in *The Equal Skies* (1980). In this poem, perhaps influenced by Ted Hughes, the Cock, arrogantly surveying the hens and what he confidently sees as his kingdom, boasts 'Lucifer's my blood brother' and declares that the sun will be waiting for him to give it the signal to rise. The sharp observation has remained, in a refined form. The frightening energy of the animal, despite its ridiculousness from man's point of view, is revealed. The wiry strength of the language may remind us of Donne, but this metaphysical argument is decidedly modern.

Vernon Scannell might not be the most obvious candidate for 'nature poet', but in a poem such as *Autumn* (from *Walking Wounded*, 1965), there is a remarkable atmosphere of the season built up almost entirely from city images and illustrations: 'Lamps ripen early in the surprising dusk;/ They are furred like stale rinds with a fuzz of mist.' The city streets, the buildings like the hotel ('an anchored liner') and the cinema, are the setting for the girls waiting for their lovers. Something of the harshness of the autumn evening seems to have affected the girls: 'Their eyes are polished by the wind,/ But the gleam is dumb, empty of joy or anger.' The poet professes

to enjoy the rather sombre scene; 'It is a time of year that's to my taste,/ Full of spiced rumours, sharp and velutinous flavours,/ Dim with the mist that softens the cruel surfaces/ Makes mirrors vague. It is the mist that I most favour.' Scannell's *Autumn* is probably one of the most successful seasonal poems of recent years, though it might be true to observe that on the whole not many contemporary poets have attempted to write them, and it is emphatically urban.

The two interesting characteristics which prompted me to select his work for closer comment here are, first, that he directly relates the world of 'nature' to the world of the human mind, or, to put it slightly differently, recognises man as a part of the natural world, and, second, that he frequently uses children's eyes through which to look, or writes poems in which children react with their environment, in a very different way from those depicted by Dylan Thomas. *Dead Dog* (from *Selected Poems*, 1971), for example, shows a child's experience, though the reporter in the poem seems to be an adult looking back on an event in his childhood. Nevertheless, the 'innocence' of the child in picking up a dead dog found on the street to take it home, although 'The hairs about its grin were spiked with blood,' comes across in the poem very well, as does the shock of the mother and the business-like approach of the father. They 'know' the dog is dead, and have a set of responses suitable for the occasion that suddenly thrusts itself on them. The child, not programmed yet in the usual human reactions, has no concept of death, or how the dog's body might affect his parents. The last lines of the poem bring us back to the present, the 'I' of the poem looking back with a longing for that childish blank page: 'I have no recollection of the school/ Where I was taught my terror of the dead.' Two

further poems which create striking images of the child are *Incendiary* (from the same collection) and *Words and Monsters* (from *The Winter Man*, 1973). *Incendiary* presents a surprising inside view of the mind of a child who would certainly be treated as a pyromaniac for setting fire to farm buildings and destroying stored crops, but whose pathetic loneliness seems to be the real cause: 'And frightening, too, that one small boy should set/ The sky on fire and choke the stars to heat/ Such skinny limbs and such a little heart/ Which would have been content with one warm kiss/ Had there been anyone to offer this.' In *Words and Monsters*, a child instinctively relishes the sounds and appearances of words, although he does not yet know their meanings, and collects them as other children collect birds' eggs. This child gleans that somehow words are the doors to new worlds, and creates his own fantasies. The adult explanation is not always satisfying and although his mother tells him that 'abysmal' means 'bottomless', the child's imagination has outdistanced her, thriving on the at once frightening and exciting that he senses in the title to a film he will not see, but for which he has seen the advertisement. He retreats into worlds where adults have already closed the doors and to which they cannot return:

The Abysmal Brute was grunting in the hot
Dark outside, would follow him to bed.

Scannell's work is by no means confined to this range, and in addition to a dry sense of humour that penetrates poems like *Any Complaints?* (from *Epithets of War*, 1969) or *The Discriminator* (from *The Winter Man*), we find a sensitive awareness of age and the difficulty of communicating from one generation to another, in,

for example, *The Old Books* (from *Selected Poems*, 1971). But I would like to finish my brief comments on his work by referring to the disturbing piece entitled *The Moth* (from *Selected Poems*), which seems to draw together some threads of his vision. The simplicity of the language, the dry humour shown by the objectivity of the view of the 'I' in the poem of himself, makes way for a surprising final section in which the ordinary domestic moth, eater of clothes packed away, turns into something far more demanding, a large presence in its own right, being deliberately fed clothes to appease its endless appetite.

Sometimes I think of the moth in its cage,
Its great khaki wings heavy with dust
And the woman feeding it, pushing through the bars
The tasteless garments to assuage
An appetite that must
Make do with such rough food as she, too must.

It is the twist in the last part of the final line that switches the attention back from the rather grotesque moth in its imagined cage, to the woman, who herself has to 'make do' with 'rough food'. An unflattering picture, perhaps, and certainly one that disturbs our complacency.

It is, of course, impossible to mention here all those poets who have in recent years handled themes of nature, but it might be useful to refer to several particular poems which contribute to the points which I have been trying to make. C. Day Lewis (1904–1972) drew a very sensitive picture in *Sheepdog Trials in Hyde Park* (in *The Gate*, 1962), also dedicated to Robert Frost. Though at the end the poet works the theme round to reflect on the 'woolgathering' of his

own occupation, the contrast between the normal working conditions for the sheepdogs, out on the hillsides, and the 'staged' situation in central London, and the close relation between master and dog as they combine to carry out specific tasks, are sensitively described. I mention the poem principally for the latter characteristic, and would like to contrast this with a poem that describes the domination of wild animals by keeping them in a zoo. The pathetic figure of the gorilla in *Au Jardin des Plantes* (published in *Weep Before Gods*, 1961) by John Wain (b. 1925), is tired out, not with work, but with boredom. Wain has a number of poems with particularly striking images of wild life. We might think of the shock of his description of the fox gnawing off its own foot to escape from the trap, or that of the oil-stricken sea-bird in *A Song About Major Eatherly* (from the same collection), both of which point up the horror of a situation with no choices. I might also mention in passing a poem entitled *The Lay Preacher Ponders* (from *Tonypandy*, 1945) by Idris Davies (1905–1953) which perhaps suitably sets the note for the postwar years. She ironically exposes the triviality of the glib thoughts of the lay preacher, ready instantly to moralise or squeeze instruction from 'nature'. The poem opens with the lines:

Isn't the violet a dear little flower? And the daisy, too,
What nice little thoughts arise from a daisy!

It can be seen from my earlier examples, and perhaps especially from the work of the New Zealand poet, James K. Baxter, to which I would now like to turn, that there are few 'nice little thoughts', but instead some rather unexpected ones, arising from the nature observed by contemporary poets. My choice of Baxter (d. 1972)

might seem less obvious than, say, Roy Fuller (b. 1912), and certainly the *Autobiography of a Lungworm* (from *Collected Poems*, 1962) is well worth attention for its incisive honesty and reluctance to glorify the 'natural cycle'. But the cat from *The Family Cat* (in the same collection), although a daily reminder of advancing age, of the 'bones/ Which none the less cry out in grief,' seems somewhat less interesting than the creature briefly depicted by Baxter in the short poem *The Buried Stream* (from *The Bone Chanter*, 1976). The poet, listening to his old cat Tahi yowling in the bush with another cat, allows his thoughts to drift. The Tibetan ghost trap hung in the alcove 'has caught no ghosts yet', but it does jangle. The poet's children are asleep, and, stimulated by the ideas of Sartre, an 'old hound with noises in his head/ Who dreams the hunt is on, yet fears the stench/ Of action,' he seems nervously aware of the thinness of the veneer of modern civilisation. 'Something clatters in the kitchen, I hear the voice/ Of the buried stream that flows deep, deep,/ Through caves I cannot enter, whose watery rope/ Tugs my divining rod with the habit some call hope.' This rather enigmatic poem touches on unnamed fears which are only partly assuaged by the 'hope' of the last line. In simple language, Baxter has taken the argument into quite complex realms. Nature, or at least a way of life no longer attainable, is also shown in the interesting poem *To a Print of Queen Victoria* (from *The Rock Woman, Selected Poems*, 1969). In a mixture of criticism and grudging respect for the Queen, a picture of whom has come to light, the poet seems sadly aware that the modern world poses problems that make Victoria's assumptions, although of course totally unsuitable, seem to contain a confidence he has to admire:

...Little mouth, strong
nose and hooded eye—they speak
of half-truths my type have slung
out of the window, and lack
and feel the lack too late. Queen,

you stand most for the time of
early light, clay roads, great trees
unfelled, and the smoke from huts
where girls in sack dresses
stole butter...

The idealised, almost Wordsworthian nature of the last stanza, has gone, and in Baxter's poems, which perhaps deal with human nature more than the natural world, we find both extraordinary intensity and disturbing inconclusiveness instead. The *Inflammable Woman* (from *Collected Poems*, 1980) satirises a modern drawing-room scene in which elegant, educated figures sip cocktails and hold an intellectual discussion ('about God and Kafka'). The woman, apparently a reluctant guest, is both frightened, perhaps socially, and at the same time bored by the conversation. But, a question we are also encouraged to ask of her companions in the room, does she herself have any real 'core', that might make her criticism of them viable? The poet describes the scene as if the woman is being consumed by a fire, which sets light to everything else in the room, but which nobody notices or is able to see except the poet himself. The poem is an attempt to penetrate the essence, the identity of the woman, but its conclusions are nebulous, and the lines end with an ironical politeness that leaves us feeling the question may be unanswerable. We go back through the poem and are perhaps left with the hanging question: '...What did she most/ Regard herself as being? (Though

no one/ Bothered to find out)—a white rose? an old stocking?/ An animal dying of hunger?’

Equally disturbing is a poem like *News from a Pacified Area* (from *The Labyrinth*, 1974), in which the speaker, caught up in some local skirmish and observing his family members finding their own, contradictory ways of survival, finds that he has abandoned the old values for which his grandfather stood. The politics of survival speak more loudly than the abstract codes. Nevertheless the poem ends with the sense of a self-betrayal: ‘...I have grown a face/ Whitish and smooth, like new scar tissue, brother,/ To hide the evidence I am no longer I.’

Two British poets who have lived in the United States of America and who have both been extensively written about, apparently have little in common in poetical terms, but the work of Thom Gunn (b. 1929) and more particularly that of Ted Hughes, seems important in the current discussion. Thom Gunn’s early piece, *On The Move* (from *The Sense of Movement*, 1957) invites a comparison between the movement of the birds over the fields and the motor-cycle gang along the roads, with, perhaps, the implication that whatever ‘meaning’ there is in the one may be neither more nor less present in the other. A much later poem, *The Messenger* (from *Moly*, 1971) has refined the philosophical element of Gunn’s thought, and we observe in this poem a man staring into a flower, deliberately unnamed. There may be some influence of D. H. Lawrence behind both the idea and to some extent the language of this poem, though there are no solutions offered. The man is trying to absorb the influence of the flower as he gazes ‘not at but into it’, and Gunn’s personal terminology, asking in the opening line, ‘Is this man *turning angel* as he stares/ At one

red flower...?' (my *italics*) is open to a variety of interpretation. Gunn links his human beings firmly to the nature of which they are a part, and invites us to drop our easy assumptions, to look again.

Ted Hughes, however, is more likely, at least in his earlier poetry, to be described as a 'nature' poet. Early poems are striking for their accurate, powerfully expressed description of the natural world, which Hughes is obviously so aware of, and of which he has clearly had so much first-hand experience. But his nature is from the beginning disturbing. Poems like *Pike* (from *Lupercal*, 1960) in which he vividly recreates the presence of that ugly, fierce fish, have strong implications of menace and threat. The 'I' of the poem has seen two such fish, the one killed by the other, the latter by its inveterate greed: 'One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet.' As the 'I' fishes a pond, his imagination plays with what huge pike there might be below the surface. The symbolical elements of the poem evoke the primal human fears, and there is no Wordsworthian comfort, or even Lawrentian confidence, that any reaction between the human and the 'natural' worlds will be beneficial. The 'I' of the poem *View of a Pig* (from the same collection) cannot find himself upset by the sight of the animal 'dead on a barrow'. We feel none of the shock of Squire's poem, and only a kind of resignation at the deadness of the pig. Hughes was accused of having a fascist view of nature exemplified in the piece *Hawk Roosting* (from the same collection). The bird surveys the world with absolute unquestioning sense of its superiority, and the assumption that sun and wind, even its potential victims, were there only to serve its needs. To readers with anything like a Wordsworthian approach to nature, the poem must indeed appear threatening and it also provides a shocking contrast to Hopkins'

splendid *The Windhover* (1877). Perhaps Hughes' vision of the immediate proximity of such disturbing elemental forces that stretch back through the record of life on earth, is horrifying, but he does seem to be asking us to abandon too easily assumed comforts and see our planet for what it is. *Esther's Tomcat* (also from *Lupercal*) has much more in common with Baxter's Tahi than with Fuller's family cat. Hughes' pig, however, might remind us again of Fuller's *Autobiography of a Lungworm*.

Thistles (from *Wodwo*, 1967) might again initially seem reminiscent of D. H. Lawrence. Hughes describes, in spare, incisive language and controlled rhythm, the ordinary thistle that grows in English fields and gardens, but reveals the elemental savagery of the plant, eaten though it is by 'the rubber tongues of cows', and temporarily controlled by 'the hoeing hands of men'. Hughes sees the thistles as endlessly waging a war against the rest of nature for their own survival. The fighting imagery is ruthlessly insistent: 'Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear,/ Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground', and invites inspection as a reflection, too, of human behaviour. The *Howling of Wolves* (from the same collection) seems to have a similar theme, and, with a newer, even sparer, language and refined technique, the ideas first suggested in *Pike*, or other *Lupercal* poems, are shaped again. Hughes does not exactly apologise for the animality and brutality of the wolf, but he is apparently trying to underline an inevitability about its behaviour, even though this is frequently seen as inhuman or anti-human. The wolf *is* inhuman, but 'It must feed its fur'. It is interesting to compare this poem with Louis MacNeice's *Wolves* (*Collected Poems*, 1966), in which, though apparently calling for people to stop being

'reflective' and 'finding pathos in dogs and undeveloped handwriting', the poet calls our attention to the incessant movement of the sea, and the howling of wolves, all the more as he begs us to shut our ears to them.

But in Hughes' later collections, like *Crow*, 1972, poems such as *Examination at the Womb Door*, may begin to strike us as too insistently simplistic, deliberately reducing human life to the same mean dimensions he accords the wolf, pig or pike. The Crow figure, or symbol, mocks at human life and, apparently, finds it demeaning. *A Childish Prank* mocks at the sexual aspect of the relationship between men and women, and implies a bored creator, careless of what he has almost accidentally constructed. Crow goes on laughing. Yet, in spite of the reduction to animality, and the extended use of fighting and battle imagery in *Lovesong* (also from *Crow*), perhaps there is a slight tone of warmth, a trace of 'humanity' in the description of the love between the two lovers, especially at the end when we read, 'In the morning they wore each other's face.' Not everyone will, of course, agree with the suggestion, but it might be interesting to propose some connection between this late poem by Hughes and the remarkably powerful, indeed in its own way shocking, poem *Lesbos* by Sylvia Plath, written at some time in the last nine months before her suicide in 1963, and to be found in the collection *Winter Trees* (published 1971). I do not wish to involve Plath's heavily introspective poems in my perhaps very superficial look at 'nature' poetry, but poems like *Tulip* (from *Ariel*, 1965) or *The Bee Meeting* (from the same collection), for all their intense inwardness, show a perception of natural things similar in some aspects to Hughes' vision in the poems of his mentioned here.

Whether Hughes' readers are prepared to follow him in the apparently negative directions that his recent verse seems to be taking, remains to be seen. But as a poet looking uncompromisingly at the world around him, at men's and women's places in it, and trying to cut away untenable earlier conceptions, he has a commanding place in our attention. There is no false idealisation in his work.³ Some critics might find a new synthesis in a poem like *Salmon Taking Times* from the relatively recent collection *Moortown* (1979). There is a return of the more lyrical and sensuous language, and yet the uncompromising sinew of the main argument persists. The effect of the rain 'That just hazed and softened the daffodil buds/ And clotted the primroses', freshens the scene described and our perception of it. But the observer in the poem destroys the gossamer-like web: 'I touch it, and its beauty-frailty crumples/ To a smear of wet, a strengthless wreckage/ Of dissolving filaments...', though, curiously we do not feel the destruction as vicious, and there is an air of suspense in the last two lines which adjust if they do not quite redeem the intrusion:

It is like a religious moment, slightly dazing.
It is like a shower of petals of eglantine.

The youngest of the poets whose work I have chosen to mention is Seamus Heaney. His early poetry, in collections such as *Death of a Naturalist* (1966), describes the life on a rural farm in Ireland, and perhaps owes something to Ted Hughes in terms of style, though Heaney's individual voice is recognisable from the beginning. The collection *North* (1975) put him on the poetical map as *the* poet who was bold enough to confront the political situation in Northern

Ireland, even though there might be a certain amount of relief from British critics that Heaney seemed to be taking a very impartial and objective view, certainly one that would not endear him to everyone in his own country. It is not the political poems, in the normal sense, such as *Whatever You Say, Say Nothing* (from *North*), that I am concerned with here, and even the interesting series of poems which he has written under the stimulation of the discovery of the remains of the bog people in Denmark, is only involved by implication. I would like to look instead at some poems in which he describes his 'nature', from early and through to late collections, such as *Field Work* (1979), because they cast a great deal of light on contemporary attitudes.

Heaney's poem *The Early Purges* (from *Death of a Naturalist*) was criticised for having too callous a view of life, or at least animal life. The farmer, Dan Taggart, can drown kittens or puppies without compunction: '... on well-run farms pests have to be kept down.' The sentimental view of animals, particularly pets, was shocked, and letters to the press revealed how much.⁴ But the poem could be shrugged off as showing only the view of one insensitive farmer, and Heaney's rather objective presentation of it. Other poems from the same collection I find particularly revealing, partly because, like some of the work of Vernon Scannell already referred to, Heaney chooses to present the vision through the eyes of a child. The title poem of *Death of a Naturalist* is one such poem, and I think, shows Heaney's position rather clearly. He is by no means sitting on the fence in this piece, and we have undertones of a world of nature that is shockingly different from that sometimes promulgated in the safety of classrooms. Heaney recreates the latter by referring to Miss Walls,

the teacher who 'would tell us how/ The daddy frog was called a bullfrog/ And how he croaked and how the mammy frog/ Laid hundreds of little eggs and this was/ Frogspawn.'

Heaney is holding up the teacher's view, including the 'childish' language and comfortable human analogies she uses, for our closer inspection in the first part of the poem. She presents a 'traditional view' of a thoroughly ordered, completely understood 'nature' which is no threat to child or man. The second part of the poem blows this complacency to pieces. The child goes out one day, armed with his classroom simplifications, and comes face to face with a horrifying reality in which a completely different, wild and threatening 'nature' literally terrifies him. It would be foolish to dismiss this poem as only presenting the child's view, or by saying that the child's vision was, of course, rather distorted, perhaps because of his small size, or because he was by nature excessively introspective or even neurotic. There is a violence in the language that demands more serious attention:

Right down the damn gross-bellied frogs were cocked
On sods; their loose necks pulsed like sails. Some hopped:
The slap and plop were obscene threats. Some sat
Poised like mud grenades, their blunt heads farting.

The child runs away, 'knowing', in a way that Miss Walls did not, that 'The great slime kings were gathered there for vengeance...'

From the next collection, seen by some critics as less impressive, though on retrospect I find this evaluation unsatisfying, the poem *Outlaw* points up the main theme as exemplified in the somewhat sinister title of the collection, *Door into the Dark* (1969). Again

seen through a child's eyes, the natural world of sex and procreation is re-examined, and some of the human sentimentality stripped away. The poem gains some of its strength from the 'innocence' of the child about what he is observing. The child is helping out on the farm and drags the cow over to Kelly's where it will be 'serviced'. The choice of unemotional terms is deliberate. The child does not understand that Kelly has no licence to provide the stud service, and hands over 'the clammy silver, though why/ I could not guess.' Sitting on a high fence, that underlines how small he is, the child watches the old bull as it 'fumbled from its stall/ Unhurried as an old steam-engine shunting'. The sexual act itself is described in straightforward, unsentimentalised language, with the only flash of energy in the phrase 'slammed life home'. The child takes the cow home again and the bull goes back into 'the dark, the straw'. The child's incomprehension only serves to emphasise the adult's awareness of the functionality of the act of procreation in the animal world. The short poem *Rite of Spring* from the same collection describes how the farm workers wound straw rope around the frozen pump, and set it alight to unfreeze it. The whole poem, however, with its neat control and incisive language, is described in terms that imply a comparison to the sexual act. The last two lines make the point in sensuous clarity: 'It cooled, we lifted her latch,/ Her entrance was wet, and she came.'

Heaney has sometimes been accused of proffering a view of nature, similar in many respects to that of Ted Hughes, that is cruel and harsh, or which reduces the significance of man. He has also been accused, if that imperfectly describes his position, of using an apparent objectivity as an escape route. My own assessment perhaps

tends towards the former, and I therefore see his objectivity only as a technique by which he can offer his observations to the reader without forcing his own opinion on him. There are touches of human warmth, even when the vision of nature is less soothing. The poem *Limbo* from *Wintering* (1972) describes how a dead baby is caught up in a fisherman's net. The comparisons with early poems are obvious, except that instead of kittens being drowned, in this piece, for reasons perhaps of the child's illegitimacy, it is a human life that has been voluntarily sacrificed. Despite the shock of the death, which is in fact a murder, the poet tries to imply the mixture of emotions in the mother's mind as she carried out the deed. The mother ducked the child in the sea 'tenderly', and the graphic image of the dead child 'as a minnow with hooks/ Tearing her open' can only be described as 'humane', though they give an unusual dimension to the word. The essential sadness and sorrow of such a death, or perhaps of a world which has forced such a death, is shown in the apparently Christian imagery of the last five lines, but the coldness of the language belies any explicitly religious interpretation:

Now limbo will be

A cold glitter of souls
Through some far briny zone.
Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
Smart and cannot fish there.

The poem *The Skunk*, from the last collection I have space to mention here, *Field Work* (1979), has a rather finely balanced compromise in its description of the beautiful animal, the skunk, and its deliberate reference to and comparison with the woman. The early

accuracy of natural observation is there in the opening stanzas, but Heaney has stripped away some of the excessive pretentiousness of human behaviour by the end of the poem. The last two lines run: 'Your head-down, tail up hunt in a bottom drawer/ For the black plunge-line nightdress.' The woman's motion is a strong echo of the movement of the skunk. Heaney, like Hughes, though without, so far, a personal symbolism that might to some seem trite or escapist as Hughes' *Crow* can, has been trying to look closely at 'nature' and at human behaviour as a part of nature.

Of more recently noticed poets who have taken 'nature' themes, such as Craig Raine (b. 1944) or Christopher Reid (b. 1949), it can only be said here that initially sharp observation did not seem to be coupled to any apparent depth of understanding or vision. How such poets may develop, of course, it may still be too early to say. I do not know, either, whether the work of the poets I have singled out in this essay can be said to give full corroboration to the rather gloomy predictions of a critic, for example, such as M. L. Rosenthal when he observed 'a new sense of unease and disorder' in post-World War II poetry, or the death of 'humanism' as it has come to be understood in previous generations. He writes, '...the humanistic way, which traditionally educated and romantic modern men still propose to protect, and indeed to project into a Utopian future, has already been defeated' (*The New Poets*, OUP, 1967, p. 5). Rosenthal mentions a new 'angst', 'a heart-heavy realization that remorseless brutality is a condition not only of the physical universe but also of man himself.' While some, perhaps many, of the poems and poets I have mentioned could certainly be described as adding fuel to this fire, perhaps there is also an underlying irony, a kind of sincerity of

observation and language, even a 'wit', that modifies the bitterness of the apparent conclusions. Certainly the 'nature' poets of the sixties and seventies in particular have blown away many false assumptions and sentimental beliefs that could only obscure our understanding of the relation between man and his planet, or man and himself. That in itself is something to be grateful for, even if we might have to look far to find much comfort in the observations that have taken their place. It might be suggested that there is a 'brave new world' after all, though one significantly different from Miranda's and characterised perhaps by a different kind of irony than Orwell's.

Notes

1. 'F. R. Leavis', in *Language and Silence*, G. Steiner, Atheneum, 1962, reprinted in *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism*, ed. David Lodge, Longman, 1972.
2. In *D. H. Lawrence|Novelist*, F. R. Leavis, Chatto and Windus, 1955.
3. This makes his recent appointment as Poet Laureate particularly exciting in that his achievement has been 'officially' recognised, but that he is unlikely to compromise his vision to fulfill official expectations.
4. See 'Speech and Reticence: Seamus Heaney's *North*', by Blake Morrison, in *British Poetry since 1970: A Survey*, ed. Peter Jones and Michael Schmidt, Carcanet New Press, 1980, pp. 105/6.