

## Suet Pudding, Treacle Tart and Knuckledusters: An Outline of T.E. Hulme

I'd like to begin with some of his poetry. This one is called *Autumn*:

A touch of cold in the Autumn night  
I walked abroad,  
And saw the ruddy moon lean over a hedge  
Like a red-faced farmer.  
I did not stop to speak, but nodded;  
And round about were the wistful stars  
With white faces like town children.

And this is titled *Above the Dock*:

Above the quiet dock in midnight,  
Tangled in the tall mast's corded height,  
Hangs the moon. What seemed so far away  
Is but a child's balloon, forgotten after play.

What we have in these short poems is the immediate presentation of reality by means of striking images. Most of the other poetry being written at the beginning of the last century was decadent Romanticism, post-Swinburne sham antique – what Eliot called in another context the attempt *to summon the spectre of a rose and follow an antique drum*. Hulme's aim was for poetry that was hard-edged, without frills or floweriness, but packed full of memorable metaphors – the stars with white faces like town children, the moon a balloon. He believed that the fresh metaphor, by bringing together vivid images, provided the reader with an original view of reality.

As A.R. Jones said, "Hulme clings to the Aristotelian belief that the greatest of all excellences is to be happy in the use of metaphor, for it is the quick discernment of resemblances which is the mark of the poet"

Hulme's doctrine of metaphor: shocking conjunctions create new intuitions. He said, "Images are born in poetry, they are used in prose and finally die a long and lingering death in journalists' English". And he predicted, "In modern poetry we should expect a revival of classicism. But this is not "a return to Pope" He adds, "When it does come, we may not even regard it as classical" And that of course is just what happened when Eliot produced *Prufrock* and *The Waste Land*.

Metaphor is used to try to get at a reality that is always transcendent: God certainly, but also the world of experience which is never perfectly describable. Reality just *is* and it can be described and represented successfully only in briefly illuminating expressions and images – if at all. He said:

"Language is recalcitrant matter". And: "The process of poetic invention is that of gradually making solid the castles in the air. At last I come to think that all expression is vulgar, that only the unexpressed and silent is real". This is an extremely mystical interpretation of experience and it echoes St Paul's talk of seeing through a glass

darkly and all the other evocations, types and shadows in religious imagery. Hulme never met his contemporary, the philosopher Wittgenstein, but he would have agreed strongly with Wittgenstein's famous statement at the end of his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*:

"What we cannot speak about, we must commit to silence".

It is a double coincidence that both men were at Cambridge and in the trenches – where they fought on opposing sides.

Poetry is the restless attempt to portray what is ultimately transcendent. He said: "Verse is pedestrian, taking you over the ground. Prose is a train which delivers you at a destination". The highest form of language is poetry because: "It always endeavours to arrest you and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process. It chooses fresh epithets and fresh metaphors, not so much because they are new and we are tired of the old, but because the old ceases to convey a physical thing and becomes abstract counters. Prose is the museum where the dead images of verse are preserved".

I can give you an example from the world of cricket commentary. Many years ago, Ray Illingworth described poor visibility at Lord's by coining the expression "indifferent light". Nowadays that striking, because unusual, adjective "indifferent" is always used by commentators to refer to poor light. It has become part of their prose. It has died away into cliché. Hulme's desire to portray experience through vivid metaphors and analogies is a pre-echo of Eliot's description of the poet's task "...to purify the dialect of the tribe"

Or as Ezra Pound taught young poets: "Make it new!"

Hulme's preference for striking images in poetry was paralleled in his opinions about painting and sculpture. He said:

"Renaissance art we may call *vital* art in that it depends on pleasure in the reproduction of human and natural forms. Byzantine art is the exact contrary of this. There is nothing vital in it. The emotion you get from it is not a pleasure in the reproduction of natural or human life. The disgust with the trivial and accidental characteristics of living shapes, the searching after an austerity, a perfection and a rigidity which vital things can never have, leads here to the use of forms which can almost be called *geometrical*. Man is subordinate to certain absolute values; there is no delight in the human form, leading to its natural reproduction; it is always distorted to fit into the more abstract forms which convey an intense religious emotion".

Jones says: "He feels a strong sympathy for the art of Donatello, Michelangelo and Marlowe; but he maintains that their humanism contains the seeds of errors that culminated in Rousseau and Romanticism"

Hulme reviewed Epstein's exhibition and Epstein said it was "The sanest article ever written about me"

Hulme used violent language against Epstein's severest critic, calling him "...a charlatan...a little Cockney intellect...stupid and childish...the most appropriate way of dealing with him would be a little personal violence"

He thought that the strength of a belief is measurable by the extent one is prepared to fight for it: "This is what I call a real, vital interest in literature", he said. "It has to affect the body".

The scope and depth of Hulme's thoughts were hugely influential on the whole movement that is broadly described as Modernism. C.H. Sisson wrote in his book on the 20<sup>th</sup> century poets: "It is hardly too much to say that Hulme has been, in this country, one of the dominant minds of the century. He exposed humanism as the superstition of the Renaissance"

As to Hulme's own poems, Sisson comments: "There is such concentration that one feels one has the complete content of the mind at the moment of the poem. Each poem of Hulme's is a sort of instantaneous carving out of reality with a knife". And Sisson adds:

"A man walking on the sea shore has to have something in his head. The romantic is so to speak a holiday-maker with vague thoughts of luxurious beauty. The classic is a man no less serious than the fisherman mending his nets. His preoccupations do not leave him. He does not turn aside for beauty. No good writer does. In a sense, Hulme's distinction between classic and romantic is merely the distinction between good writing and bad"

Thomas Ernest Hulme was born in Staffordshire on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1883, the son of a gentleman farmer. He was highly intelligent and energetic from an early age. Michael Roberts says: "Even at the top-spinning age, he was engrossed in a book about gyrostatics"

Jones tells us: "While still at school he thought he had discovered the differential calculus and was bitterly disappointed to find out that it had already been discovered". He was awarded an Exhibition in mathematics to St John's, Cambridge. Hulme seemed to regard any activity other than conversation as a waste of time and effort. He was academically lazy, rebellious and rowdy and he was sent down in 1906 after a riot in a theatre. He was so popular among the undergraduates that he was sent off with a huge and flamboyant mock funeral.

Hulme was physically tall and strong and extremely lively and exuberant. Patrick McGuinness writes of him:

"Whether holding forth in his London rooms about Original Sin, enjoying riots in Paris or beating up Wyndham Lewis in a conflagration over a woman - Lewis ended up being suspended upside-down by his turn-ups from the railings of Great Ormond Street - Hulme is remembered as an energetic and irrepressible character".

He persuaded Gaudier-Brzeska to make him a knuckle-duster carved out of solid brass and this he afterwards carried about with him wherever he went. Again Michael Roberts relates how:

“Once Hulme was making water in Soho Square in broad daylight when a policeman came up and said, ‘You can’t do that here!’ Hulme turned around and buttoned himself up and said, ‘Do you know you are addressing a member of the middle classes?’ The policeman said, ‘I beg pardon, Sir’, and went on.”

And A.R. Jones says:

“Characteristic of the method adopted by Hulme in pursuing his amours was an occasion on which, sitting at a table in the Café Royal talking to his friends, Hulme suddenly looked at his watch and strode from the building with the remark, ‘I’ve a pressing engagement in five minutes’ time’. In twenty minutes he had returned wiping his brow and complaining that the steel staircase of the emergency exit at Piccadilly Circus tube station was the most uncomfortable place in which he had ever copulated

“He more than once offered to marry Diana, Mrs Kibblewhite’s young daughter when she grew up, because she made such fine treacle tart”. And he ate suet pudding nearly every day of his life while he lived in London.

A sweet tooth and a taste for fornication, but a lifelong teetotaler, Hulme always professed himself a member of the Church of England.

For Hulme, thought and belief were embodied in physical actions. Concretised emotionality: in order to *express*, we must *do*. And what we do may look irrational. As he said: “Such as pilgrimages to graves, standing bareheaded and similar freaks of a lover’s fancy. The same can be observed in religion. A man cannot deliberately make up his mind to think of the goodness of God for an hour, but he can perform some ritual act of admiration whether it be the offering of a sacrifice or merely saying Amen to a set prayer. ‘By thine agony and bloody sweat’. By common effort, all this many times repeated gives an intensity of meaning. This intensity of meaning is what is sought for”

He said: “I regard processions as the highest form of art. I cannot resist even the lowest form of them. I must march even with the Salvation Army bands I meet accidentally in Oxford Street on Sunday night”.

From Cambridge he went to Canada and worked as a labourer, philosophising all the time, thoughts which found publication in his remarks collected as *Cinders*. The Canadian landscape affected him profoundly. Again Jones says,

“In Canada he was haunted by the vast image of space, by the huge sky and the flat, rolling grasslands reaching out to the horizon. Like Pascal, he suffered the fright of the mind before the unknown”

We remember Pascal’s saying about the terrifying infinite spaces.

On his return from Canada he taught English in Brussels for a while and learnt French and German. He was always combative. For example, In 1908 he gave a lecture at The Poets’ Club referring to the Club’s President’s views as “The kind of statement that I utterly detest”. He called for a new form of poetry based on close observation.

There were a few others who thought like this and Hulme joined a group which included Flint and Pound who for a time were known as the Imagists.

On the continent he was attracted to Charles Maurras and Action Francaise, notorious for its royalism, ultra-conservatism and anti-romanticism, its nationalism and respect for the church – but without necessarily believing in God. As Hulme's views developed he began to criticise the sloppiness of romantic verse as but one symptom of a post Rousseau attitude involving various aspects of rottenness: democracy, progress, human perfectibility and the idea that man is innately good.

When war broke out, Hulme joined the Honourable Artillery Company and on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1914 he was sent to France. He returned to England wounded the following year. In hospital he took up the cudgels against pacifists (among them Bertrand Russell) with articles such as *The Kind of Rubbish We Oppose* and *Why We Are in Favour of This War* He wrote:

“The pacifists’ incapacity to realise the consequences of defeat. It arises from a relativist, utilitarian ethic. They live securely and comfortably, finding a sufficient support in a sceptical rationalism. But individuals in a condition of danger, when the pseudo absolutes melt away into a flux require once more a real absolute to enable them to live”.

The pacifism of Russell and Bell arose from a progressive utilitarian ideology that found no place whatever for the heroic, that deeply discounted the importance of honour and that was prepared to sacrifice virtually any principle for the sake of peace. Hulme had nothing but contempt for it. “It comes to this” he wrote “that for the emancipated man death is too great a price to pay for anything. Life and comfort are the ultimate goods”.

Michael Roberts comments: “Noting the socialist rhetoric with which the well-to-do Bell was wont to festoon his pacifist pretensions, Hulme made an observation that is as pertinent and withering today as it was in 1916: ‘It is a widespread but entirely mistaken idea to suppose that you amend for the advantages of wealth by asserting verbally that you are a socialist’.”

Roberts summarises Hulme's argument against the utilitarian pacifists as follows:

“In the humanist view, everything is justified by its results, and the results are justified by their results and so on. The ultimate justification is either future happiness or human survival. This is totally opposed to the outlook that Hulme sometimes calls *religious* and sometimes *classical*. In that view, there are absolute goods, which are not justified by anything they may lead to, but are simply good in themselves. Restraint, courage, self-sacrifice, truthfulness are qualities of this kind. If people have no sense of the reality of these absolute values, they have no standard by which they can perceive the radical imperfection of either man or nature, and they begin to think that life is the source and measure of all values and that man is fundamentally good”

Hulme believed that England ought to fight until Germany was beaten, because a German victory would establish German dominion from the North Sea to the Mediterranean.

Recovering from his wounds, he mooched around London until March 1916 when he was commissioned into The Royal Marines Artillery. Michael Roberts says, “On 28<sup>th</sup> September 1917, just when everybody seemed to have knocked off for lunch, there was an unexpected burst of shellfire and Hulme was killed”

Hulme rejoiced to see in modern art the break up of the Renaissance humanistic tradition which was art with the human form and human aspirations at the centre. Of this humanistic view, Hulme said:

“You get the first hint of it in the beginnings of the Renaissance itself, in a person like Pico Della Mirandola. You get there the hint of an idea of something which finally culminates in a doctrine which is the opposite of the doctrine of Original Sin: the belief that man as a part of nature was after all something satisfactory. You get a change from a certain profundity and intensity to that flat and insipid optimism which, passing through its first stage of decay in Rousseau, has finally culminated in the state of slush in which we now have the misfortune to live”

The liking for Renaissance and post-Renaissance art comes through vitalism – an identification with nature, a taking pleasure in nature because we feel we are a part of nature. Abstract art on the contrary emphasises disjunction and separation from nature. Man is different. Man is moral and fundamentally religious. There is a part of man which transcends nature.

He said: “We naturally do not call the geometrical arts beautiful because beauty is for us the satisfaction of a certain need, and that need is one which archaic art never set out to satisfy. What from our standpoint appears as the greatest distortion must have been, for the people who produced it, the highest beauty and the fulfilment of some other desire”

Hulme quotes Cezanne in saying that nature could be reduced to “...the cone, the cylinder and the sphere”

Hulme’s anti-vitalist, anti-Romantic view found expression in his political outlook and in 1912 he wrote a long article which he called *A Tory Philosophy*. He begins with characteristic vigour: “It is my aim to explain in this article why I believe in Original Sin, why I can’t stand romanticism and why I am a certain kind of Tory. I am more than a conservative: I am a reactionary”

But we must forget all about Mr Cameron here and the modern Conservative Party and think instead of Dr Johnson and Samuel Coleridge; of T.S.Eliot and C.H. Sisson. He develops a defence of classicism and royalism that we recognise later in Eliot’s *Tradition and the Individual Talent* and his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*.

Hulme says: “The classical attitude has a great respect for the past and for tradition not for sentimental but for purely rational grounds. Classicism does not believe in any real progress. The root of classicism is this, that if the rules are of no value without genius, yet there is in them more of genius than there is in any great genius himself

“The idea of a personal inspiration jumping all complete from nature, capable of creating, by a kind of divine act, the whole organism of adaptable means of expression is ridiculous”

He defines the Romantic as someone “...who is always just about to escape from something. Always escaping, that’s it. The Romantic doesn’t want to escape from anything in particular, but just that he shall escape. In politics this is associated with the idea of progress”

He declares that the engine of progress is the rise of science. And he scorns the arrogance of the scientists:

“Scientists seem to think that the discontinuities in nature are only apparent and that further investigation will reveal the underlying continuity”.

Our own thoughts might turn to Stephen Hawking and those other nuclear physicists who confidently claim that we shall soon have “a theory of everything and then we will know the mind of God”

Hulme attempts to explain why traditionalists and conservatives lost the culture wars against the Romantic and the progressive: “We have been beaten because our enemies’ theories have conquered us. We have played with those to our own undoing. Not until we are hardened again by conviction are we likely to do any good. In accepting the theories of the other side, we are merely repeating a well-known historical phenomenon. The Revolution in France came about not so much because the forces which should have resisted were half-hearted in their resistance. They themselves had been conquered intellectually by the theories of the revolutionary side. The privileged class is beaten only when it has lost faith in itself, when it has been penetrated by the ideas that are working against it”

And he asks, “What is it which makes a man contemplate the idea of a constant world with such repugnance so that he insists, in spite of all evidence, that progress is continuous and that man may and does change? I am here getting at the sentiment which is the root of all the evil”

Precisely: “The progressives and Romantics say there is no reason why we should not suppose that selfishness will be gradually eliminated and a new kind of man, better fitted to live in the Socialist Utopia, will be evolved.

“They don’t believe in God, so they begin to believe that man is a god. They don’t believe in heaven, so they begin to believe in a heaven on earth. In other words, you get Romanticism”.

As for Romantic poetry, he despises it: “I object to the sloppiness which doesn’t consider that a poem is a poem unless it is moaning or whining about something. There is a general tendency to think that verse means little else than the expression of unsatisfied emotion.

*Golden lads and girls all must,  
As chimney-sweepers come to dust*

“The Romantic”, Hulme said “would never have used the word *lads*. He would have to write *golden youth* and take up the thing at least a couple of notes in pitch”

He said: “Romanticism is spilt religion”

No one could ever accuse Hulme of being a systematic thinker, let alone an academic; and the closest he came to summarising his general outlook was in some remarks called *A Notebook* published in *The New Age* magazine in 1915 and 1916. He thinks that scepticism grown out of scientific materialism and mistaken ideas about human progress is dangerous to the proper development of the mind: “Living in a sceptical atmosphere”, he says “you are in an unnatural attitude which prevents you seeing objective truth”.

“For there is an absolute difference between men and animals. It is impossible to explain completely the nature of man as a complex development out of the animal world”.

And he identifies the impediments to sound thinking: “Romanticism in literature; Relativism in ethics; Idealism in philosophy; Modernism in religion”. Religion, for Hulme, is not simply the highest form of feeling: it is a different category altogether.

But, as he says, “Our difficulty now, of course, is that we are really incapable of understanding how any other view but the humanistic could be seriously held by intelligent and emancipated men”

People believe what they want to believe. For once Hulme states this quite politely: “Philosophers are moved by certain unconscious canons of satisfaction. The humanist canons are demonstrably false.

“The whole subject has been confused by the failure to recognise the gap between the regions of vital and human things and that of the absolute values of ethics and religion. We introduce into human things the perfection that properly belongs only to the divine, and thus confuse both human and divine things by not clearly separating them.

“The fundamental error is that of placing perfection in humanity, thus giving rise to that bastard thing Personality and all the bunkum that follows from it. You disguise the wheel by tilting it up a bit. It then becomes progress which is the modern substitute for religion”.

He believes: “Ethical values are not relative to human desires and feelings, but absolute and objective, and as man is essentially bad, he can only accomplish anything of value by discipline – ethical and political. Order is thus not merely negative but creative and liberating. Institutions are necessary”.

“The Medieval period regarded Christian doctrines as facts. These beliefs were the centre of their whole civilisation and even the character of their economic life was regulated by them.

“At the beginning of the Christian period you have many of the Fathers continuing the classical conception of man. At the same time as St Augustine you get Pelagius who has many resemblances to Rousseau and might easily be applauded at a meeting of progressives”.

I think the most incisive comments Hulme makes on the modern attitude of progressivism and human perfectibility are where he says:

“The best-known work on the Renaissance, while valuable historically, seems to me to miss the whole point, for this reason: it describes the emergence of a new attitude towards life, of the new conception of man, as it might describe the gradual discovery of the concept of gravitation – that is, as the gradual emergence of something which once established would remain always, the period before it being characterised as a privation of the new thing. The whole point of the thing is missed if we do not recognise that the new attitude towards man at the Renaissance was thus just an *attitude*, one attitude among other possible ones, deliberately chosen. It is better to describe it as a heresy, a mistaken adoption of false conceptions.

“The moderns, whether philosophers or reformers, make constant appeals to certain ideals which they assume everybody will admit as natural and inevitable for the emancipated man. What these are you may discover from peroration of speeches – even from scrapbooks, ‘To thine own true self etc...’ Over the portal of the new world *Be thyself* shall be written. Culture is not satisfied till we all come to a perfect man...the free growth of personality and so on. We think these things not because they are inevitable ways of thinking but because we absorb them unconsciously from the humanist tradition which moulds the actual apparatus of our thought. They can all be traced back to the Stoics, Epicureans and pantheists of the Renaissance. The detailed exposition of the process by which this attitude was gradually embodied in the conceptional apparatus we inherit may do more than anything else to convince us how very far it is from being an inevitable attitude.

“The pseudo-categories of the humanist attitude are thought to be on the same footing as the objective categories of space and time. It is thought to be impossible for an emancipated man to think sincerely in the categories of the religious attitude”.

In a couple of lucid paragraphs, A.R. Jones extracts what Hulme meant by the religious attitude:

“To aim towards perfection, whether in knowledge, speech or action, is right; but to expect to be rewarded by attainment is to misunderstand the whole nature of human life and activity. It is this error that leads to disillusion, and the disillusion has nothing to do with the decay of a race and the death of its gods. It is a stage on the way to health; and we can pass beyond it to a new certainty and confidence.

“There is nothing gloomy or pessimistic in the tragic view of life. The tragic view recognises from the beginning all those facts that lead to disappointment and bitterness and therefore it leaves room for a gaiety that is not at the mercy of circumstances. The tragic view is necessary because the Romanticism of Victor Hugo, the sentimental optimism of liberal pacifists and the utopian faith in automatic

progress are untenable. Many people who had placed their hope in these things find themselves reduced to a despair that would be pitiful if it were not silly.

“In the history of every civilisation a time comes when the race loses its confidence in its gods, its values and its mission; and then, in some way not understood, it begins to die out and less civilised races take its place. In Western Europe today, there is a decline in courage, faith and hope that seems exactly like the decline that led to the fall of Athens, Sparta and Rome”.

Hulme concludes *A Notebook* with this mighty peroration:

“I want to emphasise as clearly as I can that I attach very little value indeed to the *sentiments* attaching to the religious attitude. I hold quite coldly and intellectually, as it were, that the way of thinking about the world and man, the conception of sin and the categories which ultimately make up the religious attitude, are the true categories and the right way of thinking.

“I have none of the feelings of nostalgia, the reverence for tradition, the desire to recapture the sentiment of Fra Angelico, which seems to animate most modern defenders of religion. All that seems to me to be bosh. What is important is what nobody seems to realise – the dogmas like that of Original Sin, which are the closest expression of the categories of the religious attitude. That man is in no sense perfect, but a wretched creature who can yet apprehend perfection. It is not then that I might put up with the dogma for the sake of the sentiment, but that I may possibly swallow the sentiment for the sake of the dogma. Very few since the Renaissance have really understood the dogma, certainly very few inside the churches in recent years. If they appear occasionally even fanatical about the very world of the dogma, that is only a secondary result of belief really grounded in sentiment. Certainly no humanist could understand the dogma. They all chatter about matters which are, in comparison with this, quite secondary notions – God, Freedom and Immortality”

But I want to end as I began with his poems – which Eliot called “Some of the most beautiful short poems in the English language”:

### *Sunset II*

I love not the Sunset  
That flaunts like a scarlet sore  
O'er a half sick sky,  
That calls aloud for all to gape  
At its beauty  
Like a wanton.

But Sunset when the sun comes home  
Like a ship from the sea  
With its round red sail  
Shadowed against a clear sky,  
Silent, in a cool harbour  
At eve,  
After labour.

This is the antidote to all Romantic waffle, the purifying language of the hard, true image. Some of the poems are so short as to be just singular evocations, snapshots of reality

Old houses were scaffolding once  
And workmen whistling

The lark crawls on the cloud  
Like a flea on a white body

“The world lives in order to develop lines on its face” (Hulme)

The mystic sadness of the sight  
Of a far town seen in the night.

The flounced edge of a skirt  
Recoiling like waves off a cliff.

Down the long desolate street of stars

How close was Hulme to becoming a practising Christian? A.R. Jones says: “Reason is not complete unless it includes humility; and humility involves the recognition of tradition and authority. It is difficult to see how for a Western European the authority could be any other than the Christian Church. Soon after Hulme’s death one of his closet friends, Ramiro de Maeztu, wrote: ‘I believe that in essentials he was already a Catholic, although not in the ritual sense but in the spiritual’.”

Long after Hulme’s death Ezra Pound said, “The black and smeary 1920s wretchedly needed his guidance and the pity is that he wasn’t there to keep down the vermin. God knows Mr Lewis and Mr Eliot must have had a lonely time”

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