

BEYOND ORIENTALIST HOLISM? THE INFLUENCE OF EAST AND CENTRAL ASIAN THOUGHT ON BRITISH LITERATURE IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract

The paper (which is part of a wider research project) discusses the way in which three British/Irish authors, Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Durrell and Ted Hughes were influenced by the philosophical and religious thought of East and Central Asia, by the texts and spiritual practices from the traditions of shamanism, Hinduism, Shintoism and Buddhism. In different ways, all three authors considered the traditions in question to be a serious alternative to more mainstream religious thought in the West and also to the dominating paradigms of Western dualism and Western materialism.

*My discussion of Murdoch centers on her relationship with the thought of the Zen master, Katsuki Sekida, whose concept of pure cognition she discusses in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* and which, I argue, she brings into connection with her understanding of Anselm's ontological argument and Plato's *Form of the Good*. With regard to Durrell I will discuss the way in which he links Tibetan and Zen Buddhism with Gnosticism in his major novels and in his philosophy. In the case of Hughes, I will focus on the use in his poetry of Hindu, Buddhist and shamanic thought – in particular the influence of the *Bardo Thadol* and *Journey to the West*.*

*With reference to all three authors, I will discuss a question raised by the research of Edward Slingerland in his *2018 Mind and Body in Early China Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* – the question as to what extent these authors are engaged in a flawed account of Eastern thought as a radical, holistic other. I will conclude that the trope of anti-dualism in these authors is primarily a reaction against the 'puritanical' aspects of their own culture which they rejected, and that their engagement with Eastern thought is too nuanced to be confined within the paradigm of Orientalist holism.*

The location of the 2019 Global Conversations conference in Bishkek foregrounds the concept of the silk road.¹ The work of Peter Francopan has recently rewritten world history (or perhaps

¹ This article is part of a study 'The influence of Eastern religion on selected British authors' which has received grants from the JPS KAKENHI Grant-in-aid for Scientific Research (C) Grant number 19K00416

one should say the Western conception of world history) in such a way as to place the silk roads at its centre, not only in terms of commerce, but of the exchange and the fusion of ideas – of global conversation and communication.

Among the many cultural effects of this interchange which Francopan documents, there is one that is particularly symbolic of this intermingling: his account of the origin of statues of the Buddha, which first originated, not in India or the Far East, as many people might imagine, but in the region of the silk roads under the influence of Hellenistic art – more specifically, under the influence of the statues of Apollo erected in the area in the wake of the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BCE. (The statue of the Buddha unearthed in the hills around Bishkek in 2011 and initially dated to the period between the eighth and tenth centuries witnesses how long the result of this fusion survived in the region of the silk roads).² Francopan, referencing the work of J. Derrett, claims that these statues were not merely a result of the influence of ideas from the West, but of a resistance to and competition with them – the cult of Apollo was so powerful that Buddhists felt that they needed rival sculptures for their own temples and thus came to overcome their initial rejection of such images.

The silk road is also an appropriate metaphor for interactions between Eastern and Western thought – and my theme in this paper is the silk road which passed through the minds of three British authors engaged in an intellectual and spiritual interchange with ideas from the East. The idea of the fusion of Apollo and the Buddha on the silk road would, I believe, have been fascinating to all three of them. It also symbolizes the way in which their work contains elements of the ‘Apollonian’ Western tradition and ‘Buddhistic’ Eastern thought, establishing a dialectic between the two and creating images – perhaps images of the imageless – in which the heritage of the East and of the West merge.

The three authors in question are Iris Murdoch, Lawrence Durrell and Ted Hughes, all of whom combined a deep knowledge of the Western literary and philosophical tradition with a deep fascination with the texts and spiritual practices from the traditions of shamanism, Hinduism, Shintoism, and Buddhism.

Durrell’s work is permeated with a longing for the mythical ‘Tibet’ of his childhood, and his masterwork, *The Alexandria Quartet*, repeatedly alludes to the *Bardo Thadol* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*; Ted Hughes was also fascinated with this work and makes repeated references to Buddhism and shamanism throughout his *oeuvre*; Murdoch, in *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, expressed the idea that we must stop thinking of ‘God’ as the name of a super-person and that a ‘Buddhist-style survival of Christianity’³ could be the way to renew religious inspiration in the West. She also saw the idea of the transmigration of souls in Eastern religion as ‘a symbol of the unreality of the self’⁴ and her work is permeated with allusions to Japan and Japanese literature.

All three authors, like many of their contemporaries, shared a discontent with the alternatives of traditional Christian belief on the one hand and a physicalist atheism rejecting all religion and spirituality as superstition on the other. All three could be said to embrace what in the twentieth-century became quite a common position amongst Western intellectuals – that

² <https://sg.news.yahoo.com/1-5-meter-high-buddha-statue-unearthed-kyrgyzstan-105714426.html>

³ Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 137.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

of speaking in terms of rejecting the dominating paradigms of Western dualism and Western materialism.

These terms are, in my view, somewhat misleading in that they implicitly assume that Christianity in the West is necessarily Cartesian – which is actually far from the case – and in that they imply that a non-dualist philosophical position leaves no room for a weak mind-body dualism. In Durrell and Hughes, moreover, the trope of anti-dualism often took the form of a reaction against the so-called ‘puritanical’ or prudish aspects of their own culture and a desire for greater sexual freedom; it might be objected that they do not sufficiently engage with the fact that Eastern religion may also be ascetic and restrictive in this respect.

Questionable though some of the assumptions underlying the critique of the dualist/materialist dichotomy may be, it has been widely adopted as a trope by those in the West who wish to express a new kind of worldview modelled on that of Eastern thought. However, those who exalt Eastern thought may sometimes misrepresent it, and one way of so doing is to subscribe to what Edward Slingerland has identified as the ‘myth of holism’, which he sees as a form of Orientalism. Slingerland in his magisterial 2019 publication *Mind and Body in Early China: Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* shows the extent to which Western scholarship has been engaged in a flawed account of Chinese – and, more generally, Eastern – thought as a radical, holistic other. His use of the term ‘holism’ refers to ‘an absence of dualisms or dichotomies, such as mind-body, subject-object, or emotion-reason, that are thought to uniquely characterize “Western” thought’.⁵ For those subscribing to this myth, traditional Chinese thought is unable to distinguish the abstract from the concrete, the immanent from the transcendent, cause from resonance, reality from appearance or essence from process. Slingerland pays particular attention to the attribution to Chinese thought of a strong mind-body holism which entails a lack of psychological interiority, a lack of conception of the individual and no conception of the soul, afterlife or “other world.” He refutes this position with meticulous documentation of evidence for belief in the afterlife and mind-body dualism from the archeological and textual record of early China.⁶

Slingerland does not, however, choose to engage in this work with discourses on the East outside the field of academic sinology which might seem opposed to the ‘myth of holism’ in their focus on the spectral and the otherworldly – I am thinking in particular of Lafcadio Hearn’s presentation of his adopted country in texts such as ‘In Ghostly Japan’ or ‘Kwaidan’. The Japanese scholar Kaz Oishi has particularly emphasized Hearn’s fascination with spectrality in his recently published paper An “Exot” Teacher of Romanticism in Japan:

⁵ Edward Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China. Beyond Orientalism and the Myth of Holism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 1.

⁶ He also points out how those subscribing to the kind of linguistic constructivism which had dominated French post-structuralist thought tended to jump to false conclusions as they favored interpretations of Chinese ideograms which point to a way of experiencing reality completely different from Western paradigms. From the standpoint of a naturalistic hermeneutics, he concludes that we all, as *homo sapiens*, understand ourselves in terms of at least a weak mind-body dualism and that we perceive the world at roughly the same level of granularity – that is, we see everyday objects and animals as coherent wholes – as rabbits, not as Quine’s *gavagai*: “It is perhaps conceivable that a sentient life form could solve the problem of catching rabbits by conceiving of them as a series of temporal stages. This just does not happen to be the way in which *Homo sapiens*, the dominant sentient life form on the planet Earth, evolved to deal with the challenge.” (Ibid., p. 309)

Lafcadio Hearn and the Literature of the Ghostly⁷. Contemporary scholars of Japanese Gothic also focus on the ‘ghostly’ aspects of Japanese popular culture – the “Gothic in Japan” Symposium held at Nagoya University on 13 January 2018 focused on the similarities between Western Gothic and the ‘strange stories’ of the Japanese tradition.⁸ All this seems as far from the myth of a radically holistic other as can be – Western scholars are here either in the realm of discovering a common tradition, or of constructing the East as a ghostly other – perhaps a little of both as is suggested by the following passage from the chapter ‘At the Market of the Dead’ in Hearn’s *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan*, where the author describes his feelings on seeing a poor woman praying at a shrine for the ghosts of dead children,

As I watch the tender little rite, I became aware of something dimly astir in the mystery of my own life—vaguely, indefinably familiar, like a memory ancestral, like the revival of a sensation forgotten these two thousand years. Blended in some strange way it seemed to be with my faint knowledge of an elder world, whose household gods were also the beloved dead; and there is a weird sweetness in this place, like a shadowing of Lares.⁹

My question, then, is where Murdoch, Durrell and Hughes, in their interaction with Eastern myth and religion, fall on this continuum? Do they fall into what Slingerland sees as the Orientalist-holist trap, do they construct the East as a spectral other, or is their position more nuanced? A slightly different way of putting the question would be to ask whether they present Eastern thought in terms of transcendence or of immanence.

I shall argue that their work in fact presents an intertwining rather than an opposition of Eastern and Western themes and a complex interplay between transcendence and immanence. I shall not attempt to cover the complete interaction of these authors with the Eastern tradition, but will focus on one or two points of connection, which I hope to develop further in my ongoing research project. I shall discuss Murdoch’s interaction with the Zen master, Katsuki Sekida, Durrell’s interaction with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Ted Hughes’ fascination with the same text and also his references to Chinese classic novel *The Journey to the West*, often known to Western readers by the title of Arthur Waley’s translation, *Monkey*.

In *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, Murdoch is involved in the philosophical project of how ethics and spirituality can survive the demise of the belief in a personal God and an afterlife. Part of her answer to this question is to invoke the Platonic Form of the Good as a replacement for more personal conceptions of the divine. In this context, she draws on a version of Anselm’s ontological argument which substitutes the concept of the Good for that of the God. Just as Anselm began by believing in God rather than by understanding the reasons for his belief, and so found already within himself a concept of God including the belief in His Existence, so the Form of the Good must be initially experienced as something transcendent, something outside the self, of which we nevertheless partake and in which we participate in the Platonic sense of participation (μέθεξις) in the Forms.

⁷ *British Romanticism in Asia, The Reception, Translation, and Transformation of Romantic Literature in India and East Asia*, ed. Alex Watson and Laurence Williams, *Palgrave Asia Pacific and Literature in English Series*, 2019, pp. 93-118.

⁸ <https://www.alexwatson.info/gothic-in-japan#!>

⁹ Lafcadio Hearn, *Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan* (Tokyo: Tuttle Publishing, 2009), p. 90.

In Chapter Eight of *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* we also find a section devoted to Japanese aesthetics in the course of which Katsuki Sekida's concept of pure cognition is discussed. Although the connection is not explicitly made, her discussion of Plato and of Anselm is revisited through Sekida's concepts of pure cognition, in which we are given an account of the same initial move into transcendence.

Murdoch quotes a poem used by Sekida in *Zen Training* (she says it is by Nansen, though it is actually a poem by Setcho commenting on the story 'Nansen Views the Flower'),

Hearing, seeing, touching and knowing are not one and one;
Mountains and rivers should not be viewed in the mirror.
The frosty sky, the setting moon – at midnight
With whom will the serene waters of the lake reflect the shadows in the cold?¹⁰

Murdoch interprets the passage in the following way, connecting it to traditional forms of Japanese art,

The enlightened man returns to, that is, *discovers*, the world. He begins by thinking that rivers are merely rivers and mountains are merely mountains, proceeds to the view that rivers are not rivers and mountains are not mountains, and later achieves the deep understanding that rivers are really rivers and mountains are really mountains. The Japanese haiku is a very short poem with a strict formal structure, which points, sometimes in a paradoxical way, at some aspect of the visible world. It indicates that outer and inner, subject and object, are one, in a way which does not lose or subjectivise the world. Zen painting also combines a skill, born of long and strict teaching, with a throw-away simplicity. In a few strokes, the pointless presence, the thereness, of the plant, the animal, the man.¹¹

In other words, in pure cognition (and in art arising from it) there is no separation of the subject and object – subject-object distinction only arises in the second stage of the recognition of or reflection on pure cognition and it disappears again in the third stage.

In terms of ontology, this is a warning that we should not subscribe to the idealist position that the external world is nothing but the projection of the subjective mirror of our mind. In terms of ethics, it can be translated into the awareness that it is goodness as a *participation* in something beyond oneself that takes the mountains out of the mirror, and that goodness is thus both immanent and transcendent. This move corresponds to Murdoch's adaptation, or one might say, shadowing of Anselm's ontological argument. The necessity of experiencing God or the Form of the Good as something transcendent corresponds to Sekida's pure cognition. Reflection on the concept only comes as a second stage. There is a circularity here, but it is a hermeneutic, not a vicious circularity.

To condense Murdoch's thought: it is through the pure cognition of Zen that we can experience what she calls 'a sort of ontological proof' and achieve participation in the Form of

¹⁰ Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, p. 242.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 244-245.

the Good. Her philosophical journey to the East is both a turning towards the transcendent and a celebration of the immanent.¹²

In Durrell, though there is less of an engagement with academic philosophy, there is also a desire to fuse elements of Eastern thought with the Western literary and philosophical tradition. Indeed, he saw this fusion as integral to the creation of his major works, *The Alexandria Quartet* and *The Avignon Quintet*. In an interview of January 12th, 1972 at the University of California in Los Angeles¹³, he speaks of Alexandria as Tibet and also speaks of the similarity between Zen Buddhism and Gnosticism – a major theme in *The Quartet* and *Quintet*. In another interview published in *Nouveau magazine littéraire* he stated that his main aim was to write a Tibetan novel, rather than a European one, and that he wished to combine the four Greek dimensions which are the basis of our mathematics and of our view of matter with the five *skandas* of the Chinese Buddhists.¹⁴ The major way in which he does this is by advancing the theory that discrete personality is an illusion (something his own characters frequently discuss) and by showing how his characters can be considered as aspects or limbs of one another. Yet at the same time his characters are powerful, charismatic, complex and fully realised characters in the Western tradition of novel writing. There is thus a fusion of the Apollonian and the Buddhistic in the very structure of the novels themselves.

The novels also contain numerous images which subtly reference Buddhist texts, in particular the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, or *Bardo Thadol*, which Durrell would have read in the edition of Walter Evans-Wentz with a preface pointing out similarities to the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*. ‘The Book of the Dead’ was the working title for the first novel in the *Quartet*, ‘Justine’, and characters in the novels repeatedly refer to themselves as being as if dead, in an intermediate, limbo-like state. The *Bardo* tells us that if a dead person does not succeed in holding on to the light of the Tathagata, they are confronted on their journey with a number of choices between bright lights which they should embrace and dull coloured lights which should be resisted. For example, on the first day of intermediate reality, all space arises as a blue light and is followed by a vision of the Lord Vairocana on a lion throne. This moment is alluded to in the *Quartet* in the scene where the lovers Darley and Justine stand before the Chinese paintings in the Montaza Palace. Justine comments disgustedly: ‘The meaning of space’ and Darley sees – ‘simply a gaping hole in which the infinite drains slowly into the room: a blue gulf where the tiger’s body was’.¹⁵ Dull red and dull yellow lights appear at other significant

¹² I discuss Murdoch’s use of Plato, Anselm and Sekida at greater length in ‘Murdoch’s Question of the Work of Art: A Dialogue Between Western and Japanese conceptions of Unity (MGM Chapters 1 and 8)’ in *Reading Iris Murdoch’s Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*. Edited by Nora Hämäläinen and Gillian Dooley, pp. 51-66.

¹³ The interview is recorded in the archives of the *Communication Studies Department of UCLA* and available on Youtube.

¹⁴ “Avec le *Quintet d’Avignon* j’achève un roman qui met en question la séparation de l’individualité [...] Mon jeu principal était d’écrire un roman tibétain plutôt qu’un roman européen. J’ai voulu tenter de faire la jonction entre les quatre dimensions grecques qui sont la base de notre mathématique et de notre vue de la matière, et les cinq skandas des bouddhistes chinois. (<https://www.nouveau-magazine-litteraire.com/lawrence-durrell>); “With *The Avignon Quintet* I have succeeded in completing a novel which puts into question the separation of individuality [...] My main aim was to write a novel which was more Tibetan than European. I would have tried to make the connection between the four Greek dimensions which are the basis of our mathematics and of our view of matter and the five skandas of the Chinese Buddhists.” (My translation.)

¹⁵ Lawrence Durrell, *The Alexandria Quartet* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), p. 118.

moments in the text. Images of phosphorescence also appear at critical moments as in the scene when the character Clea has a near-death experience after a harpoon accident when free-diving into phosphorescence. This can be taken as a symbol for the unreal nature of all phenomena according to Buddhist philosophy. In the words of the *Diamond Sutra* or *Immutable Sutra* (which is also quoted in Evans-Wentz's introduction to *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*),

The phenomena of life may be likened unto a dream, a phantasm, a bubble, a shadow, the glistening dew, or lightning flash; and thus they ought to be contemplated.¹⁶

Clea seems to have attained a kind of enlightenment after her plunge into phosphorescence, but she is also reborn as an artist, thus giving us another fusion of the Western Apollonian with Eastern Buddhist thought.

As previously mentioned, Ted Hughes was also fascinated with the *Bardo Thadol*, which he first encountered when a student at Cambridge. In the autumn of 1959, whilst staying for two months with Sylvia Plath in the writers' retreat of Yaddo in upstate New York, he began a collaboration upon an oratorio based on the work with his fellow-resident, Chou Wen-chung, a Chinese composer who had settled in the US and whose work sought to integrate Western and Eastern musical traditions. Wen-chung was to compose the music and Hughes was to provide the *libretto*.¹⁷ The project was never completed due to lack of funding,¹⁸ but the influence of the *Thadol* can be traced throughout his work. Indeed, it can be said that the Yaddo project marked the rest of his poetic career. Jonathan Bate remarks that 'it took Ted into territory that he would make his own in almost all his later mythic works'¹⁹ and that the project was reworked in *Cave Birds*.²⁰

In contrast to Durrell's focus on the dull coloured lights of temptation, Hughes in his engagement with the *Bardo Thadol* gives us concrete images of the fascination and horror of the filthy womb-door which the deceased person should attempt to close in order to avoid rebirth and enunciates the horror of the cycle of birth, life and death (*samsara*). However, his allusions to *The Journey to the West* lead us in the direction of the possibility of peace attained within this strife. I shall argue that these two texts appear to complement each other: both are accounts of sentient beings struggling with desire, caught up in violence and the cruel cycle of rebirth – but in Hughes, the *Bardo Thadol* world remains in darkness and violence, whilst *The Journey into the West*, though, paradoxically, alluded to in closer connection to the tragedies of his life, is associated with moments of luminosity suggestive of the breakthrough into enlightenment.

Hughes' libretto focuses on the moment when after many failed opportunities to break free of the cycle of rebirth, the deceased will see images of copulating couples, and (following Oedipal logic) feel attraction to one member of the couple and repulsion towards the other according to the sex in which they will be born. (In Hughes' version, unsurprisingly it is the

¹⁶ *The Diamond Sutra*, <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/r/religion/diamond-sutra/chapter32.html>

¹⁷ Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: the Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2003), p. 155.

¹⁸ Hughes' working draft is now preserved in the British Library (BL Add MS88918/1) and a short reading from it is available online at <https://archive.org/details/TedHughesOnTheBardoThodol>

¹⁹ Bate, *Ted Hughes: the Unauthorised Life*, p. 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 332.

female attracting and the male causing revulsion.) The deceased have a last chance to avoid rebirth through obstruction of the womb entrances, and then as a last resort, are advised on choosing the best of possible womb entrances so as to be reborn as a god or as a human in a place where the sacred teachings are respected.

This moment of evil karma and copulation leading to the womb-door is a key to much of Hughes' poetry in the early and mid-period works, particularly from the volume *Crow* onwards. Indeed, *Crow*, despite the more obvious Biblical and shamanic references, can be read as dominated by this concept. Here we are in the realm of the final *Sidpa Bardo* state in which the deceased, having lost the opportunity to attain Nirvana and obstruct the doors of the womb, is whirled around by karmic winds towards rebirth. It is there in 'Examination at the Womb Door', which is, on one level, a poem about the failure of the soul in the Intermediate State to close the door of the womb and to achieve liberation, though there is also, of course, a sense of triumph in and on behalf of *Crow* as the stronger-than-Death survivor who enters the realm of existence – perhaps not for the first time,

Who owns those scrawny little feet? *Death.*
 Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? *Death.*
 Who owns these still-working lungs? *Death.*
 Who owns this utility coat of muscles? *Death.*
 Who owns these unspeakable guts? *Death.*
 Who owns these questionable brains? *Death.*
 All this messy blood? *Death.*
 These minimum-efficiency eyes? *Death.*
 This wicked little tongue? *Death.*
 This occasional wakefulness? *Death.*

Given, stolen, or held pending trial?
Held.

Who owns the whole rainy, stony earth? *Death.*
 Who owns all of space? *Death.*

Who is stronger than hope? *Death.*
 Who is stronger than the will? *Death.*
 Stronger than love? *Death.*
 Stronger than life? *Death.*
 But who is stronger than Death?
Me, evidently.

Pass, *crow*.²¹

We find the same underlying image in other poems from *Crow* such as the womb-entrance poems 'The Door', 'Crow and Mama' and in the ghastly copulations described in 'A Childish Prank' and 'Apple Tragedy'.

Hughes' poetry after *Crow* continues to be marked by the metaphorical connection of womb and grave. To quote some of many possible examples, in the poems from *The Remains of Elmet*, 'Emily Bronte' and 'Haworth Parsonage' (poems undoubtedly marked by his visits

²¹ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2003), pp. 218-219.

to the area with Sylvia and Assia) Emily's death is 'a baby-cry on the moor' and we are given 'Hills seeming to strain/And cry out in labour'.²² In 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', the striking of an owl is described as 'The womb opens and the cry comes'.²³ The poem "Second Birth" in the 1979 volume *Earth-Numb* gives an even bleaker aspect to Crow's re-entry through the doors of birth, showing how the imagery of the *Bardo Thadrol* continues to recur twenty years after the Yaddo project,

When he crept back, searching for
The womb-doorway, remorseful,
It was an ugly grave
Fallen in on bleached sticks.²⁴

Leonard Scigaj in his 1983 essay 'Oriental mythology in *Wodwo*' (in 'The Achievement of Ted Hughes' ed by Keith Sagar) expresses the view that Hughes uses the *Bardo* and other Oriental thought as a paradigm not for attaining the Nirvana of the Clear Light of the *Bardo*, but to return to the world cleansed of over-dependence on rational analytic ego that divorces man from nature'.²⁵ Yet even this is something of a sanitised account of the recurring image of the filthy womb-doorway, the womb that leads to the grave, which is, I think, the dominant image taken from the *Bardo*.

If we are to attempt to locate Hughes in terms of where he stands with regard to the 'holist fallacy' of Orientalism, it is interesting to note that the *Bardo* is a text susceptible to what Slingerland calls 'theologically incorrect'²⁶ readings, in that although Buddhism denies the concept of the individual soul, it seems to be consonant with a weak-dualist folk-interpretation of a soul doomed to wander through the miseries of the intermediate state. The same may be said of the folk interpretation of Buddhism in *The Journey to the West*, where we are presented with very physical accounts of the afterlife and of the frequently comical adventures of the character 'Monkey' who is in a liminal state between enlightenment and his unreconstructed animal nature.

Hughes' most striking use of *The Journey to the West* is his quotation from it in the epitaph that he had placed on Sylvia Plath's gravestone: 'Even amidst fierce flames/The golden lotus can be planted'. It has been said that Hughes in his lifetime attributed these lines to Hindu scriptures; it is possible that Hughes had forgotten their original context. They also reference Plath's own poem 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower'.²⁷ However, the passage in question actually occurs in *The Journey to the West*, at the point after Monkey has asked for the secret of Immortality and is given the following advice, which leads to his Illumination,

²² Ibid., p. 486.

²³ Ibid., p. 448.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 552.

²⁵ Keith Sagar, *The achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 142.

²⁶ Slingerland, *Mind and Body in Early China*, p. 279.

²⁷ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2018), pp. 45-46.

To spare and tend the vital powers, this and nothing else
 Is sum and total of all magic, sacred and profane.
 All is composed in these three, Spirit, Breath and Soul;
 Guard them closely, screen them well; let there be no leak.
 [...]
 That is all that can be learned and all that can be taught. [...]
 Even in the midst of fierce flames the Golden Lotus may be planted,
 The Five Elements compounded and transposed and put to new use.
 When that is done, be what you please, Buddha or Immortal.²⁸

Here we have the concept of the luminous mind or *prakṛti-prabhāsvara-citta*, dwelling not only within strife, but arising as consequence of it. The choice between being a Buddha and an Immortal can also be presented as a choice between Buddhism and Taoism, or between immanence and transcendence. The narrative of *The Journey to the West* shows Monkey on the path to enlightenment, but he has many adventures on the road, including ejection from the Taoist Heaven and confinement under the Mountain of the Five Elements²⁹ – a name which refers back to the Golden Lotus passage. He is found there by the Bodhisattva Kuan-yin, who sees the imprint of Buddha's seal OM MANI PADME HUM, and recites the following poem.

Long ago performed in vain prodigies of valour.
 In his blackness of heart he upset the Heavenly Peach Banquet;
 In mad rashness he dared rob the Patriarch of Tao.
 A hundred thousand heavenly troops could not overcome him;
 He terrorized the realm of Heaven throughout its nine spheres.
 At last in Buddha Tathāgata Monkey met his match.
 Will he ever again be set at large and win back his renown?³⁰

He will in due course be released and become a disciple and companion of Tripitaka on his journey to collect Scriptures from India before finally attaining Buddhahood.

However, it is the episode of Monkey's confinement which Hughes chooses to reference in a poem from the 1980s, 'Chinese History of Colden Water', which begins with the line 'A fallen immortal found this valley'. The fallen immortal is lulled into a sleep which becomes 'a migraine of head-scarves and clatter/Of clog-irons and looms, and gutter water/And clog-irons and biblical texts'.³¹ Hughes seems to identify himself with Monkey here in his experience of the twin horrors of industrialisation and an oppressive, Puritanical Christianity. However, Monkey/Hughes wakes from this nightmare,

The dream streamed from him. He blinked away
 The bloody matter of the Cross
 And the death's head after-image of 'Poor'.

Chapels, chimney's roofs in the mist – scattered.

²⁸ Wu Ch'êng-ên, *Monkey. Folk Novel of China* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 24.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p, 83.

³¹ Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 739.

