

# THE BODY THINKING

## A Kinship Between Poetry and Phenomenology

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### 1 Introduction

In this paper I am going to focus on the similar ways that the philosophical tradition of phenomenology and the poetry of Ted Hughes strive toward a radical shift in the way consciousness—defined in terms of self-reflection—participates in the natural world. The style of reflection that joins phenomenology and the poetry of Ted Hughes into dialogue is a type of thinking that does not forget, but *re-instates* its origins in the body's primordial continuity with the natural world. This style of reflection that they have in common is what I will call *intercorporeal reflection* which, to quote French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty, concentrates all its efforts upon “re-achieving a direct and primitive contact with the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Phenomenology and the poetry of Ted Hughes seek to think or reflect upon the world from *within* it, as opposed to thinking or reflecting upon one's experience of the world as a detached observer, construing the world as a fixed system extracted from that larger, organic context which eco-philosopher David Abram calls, the ‘the more-that-human-world.’<sup>2</sup> Phenomenology, particularly in the recent developments of

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<sup>1</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup>Abram 1997, p. 1.

eco-phenomenology, inquires into the nature of bodily experience in a manner that avoids falling into the trap of reflecting upon the world from an abstracted point of view. Intercorporeal reflection means thinking from *within* and *of* the immediate environment—thought embedded in the flesh.

The poetry of Ted Hughes demonstrates a mind at work that exemplifies the phenomenological reflection promoted by Merleau-Ponty who strove to dismantle the subject-object divide and describe, beneath that impeding duality, a primordial cohesion between the body and the sensuous world. As a rebellion against the Cartesian heritage, which led to the degradation of the validity of sense-experience, the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty sought to undermine the Cartesian inheritance with a more radically different way of understanding human being's orientation toward the world of sense-experience. Merleau-Ponty tried to find a way of entering into the world without disrupting its immediate continuity, and to discover beneath the packed layers that the human mind builds up upon the immediate world of sense-experience, "that primordial being which is not yet the subject-being nor the object-being."<sup>3</sup>

## 2 The wreck of the I

Firstly, I am going to examine *Wodwo*, a poem by Ted Hughes which explores the primal role of the body in forming, discovering and revealing intercorporeal relations between self and world. After considering the role of the body's interactions with the sensuous world I will go on to discuss how such a body-world continuum reveals a particular shape of mind, a consciousness aligned to that primordial dance of the body and world mentioned in the introduction. The poem is cited here in full:

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over  
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge  
I enter water. What am I to split

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<sup>3</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1970, p. 65-66.

The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed  
Of the river above me upside down very clear  
What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find  
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret  
interior and make it my own? Do these weeds  
know me and name me to each other have they  
seen me before, do I fit in their world? I seem  
separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped  
out of nothing casually I've no threads  
fastening me to anything I can go anywhere  
I seem to have been given the freedom  
of this place what am I then? And picking  
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me  
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it  
me and doing that have coincided very queerly  
But what shall I be called am I the first  
have I an owner what shape am I what  
shape am I am I huge if I go  
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees  
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me  
for the moment if I sit still how everything  
stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre  
but there's all this what is it roots  
roots roots roots and here's the water  
again very queer but I'll go on looking<sup>4</sup>

Ted Hughes's poem *Wodwo* is taken from his 1967 collection of the same name. It is the personified activity of the intercorporeal, reflective spirit of inquiry that seeks to attain a grip upon the world, to get a hold *of* and be held *by* the body's pre-cognitive embrace of the larger Body of the earth.

In this poem, *Wodwo* the character is the demonstration of Merleau-Ponty's statement that there "is no inner man,"<sup>5</sup> that the discovery of oneself is located within the *projective*, outward movements

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<sup>4</sup>Hughes 2003, p. 183.

<sup>5</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. xii; See also Toadvine 2009, p. 83.

of the body, as opposed to the *introjective*, inward gaze of the mind into oneself which is, as so much twentieth century thought has argued, an insular dead-end and a perpetuation of an anthropocentric illusion, the stubborn misconception that the human subject has come to believe that it he is the centre of the world.

Through the open-ended exploration of the exterior horizons that rhythmically close and open up before him, Wodwo is lead deeper into a mystery made up of both himself and the world. Discovering what he/she is wholly depends upon the extent to which, in Ted Toadvine's phrase, 'the inexhaustible perceptual plenitude' is explored. By the end of the poem, *what* he is shown to be seems as inexhaustible as the sensuous terrain itself. In Wodwo's ongoing, intimate quest with the persistent queerness of the perceptual field, it becomes evident that the question of an interior man is made obsolete in Wodwo's probing of what Merleau-Ponty called the unfathomable "enigma of the brute world."<sup>6</sup> It is through the world that a sense of Wodwo, as a wave of the sensuous world's rhythm, is made manifest. Wodwo feels himself come into being out of the very world he throws himself toward.

The poem also describes the fluid dynamic of perception that is characterised by a continual, open indeterminacy in dialogue with the indeterminate, sensorial landscape. Merleau-Ponty's astute example of this dynamic of perception sheds light upon the poem. Here, we can imagine that the speaker is Wodwo who goes on looking because he *can*.

If I walk along a shore towards a ship that has run aground,  
and the funnel or masts merge into the forest bordering on  
the sand dune, there will be a moment when these details  
suddenly become part of the ship, and indissolubly fused  
with it. As I approached, I . . . felt that the look of the ob-  
ject was on the point of altering, that something was im-  
minent in this tension, as a storm is imminent in storm  
clouds. Suddenly the sight before me was recast in a man-  
ner satisfying to my vague expectation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 156.

<sup>7</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 20.

As the quote indicates, the sensuous world is already ready to interact with the philosopher's eyes before his eyes have fully caught sight of the object. The object of perception thus becomes the subject that the philosopher is pulled towards. In terms of Wodwo, he/she inhabits a world that is full of subjects that are always on the brink of becoming themselves. Through bodily perception of other objects, other bodies, the world is constantly enriched by its own coming-to-be. Wodwo is a body experiencing a world of bodies coming into being. Through sense-experience, objects become subjects to be communed with and not, as in the case of objects, encased in the plastic distance of the analytic mind to be studied and dissected.

Caught up within the sensational enjambment of Wodwo's being-in-the-world is the process of bodily perception whereby Wodwo's fascinated exploration of the organic world is made possible. The possibility of Wodwo's access to things wholly depends upon the body's immediate willingness to comply with each sensation. Wodwo is drawn onward through the organic sensorium by the magnetized charge of natural phenomena which is first off all, prior to the conceptualization of what he is, empowered by the body's interrelation with things. The body is summoned forth by things, it seems, because things themselves are active agents of carnal expression. In the event of perception, Merleau-Ponty says that:

Apart from the probing of my eye or my hand, and before my body synchronizes with it, the sensible is nothing but a vague beckoning.<sup>8</sup>

Wodwo clearly obeys the 'vague beckoning of the sensible' because his body affirms the response. Wodwo's repeated questions are spoken by the voice of the body in reply to the polyphonic chorus of the sensible that swells and fades in rhythm with Wodwo's movement. Body and world conduct each other's movements; there is no 'I' separate from the choral voice, wielding itself as the sole conductor. (It is ironic that the shape of the letter 'I' is also the shape of the conductor's wand.)

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<sup>8</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 248.

The conversation reels in a dynamic interplay between body and world thwarting any closure of the perceptual event which could stifle the freedom of the bodily pose, the bodily pose being simply the orientation of the body towards a thing. The thorough engagement with things enacted by Wodwo confirms the phenomenological vision of an implicit reciprocation between body and world in the event of perception. Wodwo finds this endless sucking-in a source of fascination. Wodwo the character is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, caught up in a "momentum which carries us beyond subjectivity," because "... round about the perceived body a vortex forms, towards which my world is drawn and, so to speak, sucked in."<sup>9</sup> Wodwo's movement through the world is only possible by the fact that he/she is a body possessed by the world which, at no point, can be exorcised or extracted. Wodwo can be regarded as the energised impulse of the body's ceaseless attunement to the summoning of things; the secret interrogator that sits at the heart of our perceptual participation with the world. Merleau-Ponty reiterates the actuality of the body's unremitting questions by adding:

a sensible datum [like the colour blue] which is on the point of being felt sets a kind of muddled problem for my body to solve. I must find the attitude which *will* provide it with the means of becoming determinate, showing up as blue; I must find the reply to a question which is obscurely expressed. And yet I do so only when I am invited by it, my attitude is never sufficient to make me really see blue or really touch a hard surface. The sensible gives back to me what I lent to it, but this is only what I took from it in the first place. As I contemplate the blue of the sky ... I abandon myself to it and plunge into this mystery, it 'thinks itself within me,' I am the sky itself as it is drawn together and unified, and as it begins to exist for itself; my consciousness is saturated with this limitless blue.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 400, 412.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 248-9.

The attitude adopted by this 'I' so that it can enter into the mystery of the sky is not the domineering, oppositional attitude adopted by egocentricity. The 'I' in this passage as well as the 'I' in Wodwo is the expression of a deeper self whose attitude towards things is identical to the attitude of the body. This 'I' is the 'natural self', which is characterised by its abandonment to the solicitations of sensuous phenomena. It synchronises itself with a certain thing or aspect of things in order to bring about a perceptual encounter.

### 3 The natural self in question

The natural self is nature's own gift, or what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'primal gift', entrusted to us but which we immediately give back in a ceaseless, carnal reciprocity. The natural self is our way *into* the world and is *of* the world. It gives us access to a democratic, open-ended totality which exists beyond our intellectual comprehension. Wodwo, as the natural self, is primordially enamoured with a world that is to be explored, described, participated in, but which in every look or touch is indefinable but somehow, clearly *there*. Merleau-Ponty writes of

the prepossession of a totality which is there before one knows how and why, whose realizations are never what we would have imagined them to be, and which nonetheless fulfills a secret expectation within us, since we believe in it tirelessly.<sup>11</sup>

Wodwo, as the natural self, demonstrates the secretive commitment to a world that is unknowable but which paradoxically nonetheless ensures his rootedness in that world. Wodwo's unhesitant attitude in knowing himself through the world is characteristic of the 'natural self's' faith in the reliable correspondence of phenomena to the world.

Wodwo's interrogation of sense-experience is not performed by an ego but by the natural self, which has already and wholeheartedly abandoned itself to the world, to water, roots, and trees. Wodwo *is* the natural self whose life is connatural with 'the ongoing emergence

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<sup>11</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 42.

of the real' and whose status is in the world 'as the heart is in the organism,' forming on open system of reciprocity between perceiver and perceived.

The natural self maintains what Merleau Ponty calls the 'natural attitude' which endlessly thwarts closure of any perceptual encounter. The visible spectacle is kept constantly alive by the natural self's attitude towards the world, endlessly on the look-out for further migrations into the open, sensuous field. In another passage, which sheds light on the natural self's hyper-intimate attitude with the world, Merleau-Ponty writes:

The relations of sentient to sensible are comparable with those of the sleeper to his slumber: sleep comes when a certain voluntary attitude suddenly receives from outside the confirmation for which it was waiting. I am breathing deeply and slowly in order to summon sleep, and suddenly it is as if my mouth were connected to some great lung outside myself which alternately calls forth and forces back my breath. A certain rhythm of respiration, which a moment ago I voluntarily maintained, now becomes my very being, and sleep, until now aimed at as a significance, suddenly becomes a situation.<sup>12</sup>

The sensible takes possession of the body because of the natural self's openness toward the possessive kinship of nature. The natural self is not personal in this sense of an 'I' that is related to a particular person or situation. The natural self, much more complex than this, is our general mode of access to the perceptual plenitude. Taylor Carman elucidates the natural self in this way:

Underlying that (more or less) transparent personal subject is a more primitive, one might say *translucent* layer of bodily experience that has a more impersonal character, better captured by the French pronoun *on* ('one' or 'we'), as 'one' in *one blinks every few seconds*, or *we breathe*

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<sup>12</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 246.



*through our noses.* The *prepersonal* bodily subject of perception is thus not my conscious, reflective self, but simply ‘the one’ (*le ‘on’*).<sup>13</sup>

Discovery of the ‘one’ is a consequence of the affirmation of the natural self. Merleau-Ponty says of this ‘one,’ that:

Every perception takes place in an atmosphere of generality and is presented to us anonymously. I cannot say that *I* see the blue of the sky in the sense in which I say that I understand a book or again in which I decide to devote my life to mathematics. . . . [I]f I wanted to render precisely the perceptual experience, I ought to say that *one* perceives in me, and not that I perceive.<sup>14</sup>

The natural self, then, is something that renders all experience possible—a kind of transcendental prerequisite for experience made manifest to the cognizant, thinking self. Importantly, though, this natural self for Merleau-Ponty is also an anonymity, something that I cannot call my own. In *Wodwo*, we can see how this anonymity, ‘the one,’ continually reinvigorates itself through contact with other bodily beings, with other concretions of ‘the one.’ The hunch implicit in the poem, then, is that there is some interesting and important relationship between the preservation of the natural self on the one hand, and the kind of communion with other parts of the anonymous ‘one’ on the other. Merleau-Ponty says the natural self “runs through me, yet does so independently of me,” and “[e]ach time I experience a sensation, I feel that it concerns not my own being, the one for which I am responsible and for which I make decisions, but another self which has already sided with the world. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

This then poses an interesting question: How, then, does one gain greater access to this natural self whose ‘thoughts’ are the ‘thoughts’ of the earth, a self which has already sided with the world before personal thought about the world has commenced? Perhaps one could argue

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<sup>13</sup>Carman 2008, p. 94.

<sup>14</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 91.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 192, 251.

that it is through an attentive abandonment of the conscious self, and in a rapturous fascination with things and sensations that the natural self is awakened and engaged. The natural self that was latent within conscious experience of a thing or sensation becomes manifest, and the 'precognitive grip on the environment,' what Merleau-Ponty terms the '*meilleure prise*,' (optimal grip), is brought to the fore.

Returning to the idea of the body-world conversation, it is as though the questions posed by Wodwo were posed by the natural world itself. Wodwo's mode of self-inquiry, as the natural self expounded by Merleau-Ponty, is in the form of questions which do not separate Wodwo from the natural surroundings. The questions' unanswerability inspires Wodwo to enfold himself back into the surroundings. The questions posed by Wodwo do not require straight answers because they seem to arise out the intercorporeal process itself. They lie beyond discursive dispute. Wodwo's eventful movements are the silent answers. And the questions seem as part of the surroundings just as much as the trees, the roots and waters. Consider the lines:

... I seem  
 separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped  
 out of nothing casually I've no threads  
 fastening me to anything I can go anywhere  
 I seem to have been given the freedom  
 of this place what am I then? ...

The place opened out toward him is an unfathomable enigma, a question to be experienced not explained. It is as though the place, the things, nature itself speaks through him. As Merleau-Ponty indicated, such questions are a way of taking bearings upon the world. And what is true of Wodwo is also true of ourselves: "If we are ourselves in question in the very unfolding of our life, . . . it is because we ourselves are one sole continued question, a perpetual enterprise of taking our bearings on the constellations of the world. . . ." <sup>16</sup> In the poem, the question marks dissolve away because Wodwo becomes a continued

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<sup>16</sup>Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 103.

question, a spirit of open inquiry. Cognitive reflection becomes bodily interaction.

#### 4 Saying 'No' to conclusion

Wodwo moves within a world that exists beyond conclusion, brimming with a perpetual excess and abundance of being. Wodwo, even though he exists as a perpetual question, *knows* because he exists as a body *knowing*, which occurs in the form of 'I can.' Wodwo is testimony to the phenomenological truth which that 'the deepest sort of knowing is summoned by this anonymity, which subsists not as knowledge but as events.' *I think therefore I am* becomes *I can therefore I am*. Wodwo demonstrates a deep faith in an indefinable world; it is almost religious.

Wodwo experiences himself as a sentient being caught up in the improvisational, open circuit of the sensuous. The gift of nature is Wodwo's sentience, but Wodwo's sentience does not belong to him alone. Sentience is an ubiquitous quality that belongs to the very earth of which Wodwo is a part. Because of this, sensation comes to mean the revelation of anonymity, and the rebirth of the nameless, natural self. Indeed, Merleau-Ponty says that the world of sense-perception "ceaselessly assails and beleaguers subjectivity as waves wash round a wreck on the shore."<sup>17</sup> In sense-perception, a new sense of self is discovered which, unlike the ship of anthropocentric subjectivity tearing through the world, is in rhythm with the world, and guided by it.

In a pivotal passage, Merleau-Ponty states:

Every sensation carries within it the germ of a dream or depersonalization such as we experience in that quasi-stupor to which we are reduced when we really try to live at the level of sensation. It is true that knowledge teaches me that sensation would not occur unless my body were in some way adapted to it, for example, that there would be no specific contact unless I moved my hand. But this

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<sup>17</sup>Merleau-Ponty 2002, p. 241.

activity takes place on the periphery of my being. I am no more aware of being the true subject of my sensation than of my birth or my death. Neither my birth nor my death can appear to me as experiences of my own, since, if I thought of them thus, I should be assuming myself to be pre-existent to, or outliving, myself, in order to be able to experience them, and I should therefore not be genuinely thinking of my birth or my death. I can, then, apprehend myself only as 'already born' and 'still alive'—I can apprehend my birth and my death only as prepersonal horizons: I know that people are born and die, but I cannot know my own birth and death. Each sensation, being strictly speaking, the first, last and only one of its kind, is a birth and a death.<sup>18</sup>

As this quote indicates, to be a sensational being means to be reborn through every sensation, thereby thwarting the threat of stiffness and calcification that a purely intellectual, abstract being is privy to perform. For surely, to be reborn through the womb of every sensation, whether it's through the touch of rain or the pangs of pain, is to experience a world that is replete with inexhaustible wonder. Wodwo's ongoing fascination with the world is exactly that: he is reborn through each encounter with the world. But something stable still remains throughout this fluidity; it is the body, the earth's ancient friend, reinvigorating the mind with carnal wonder.

The mind of Wodwo, then, is his body, and his body is that of the earth. Intercorporeal reflection, *the body thinking*, entails that consciousness becomes attuned and immersed in the wider dance of the human body with the larger Body of the earth. Wodwo is a thinking body, feeling himself to be integral to the earth.

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 250.

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