Strength through Poetry as We Regain Our Balance in the COVID-19 Aftermath: Literary Insights from Ted Hughes and Seamus Heaney Read from a Naturalist and Existentialist Perspective

Jytte Holmqvist
HBU-UCLan School of Media, Communication & Creative Industries

Abstract

Drawing on Seamus Heaney and his symbolic reference to a great sea change or tidal wave in epic poem "The Cure at Troy" (1990) – much referred to in these gradually post-pandemic times and indicating that a new chapter is about to begin – and "The City" by Ted Hughes, where a life is read like a poem and in the many depths of the urban space the writer roams "my own darkness", this paper looks at human resilience in the face of an interrupted COVID reality that has brought a fundamental shift to the way we view the world and our role in society. In our era of a New Normal, the idea that "less is more" is quickly becoming a mantra for our times, a time characterised by a gradual distancing from material hype while we turn to nature for solace and guidance – as importantly advocated by Heaney and Hughes who illuminate our path as we gain a greater understanding of what really matters at the core. We likewise begin to see commonalities between people and cultures, and we open up a space for a greater sense of authenticity. As we are now stepping into the initial stages of 2023, entering a new chapter; have we gained existential insights from the COVID-19 pandemic and will this lead to new beginnings where the written word helps us along the way?

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, culture, nature, poetry, Seamus Heaney, symbolism, Ted Hughes

We live in an unpredictable and highly cinematic reality. Only four years ago our increasingly globalised world was spinning fast, full of activity and human interaction, as we were drawn into a vortex of media frenzy and media hype. It appears we generally lacked the ability to ask questions, and we let ourselves be dragged along by, and into, the larger social machinery. Carefree urbanites in need of constant entertainment, people in the technocratic western world engaged in traveling for traveling's sake and were driven by a need to explore foreign territories while obsessively sharing their holiday snaps on a range of social media sites. Private memories were turned public and collective in an instant and the narcissistic aspects of 21st century individuals were on full display. Boarding a plane at short notice was a normal, and as we shuttled across the sky for holiday or business purposes we engaged in constant dialogue on a both personal and professional level – always moving and involved in what Bauman calls a postmodern hunt with no clear aim or future plan in place: "We are all hunters now, or told to be hunters and called or compelled to act as hunters do" (Bauman, 2007, p. 100).

It was a dynamic yet materialistic and self-obsessed globalised society that prioritised individual pleasures and immediate satisfaction above human connection on a collective level; a world of commerce and trade, of communication across borders – one of extreme contrasts, of fear and excitement, of excessive wealth and stark poverty, a world of euphoria and tragedy all at once. "Fake news" hit the headlines as an almost viable option to be taken seriously and pay heed to, confusing audiences and the public across the globe. In disbelief we watched leaders rise to power but not rise to the occasion; inept, unqualified for the job yet let to enter centre stage with ideas and convictions that would jeopardise not only the United States in a dark age of Trumpian ideals[1], but the world at large. Social media posts and Twitter feeds travelled fast and as we obsessively consumed different types of media texts it was not so much in search for real insight or to engage in critical discernment. Rather, as readers we found ourselves exposed to mental clutter at a time of information overload. Seeking a sense of relief and driven by a parallel escapist mindset we turned to film and media for entertainment, taking it all for granted and not reflecting much on the possibly deeper meaning behind verbal and visual messages. The world was spinning fast and there was no time for standing still, no time for reflection, and no time for solace. Noise was the norm in a highly consumerist western society where the more we had, the more important we became; icons, gadgets and status symbols ruling the day. Frenzied speed defined our lifestyles, as did a parallel existence where we had one foot in a world supposedly more real than the other, while the other was steadily anchored in a virtual space or reality as we quickly alternated between being, simultaneously, citizens and netizens; cyberspace calling our attention away from our physical reality. Face to face interaction had become increasingly artificial as we hid behind mobile screens, barely noticing one another. We had become robots in a world of technological breakthroughs come about at the sacrifice of interpersonal contact and connection. We faced a loss of self and a loss of other, unable to interact effortlessly; dependant on gadgets and gizmos to add a silver lining to the day.

Until it all suddenly came to a grinding halt and the world watched in disbelief. Wuhan, China, 10 December 2019: the first known Coronavirus patient falls ill and is admitted to Wuhan Central Hospital 6 days later. An official connection is made between the new virus and a

[1] Bauman calls Trump "a quick fix for existential anxiety" (Bauman, 2017, 150).

Chinese wet market.[2] Initial dates were followed by a more complete timeline – the virus since having branched into new strands and variants as we witness history unfold. As, during the height of this most recent pandemic the Great Contagion held us captive, the existentialist aspects of our times became more apparent than ever. The Coronavirus has laid bare the vulnerability of human existence and the brevity of it all. How do we move from here? Where do we turn? We are but driftwood in a sea of uncertainty – "How could fate stage a scenario so symbolic?" This is the "batlight" we are "living in: death" (Hughes, 1998, p. 74).

Methodological Approach and Shamanic Elements in Hughes' Prophetic Poetry

Literature and poetry now shine a light in our cultural and existential darkness, providing a lens through which we may begin to interpret our unpredictable and challenging new reality that calls for a radical shift in the way we view the world and our role in it. We have lost control during a pandemic period that has further conditioned our human condition. There are poets and poems that come to mind more readily than others as we seek guidance and words to hold on to. This paper draws on English writer Ted Hughes (1930-1998) and Irish Seamus Heaney (1939-2013) and illustrates how, through words, symbols, and metaphors, they highlight the vital role of nature in shifting our focus from our own immediate issues to the deeper meaning of our existence. With that, we gain a greater appreciation for the world at large and the roles we play. Both healers in a sense, Hughes and Heaney have in common their focus on myth, but also pain and suffering while they ultimately propose that there may be a way out, into the light. Dark and realistic at times but also allegorical and metaphorical, even metaphysical in style, they speak of what lies beneath, of human misery, human compassion and interconnectedness, of people been and gone, some of them corpses protected against the decay of time by natural acids – as in Heaney's take on the mummified Iron Age bog people in his bog poems[3], including, "The Tollund Man"[4], "Bog Queen", and "The Grauballe Man" (the poet's interest in Danish and Scandinavian history and culture is likewise apparent in his 1999 book *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation*, where he translates into verse the supposedly oldest epic English language tale written between the 7th and 10th century"[5]). Heaney dedicated *Beowulf* to Hughes and said of his fellow writer that he had "a soothsayer's awareness that facing a destiny was bound to involve a certain ordeal" (Hart, 2012, p. 76). In *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected* (Hart, 2012), Heaney, who coedited several collections of poetry with Hughes, declares that "no death had been as devastating to poetry as Hughes' death, and no death outside his family had hurt him as much" (Hart, 2012, p. 76).

No stranger to death or the thought of it, Ted Hughes saw our ending as a pathway to new beginnings. In poem "A Green Mother" (*Cave Birds,* 1978), he writes:

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[2] Ebrahimian Allen, Bethany (March 18, 2020). *Timeline: The early days of China's coronavirus outbreak and cover-up*. https://www.axios.com/timeline-the-early-days-of-chinas-coronavirus-outbreak-and-cover-up-ee65211a-afb6-4641-97b8-353718a5faab.html

[3] Miller, Tim (June 3, 2016). *Heaney's Bog Poems*. https://wordandsilence.com/2016/06/03/heaneys-bog-poems/

[4] This text is included in the edited collection of poetry *Seamus Heaney: 100 poems* (2018).

[5] We are informed, in the introduction to the book, that "[t]he poem was written in England but the events it describes are set in Scandinavia, in a 'once upon a time' that is partly historical. Its hero, Beowulf, is the biggest presence among the warriors in the land of the Geats, a territory situated in what is now southern Sweden, and early in the poem Beowulf crosses the sea to the land of the Danes in order to rid their country of a man-eating monster called Grendel" (Heaney, 1999, ix-x).

> Why are you afraid?
> In the house of the dead are many cradles.
> The earth is a busy hive of heavens.
> This is one lottery that cannot be lost.[6]

Hughes here seems to suggest that we should look at death reassuringly; as an encounter with other realms where we have a real possibility to approach divinity. At the same time, he reminds us that our time on Earth already grants us the possibility to embrace the divine elements of daily existence as we become aware of the magical aspects of reality and forge connections with other beings (human and otherwise). In doing so, we may start to envisage the spirit world. It is not for nothing that he has been called a "shaman of the tribe" (Heaney as quoted in Scigaj 1992, p. 64)[7], with a tendency to address his readers in animal disguise. Ewa Panecka importantly elaborates on the shamanic elements in Hughes' poetry. She highlights Hughes' exploration of myth and his references also to animals, with a multilayered poetry that interweaves culture with nature:

> In his poems he called for the destruction of the artificial, sterile personality created by Western culture and thus offered a way of liberating man's true, instinctual self. In doing so he performed a healing, regenerating ritual, often likened to shamanistic practitioners' magic. Poetry is a natural vehicle for the expression of feelings and emotions, and the shaman-poet can transcend the constraints of ordinary language. Hughes claimed that in human language, 'animal music' in which the poet can evoke the spirits, is present (Panecka, 2018, p. 2).[8]

This resonates with words from The Poetry Foundation where it is similarly held that "Hughes's work speaks to his concern with poetry's vatic, even shamanic powers. Working in sequences and lists, Hughes frequently uncovered a kind of autochthonous, yet literary, English language".[9] As we peel away the layers of reality, read between the lines and look beyond the words we begin to discern the essence of Hughes' work and, likewise, that of Heaney – a poet who was perhaps more readily in touch with reality: concerned with Irish history and politics, society and culture and less prone to exploring the symbolism in nature and the animal world. And yet, Heaney also brings us words to abide by metaphorically and shows us the path forward, inspiring "common folks" and politicians alike – as we shall see in relation to the 2020 US elections. The darkness and apparent despair dealt with not always so indirectly by both Heaney and Hughes ultimately provide us with a sense of relief at a time when we must confront our own fears in order to regain the hope needed to get through these troubled times.

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[6] Beshara Magazine (2020, June 14). Poems for These Times: 12: A Green Mother by Ted Hughes. https://besharamagazine.org/newsandviews/poems-for-these-times-12/

[7] According to Britannica, "the term *shamanism* comes from the Manchu-Tungus word *šaman*. The noun is formed from the verb *ša-* 'to know'; thus, a shaman is literally 'one who knows.' The shamans recorded in historical ethnographies have included women, men, and transgender individuals of every age from middle childhood onward." Eliade, Mircea. *shamanism: religion.* https://www.britannica.com/topic/shamanism

[8] Panecka here makes partial references to Neil Robert's interview with Hughes in the Times Literary Supplement 1, October 1971.

[9] Poetry Foundation: *Ted Hughes (1930-1998).* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes

Major Works – Major Thoughts – Major Breakthroughs

Heaney and Hughes are considered two of the finest poets to see the literary light and break through during their own lifetimes. They amassed an extensive critical following, reputation, and acclaim, with Heaney (his first collection of poetry was *Death of a Naturalist*, 1966) conferred a number of awards – his greatest accolade the Noble Prize in Literature in 1995. Versed in poetry and prose, Heaney heralded what became known as the Nordic School of Writing, and counted *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (1980), *The Government of the Tongue* (1988), *The Redress of Poetry* (1990) and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* (2002), as his main prose collections.

Hughes, in turn, was appointed Poet Laureate in 1984 and the Order of Merit, and his "most characteristic verse is without sentimentality, emphasizing the cunning and savagery of animal life in harsh, sometimes disjunctive lines"[10]. He has left a legacy on a both personal and professional level. As a poet, Hughes reached fame and reputation with *Lupercal* (1960), *Wodwo* (1967), *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970), *Remains of Elmet* (1979), and *Wolfwatching* (1989). He went through the motions when his private life became a matter of public interest after his marriage to Sylvia Plath went from romance and poetry, to heartbreak and tragedy. Plath's sudden suicide in 1963 triggered a period of expressive hiatus for Hughes. Short collection of poetry *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) is dedicated to Plath, or, simply, "Sylvia", and forty years and many memories later, *Birthday Letters* (1998) saw the light. Uncommonly candid, raw, and honest, this book dedicated to Frieda and (likewise ill-fated) Nicholas Hughes was published shortly before Ted Hughes' passing and 35 years after the death of their mother – Hughes' spiritually lingering, long term muse Sylvia Plath. The collection features 88 poems about this woman who would leave a lasting impact. He writes: "You are ten years dead. It's only a story. Your story. My story" (Hughes, 1998, p. 9). The narrative that they carved out for themselves would be paralleled, if not entirely matched by, that of Hughes and extramarital lover Assia Wevill, who like Plath ended her own life – in 1969, exactly seven years after her relationship with Hughes had officially begun. Wevill would bring her and Hughes' daughter Shura, with her in death.[11]

Personal tragedy swayed public opinion about Hughes and made him "not famous but infamous"[12]. Nevertheless, it would later be an experience to draw from by a poet whose texts reflect a lasting appreciation for life and love, children, nature, and the power of the elements and with that likewise an honouring of 'less is more'[13].The a forementioned first collection of poetry *The Hawk in the Rain* was the result of Plath's persuasive efforts, and *The Iron Man* (1968), *Cave Birds* (1978), and *Selected Poems 1957-1981* (1982) count as other masterpieces.

Hughes' spirit lives on not only through The Ted Hughes Society – with a wealth of information about the writer, his life and work – but also the Modern Poetry in Translation (MPT) journal

[10] Britannica. *Ted Hughes: British poet*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ted-Hughes

[11] For further references, see https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/1999/apr/23/features11.g21

[12] Wagner, Erica (October 1, 2015). *Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: partners in martyrdom*. The New Statesman, https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/10/ted-hughes-and-sylvia-plath-partners-martyrdom

[13] Wagner highlights "Hughes's extraordinary appetites, for art, for nature, for learning, for friendship and for women" (2015).

that Hughes funded with Daniel Weissbort in 1965 "as an act of European cultural solidarity with writers from behind the Iron Curtain, whose work they wanted to bring to a wider readership, and in the hope of challenging the narrowness of British poetry."[14] Moving with the times, MPT operates with a continued awareness of what matters also from the perspective of today:

> The Covid19 pandemic has led to communities across Europe turning inwards. Geographical borders have been closed, and the sense of openness and curiosity that exists amongst the many different cultures across the continent is now under threat. MPT's ongoing mission is to enable and foster cross cultural understanding and solidarity.[15]

Emphasising the importance of the arts at a time of increased focus on bare necessities while the arts and humanities sector has suffered across the board, the annual Ted Hughes Award likewise keeps the poetic spirit going from past into present and future, and is awarded a "living UK poet for new work in poetry"[16]. Perhaps this award can serve as a source of inspiration for boards and organizations also outside the United Kingdom, and highlight the need to nurture our mind and soul with words that matter, that enlighten and comfort us on our collective road into a shaky, possibly post pandemic future – unless COVID-19 (or what remains of it) is here to stay?

Narrative and Existentialist Themes that Inform and Unite Us Cross Culturally

Poetry matters. It appears now more than ever before. And poetry, through symbolism and metaphors, also bears witness to our current times, with all the trials and tribulations. While we have sought escape routes away from our pandemic reality through film, television, and the media, we are likewise inspired by the written word and find comfort and consolation in poetry as one of the most compellingly expressive literary genres. Words of wisdom, insights gained from lived experiences, tales and myths fuelled by a vivid imagination and a curious and alert mind, but which are also steeped in the poet's own interpretation of history, culture, and English and Irish reality, come our way, step out and away from the page and into our own lives, guiding us when we ourselves lack the capacity to express our feelings. The poet turns to us with words that move us but that also challenge our prior beliefs and force us to explore painful topics and emotions. Heaney's aforementioned bog poems are based on real facts, but they still speak to us from a place of lingering in-betweenness. They touch on universal themes relating to life and death, fear of living and loving, longing and heartache, human connection, physical consummation and decay. The powerful poems of both Heaney and Hughes point to

[14] Cultural Foundation. *Poems to translate the Covid-19 crisis.* https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/cosround2-modern-poetry-in-translation. Clare Pollard, editor of MPT, explains further, "We aim to give voice to the silenced, exiled and excluded, and create a diverse and creative community of translators, poets and readers. The act of translation is in itself an act of solidarity and sharing because it gives the possibility to everyone to enjoy different content." (same website).

[15] Cultural Foundation. *Poems to translate the Covid-19* ***crisis****.* https://culturalfoundation.eu/stories/cosround2-modern-poetry-in-translation/

[16] Poetry Society. Ted Hughes Award. https://poetrysociety.org.uk/competitions/ted-hughes-award/

the capacity of human beings to resist the passing of time by delving into literature and the arts, and our lasting presence beyond death.

Seamus Heaney: "The Cure at Troy"

As today we still struggle to make sense of a disrupted reality that forces us to look within and reprioritise our lives, we turn to Heaney and book and poem *The Cure at Troy* (1991). As if understanding our external ordeals turned private pain and likewise pointing to the cruelty that we are all capable of, Heaney draws on Trojan myth to highlight the flaws of man yet, at the same time, our possibility to change things for the better:

> Human beings suffer.
> They torture one another.
> They get hurt and get hard.
> No poem or play or song
> Can fully right a wrong
> Inflicted and endured.

And still, there is hope – if we choose to believe there is:

> History says, Don't hope
> On this side of the grave,
> But then, once in a lifetime
> The longed-for tidal wave
> Of justice can rise up,
> And hope and history rhyme. (Heaney, 2018, p. 100)

An eloquent poem that bears commonalities with Martin Luther King's ground-breaking 1963 speech, it is similarly rich in metaphors and contains both poetic and musical elements – and famously inspired Joe Biden in his 2020 US presidential election speech. Heaney speaks of a "great sea-change on the far side of revenge", of "a farther shore ... reachable from here" (Heaney, 2018, p. 100), of the miracle of self-healing and of a god speaking from the sky. His likewise current and pertinent line turned motto – a quote from an interview given in 1972, where Heaney spoke of the troubles in Northern Ireland[17] – "If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere" (later included in *Wintering Out*, 1972)[18] has also sent readers into a frenzy, with an article establishing that the poem got "hundreds of re-tweets and quickly took off, being referenced by people in relation to the ongoing Covid-19 situation"[19]. Indeed, it has become a

[17] Seamus Heaney: The Estate of Seamus Heaney. (April 10, 2020*). If we can winter this one out, we can summer anywhere.* https://www.seamusheaney.com/news-and-events/2020/4/10/if-we-winter-this-one-out-we-can-summer-anywhere

[18] Heaney is said to have first uttered this line in an interview article with the *Cork Examiner* on 22 November 1972. With regard to the renewed interest in Heaney's 1972 poem during the recent pandemic, Frank McNally informs us that in 2020 "Seamus Heaney's line saw him replace Yeats as the most quoted Irish poet". McNally, Frank (December 25, 2020). *'If we winter this one out, we can summer anywhere': The year Heaney helped us through*. https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/if-we-winter-this-one-out-we-can-summer-anywhere-the-year-heaney-helped-us-through-1.4438422

[19] McGrath, Dominic (April 5, 2020). *The story behind the Seamus Heaney quote guiding people through the crisis: If we winter this out, we can summer anywhere*. https://www.thejournal.ie/seamus-heaney-quote-winter-this-one-out-summer-5065553-Apr2020/

mantra to abide by in troubled times. Heaney's words were first uttered with reference to cattle in bleak Irish landscapes that, as he explained at the time, could be likened to "[b]easts standing under a hedge, plastered in wet, looking at you with big patient eyes, just taking what came until something else came along." And he added, "Times were bleak, the political climate was deteriorating. The year the book was published was the year of Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday."[20]

Fast-forward to today and Heaney's mantra that encapsulated difficult sentiments at the time and were uttered with a specific cultural and societal Irish context in mind, now likewise guide and help us mentally survive the pandemic as we both collectively and individually face our own Angst: mind over matter.

The Crow as a Symbol of Suffering and Resilience

Figure 1
Ted Hughes' "The Crow". stashmedia.tv[21]

In a similar vein, even if he may generally be less politically specific than Heaney, Hughes writes in the poem "Two Legends" (included in *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow*):

> To hatch a crow, a black rainbow
> Bent in emptiness
> over emptiness
> But flying. (Hughes, 1972 ed., p. 1)

With that Hughes, the poet, again opts for the animal guise, moving us closer to the spirit world while through his words he steps up to the level of the mythical shaman. Robert Shaw declared that Hughes "marshaled a language of nearly Shakespearean resonance to explore themes which were mythic and elemental"[22]. The crow is a recurring theme or element in Hughes' poetry and signals both our own suffering and boldness or perhaps, rather, boldness in suffering, our refusal to stay within our presumed boundaries and our desire to break through and away even if the road to a more luminous existence may be through profound darkness. The crow, its originally white feathers scorched by the sun while it attempts to blacken the sun's whiteness to make way for a relieving darkness, could in multilayered poem "Crow's

[20] Ibid.

[21] https://www.stashmedia.tv/ted-hughes-the-crow-animated-poetry-by-playdead/

[22] Poetry Foundation: *Ted Hughes (1930-1998).* https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/ted-hughes

Fall" (included in the previously mentioned collection of poetry) be symbolic of our own dogged attempts to conquer difficulties ("When Crow was white he decided the sun was too white. He decided it glared much too whitely. He decided to attack it and defeat it"), our ultimate resilience in the face of adversities ("But the sun brightened – It brightened, and Crow returned charred black"), and our need to query whether what we have been led to believe is 'the truth'. Hughes ends his poem with an apparent paradox: "Where white is black and black is white, I won" (Hughes, 1972 ed., p. 28). With that, the poet seemingly urges us to look beyond immediate appearances and to challenge preconceived notions and ideas.

Eighteen years later, Hughes, whose father survived the carnage of Gallipoli in 1915 (Meyers, 2013, p. 30) and who would make war and warfare recurring themes in his poetry – sometimes disguised in animal symbolism – proposes, while transporting us to "a valley overshadowed by war"[23], that we may be able to return "from no man's land." (*Wolfwatching*, 1989). If as readers we allow ourselves to, at least momentarily, defend the idea of the 'death of the author', excerpts of poetry can be read in isolation, and when applied to our own context, individual words and phrases become powerful in their own right.

Figure 2
Illuminated cobbled street in old city by night[24]

Ted Hughes: "The City"

This paper takes a specific cultural interest in Hughes' poem "The City", where references to Plath appear to be constant and the personal spills over into the broader context of a city void of life but which is all the more filled with nostalgia. Moving away from the no man's land of war-torn lands and the symbolic elements in animals and nature, and the link between nature and mankind, in "The City" Hughes transports us from natural habitats into an urban space that is dystopic and nostalgic all at once. The oppressive city environment in the poem is also tainted by Hughes' memories of a love gained and lost. Hughes calls forth the absent presence of a special someone whose being is felt in the many arteries of the urban space. A potential memory is juxtaposed with the real possibility of the loss of that same memory: "to remember — or suddenly not to remember". He writes:

[23] Ted Hughes Society. *Poetry by Ted Hughes: Wolfwatching* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989). http://thetedhughessociety.org/new-page-2

[24] https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/illuminated-cobbled-street-light-reflections-on-706424317

> Your poems are a dark city centre.
> Your novels, your stories, your journals, are suburbs
> Of this big city. (Keegan ed. 2005, p. 1179)

It is no doubt a reference to Plath, but this is also a poem that speaks straight to us at a time when history is revised, in part forgotten, most definitely rewritten without our consensus. The dark city centre of Hughes' poem translates into an opaque sensorial experience of pandemic years that have erased from our memory what was before and have left us questioning what may be in store for us. The urban space becomes both a focal point and a catalyst for ground-breaking changes and massive upheavals; changes triggered by a global malaise that cleanses the earth and effectively separates the strong from the weak. In Hughes' words, "[y]our" poems are dark". Likewise, our lives are dark. It seems we have hit a point of no return. And yet, from the dark crevasses of the Earth we appear, exiting, and we may with luck or fate on our side rise like a phoenix from the ashes – many of us gone, some still left standing. In even darker poem "Your Paris", with references to artists and artworks, the Occupation, the Holocaust and "SS mannequins", Hughes talks of Paris as "a post-war utility survivor" (Hughes, 1998, p. 36). The city referred to:

> [w]as a labyrinth
> Where you still hurtled, scattering tears.
> Was a dream where you could not
> Wake or find the exit or
> The minotaur to put a blessed end
> To the torment. (Hughes, 1998, p. 36–37)

What do we make of this? Can we apply this wartime poem to our current context, or is that too presumptuous? Suffice to say that poetry, like films, has the capacity to penetrate deep into our psyche and touch us at the core. As readers we have the choice to approach a poem from different angles. In the case of Heaney and Hughes, if we do so, their poems are conferred multiple layers and we are left with multiple revelations and discoveries.

Final Reflections – With a Brief Reference to Films that brought Viruses to the Screen Long before the COVID-19 Pandemic Hit

Both Heaney and Hughes spring forth as poets and literary and cultural flame bearers of our times. Just like many readers and critics today have interpreted our authoritarian, and also autocratic, world from an Orwellian perspective, the two British poets provide guidance that not only explains the human condition but illuminates our path and points to a way forward from the darkness into the light. On a soul level, human to human, we crave emotional connection to compensate for the emotional scarcity that defines our (post)pandemic (sur)reality. The late Zygmunt Bauman's assessment of our postmodern society and beyond suggests an uncomfortable departure from the past and a new trajectory into a shaky new existence – in which Leonard Cohen's famous last words in album *You Want it Darker* (2016) ring truer than ever. Contemporary TV series and films likewise do their best to keep up with the artist's efforts to capture our bewildering new existence – with *Contagion* (2011) reiterating that "no one is immune to fear". The rapid transmission of a virus that could be SARS, MERS, COVID-19, or any one of them, in *Contagion* becomes a nightmarish reality that leaves the world in shatters – with lives lost and the individual at the mercy of a harsh environment and

the relentless all-pervasive sickness. If we move from fiction to reality, one wonders if the COVID-19 pandemic may have been lurking in the shadows all along; ready to break out 8 years after Steven Soederbergh's film was released.

Earlier Sci-Fi thriller, *Outbreak* (1995), similarly carries eerie undertones and proposes a scenario that could easily travel from the screen into our own off-screen realities. An Ebola type virus spreads across the world and here monkeys become the fictional carriers of the disease. Only four years ago it was supposed to be bats, pests turned delicacies, or was it various species of wildlife caged up in intolerable conditions? Or could it be a gigantic political conspiracy where the COVID-19 virus was invented in a lab? We may never know the exact origins of the pandemic and as we now deal with the tragic aftermath, we must be stoic, face our own fears, conquer them best we can, and remain hopeful. Vaccines now provide light in the tunnel, and we have finally regained some of the lost control.

Concluding Comments

Our surreal and often nightmarish pandemic existence has turned the world upside down, delivered a punch to the collective solar plexus and entered our individual and global consciousness. At the same time the COVID-19 pandemic has, importantly, revealed the flaws in the system, the crack in the wall – and yet, as Leonard Cohen maintains, it may be that's how the light gets in. Poetry is the key and poetry is power – or, put differently, with reference to Bauman, "the focus on subjective experience is … the distinguishing characteristic of the new individualistic spirituality" (Motak, 2009, p. 136). Poetry offers us new perspectives without being prescriptive. It is ultimately up to each and every one of us to interpret a text that reflects deeper queries, tackles conundrums, and speaks of higher truths, according to our needs and preferences at any given time. We may not find a concrete answer or solution, but we will find a way forward and gain new insights to draw from.

As men of their time, Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes, steeped in tradition and concerned with the politics of their contemporary Ireland and England, were also visionaries who imagined a world where there was light and hope and possibilities to start over. As we now likewise enter a new chapter, we would be wise to bring the poet's many insights along for the ride. And we may finally be able to, as Hughes predicts, "return from no man's land". Less is more. Love and respect human to human, the appreciation of animals and nature, allowing ourselves to identify with our own cultures yet learning from past mistakes, and to live with fear yet let darkness and light coexist in perfect balance: that is where we may find the key to a more sustainable existence and future. As Seamus Heaney concludes perceptively "[w]hy should the joyful affirmation of music and poetry ever constitute an affront to life? The achievement of a poem, after all, is an experience of release."[25]

[25] Heaney as cited in https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0331/1127523-poetry-pandemic-coronavirus/

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Corresponding Author: Jytte Holmqvist
Email: JHolmqvist@uclan.ac.uk