

I just found the following letter under a pile of lumber in the depths of a computer drive. I think it must have been written to Barry MacSweeney. I can't think of any other Barry who phoned me.

It looks to me, and I may half-remember it, that Barry had solicited responses to the death of Ted Hughes, which had occurred three days before. Whether anything was done with what he received, I have no idea.

Bearing in mind that it was written nearly 15 years ago, I will still own up to having written this. Whether or not it is worth reading, is not for me to say. It is adequate to the task I think that I was set.

Lawrence Upton

28 December 2012

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Just inside the M25, Surrey

Saturday 31 10 98

Dear Barry,

Thanks for your call. I couldn't start immediately. Not grief over Ted Hughes: my computer wasn't working; but it appears to be restored though it's making some odd noises... What was the question? *What do I think about Ted Hughes dying?* I think that was it. Or was it *What do I think about Ted Hughes??* Ted Hughes. Discuss.

I taught his poetry for a while, in the mid 80s, in secondary school. No real choice because there were no other books available; and he fits into a conventional regime - alliteration, imagery - How many yards would you like, Sir? These are among our popular lines; challenging, but not **challenging**, if you know what I mean.

A bit like a zoo: you see dangerous things, but you won't come to harm; and you go home afterwards and nothing need have changed...

I quite enjoy some of Hughes' poetry, now and then; but not to any greater extent than the poetry of many others; and, maybe I should look again, but I wasn't impressed by the recently published poems about SP... Individual poems have their qualities, but Hughes' poetry as a body of work does not speak to me. It always was a silent body.

I wrote recently "There are no real bests, only lists of them"; and I'll stand by that.

Words like "best" and "greatest" mean ineffective, because misleading, ways of thinking. "X is a great poet" assumes the validity of the concept of greatness and that assumes the validity of hierarchies... The school I referred to, a multi-layered hierarchy, like all schools, breeding hierarchies like viruses, was headed by an idiot who destroyed with bad leadership a thriving school, whilst fending off objection by shouting "Are you challenging my right to manage?" Too right we were, though we denied it. Never argue with a man with a gun. If it hadn't been a hierarchy, the school might have survived. If it hadn't been a hierarchy, I wouldn't have taught much Hughes.

The children we were teaching, Hughes readers by fiat, were, the majority of them, at the bottom of a heap; and their expectations were limited. That's what happens in hierarchies. There has to be a majority at the bottom or the hierarchy ceases to exist. Great poets, great politicians, great whatever, are named great and so refresh the existence of the hierarchy while the hierarchy gives comfort to those at its bottom. Some students hoped to ascend a mythical ladder and worked to pass examinations. Others

believed in the hierarchy so strongly that they did not believe they could ascend its structure and made little attempt to learn anything. Each to its place. Eternal verities. We were not encouraged to encourage love of learning. As the school sank, some teachers hung on, less from a sense of duty, more from the lust to be, briefly, heads of department et cetera, before they all lost their jobs. I see the cult of Hughes as part of that stupidity - he is used to confirm the apparently continuing things as categorised by powers higher up the heap; he is made a profitable industry with a flow of new potential readers courtesy of his being taught in schools.

Supposedly, the English like "Nature", but few of them experience it as what they believe in. Many, I think, believe that Hughes' engagement with Nature is inherently good - because of what he is stood for, cue music - though they would be hard put to experience the Nature of Hughes' poems. If we want an observant and innovative poet who writes of Nature, let's have Colin Simms. *Colin Simms is the greatest poet writing in English*. How would that go down at F & F? Not very well. Colin doesn't behave as if many of the innovative poets of this century had never lived.

But let's play the greatness game on its own terms. What about Rilke? for example. Change the name you evaluate in the statement *X is a great poet* and you change the socio-political consequences of the statement. Naming a great poet is not value free. Naming a great poet is a matter of personal choice. Personal choice is ideologically determined, at least in part, and helps to determine one's ideology. Poetry's not in it. Poetry breaks the circle. Naming people great is brown-nosing yourself as you strive to share a little of the greatness of the example of the great.

What about *Jackson Mac Low is the greatest living poet*? Like Simms, he's still alive and still producing. Many in UK won't have heard of him; but that's a marketing problem. Though he speaks English, he isn't an Englishman. (Nor was Rilke, but at least he was European and we're European now - the posters say so.) Marketing may not deal with that. Cue music. Not Elgar! Cage!! That's better. On with the campaign. Think positive! Jackson Mac Low is the most important and greatest poet of the twentieth century... Your frequently-asked question: *This Mac Low, what does he write about*. Your question answered: He uses chance operations and he uses procedures. It's poetry a bit like the world you really live in. (He doesn't write about, he writes.) It has to be experienced rather than just consumed and'll take a little longer than The Thought Fox takes. It's rather democratic poetry. It rejects hierarchies implicitly. It encourages you to think. It teaches you to teach yourself. It exposes linguistic additives and side-effects.

No, it'll never work and I wouldn't want it to. I don't want great poets. I want Hughes and Mac Low.

We survive in a dying country, sans industry, sans community, sans country. We are inventive and semi-literate but ruled and robbed by airheads.

We don't thrive, but some with the money to buy books from Faber believe we thrive. They believe we are free. So what an appropriate poem The Thought Fox is! And Death shall have no Dominion. No wonder the BBC have been broadcasting it repeatedly. Hughes for Permanent Laureate. The monarch may, eventually change; but we'll have an iconic poet to reinvent repeatedly. Britain never never never shall be changed. Lord Hughes. Thought (up) Hughes.

Lawrence