

## Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape

### The Expressionist Poetry Workshop

#### Introduction

*Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape* is a five-session course in which participants will be encouraged to respond poetically to a landscape of their choice—ideally a landscape with which they have some connection with and feeling for, but not necessarily so. The idea is for participants to write extendedly or sustainedly about the landscape—a long poem or sequence that has ambition and scope.

Accordingly, the workshops will *not* comprise a succession of tutor-directed prompts with the aim of getting a discrete ‘stand-alone’ poem out of each one. Rather, participants will define an extended project at the beginning of the course and work on it throughout, plotting their own route. In this context, any writing exercises will be designed to help participants develop and enrich their projects-in-progress—ideas, provocations and excursions that may be incorporated into your project—or not.

*Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape* is the first iteration of an umbrella project named *The Expressionist Poetry Workshop* (TEPW). The TEPW derives from the AHRC project described on page 3. Its aim is to encourage poets to write ambitious, subjective and visionary poetry in the Expressionist and Modernist traditions. The understanding of Expressionism that informs its usage in these materials is:

an approach to creativity characterised by a rejection of objectivity in favour of a visionary subjectivity that draws on inner life and imagination to transform content, deploying abstraction, typologies, metaphors and symbols to create novel forms and shape presentations in a tendentious manner.

In February 2024, a poetry competition will be launched, aimed primarily at those who’ve participated in the in-person and online courses, or simply engaged with the course materials. The work of fifty poets will be selected for an anthology—*Apocalyptic Landscape: Poems from the Expressionist Poetry Workshop*—to be published by Valley Press in September, 2024. A number of launch events will be scheduled, at which I hope several anthologised poets will read. More about the competition and anthology in the final page of this document.

#### Why ‘Apocalyptic’?

Among other things, the best poetry is reflexively adequate to the complexity of the *self* and the *times*. This implies a convergence of the *subjective* and the *objective*. Two understandings of ‘apocalypse’ help us effect this convergence and thus open the possibility of writing rich and ambitious poetry:

*Self/subjective*: the Greek word ‘apocalypse’—ἀποκαλύπτω—means ‘revealing’, ‘unveiling’—or ‘vision’. Participants will develop a *vision* of their landscape that goes beyond the simply representational. Although you will begin with the concrete and presenting realities of your landscape, you will interpret and transform them under the influence of your transformative imagination.

*Times/objective*: ‘the Apocalyptic’ as we know it first emerged as a literary genre in the embattled Judaism of the Hellenistic period. Apocalyptic texts typically presented themselves as visions given to the inspired author—‘The Apocalypse of Baruch’, ‘The Apocalypse of Enoch’—by an angel or similar supernatural figure. These Apocalypses addressed the crises of the times, typically in the disguised form of prophecies about the future, and sometimes revisionist interpretations of the past. The best-known example of such an apocalypse is the book which Catholic Bibles refer to as *The Apocalypse of St. John the Apostle*, and

it is the remorseless eschatological catastrophism of this book that gives us the current popular understanding of apocalypse as ‘disaster’ or ‘crisis’ in the context of the imminent ‘End of the World’—whatever that might mean. There is little doubt that our own times are Apocalyptic in this sense—the climate crisis, the Sixth Extinction and the End of Nature, the subordination of humanity to intensifying violence of capital, the rise to global dominance of Bond-villain billionaire plutocrats, the return of mob-populism and fascism, the replacement of the real world by the virtual, ‘wars and rumours of wars’... It is therefore arguable that to write engaged poetry about the modern world *necessarily* involves an engagement with the Apocalyptic. Of course, apocalypses can be personal as well as public...

### Why Landscape?

Landscape is the arena of life, and anchors everything—nature, culture and personal history. Landscapes exist not only as things-in-themselves (arguably) but can also function as portals and jumping-off points to journeys of intellect and feeling. They seize the imagination and become symbols and metaphors, redolent with meaning. However, landscapes also contain within them physical centres of gravity that compel us to return—to the *now*, the material, the sensory, concrete and specific. It is in the tensile elasticity of these relationships—of subjectivity and objectivity, coming and going, improvisation and discipline—wherein the power and potential of landscape writing inheres. Landscape is *technique* as much as *content*.

### Pre-Sessional Tasks

Before the first workshop you need to have selected your landscape, thought about why you have chosen it, and developed an idea—even if it is quite vague (probably better if it is)—of the kind of thing you might write.

#### 1. Choose a landscape

- Choose a landscape you are familiar with, interested in and which has meaning to you. It might be quite a broad area: ‘the South Downs’, ‘Hexham’, ‘Morecambe Bay’; or a more specific place; ‘Elland Road’, ‘Orchard Park’, ‘Yeavinger Bell’. Ted Hughes’s *Remains of Elmet*, Alice Oswald’s *Dart*, or William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* might be examples of the ‘broad’ approach. Brian Lewis’s *White Thorns*, Wole Soyinke’s *Idanre*, and Harriet Tarlo’s *Fitties* might be examples of the more specific. Nancy Gaffield’s *Meridian* and John Montague’s *The Rough Field* arguably combine both. There are countless other exemplars and models. Research your landscape—explore, consult maps, books, websites and whatever other sources are available.
- After you’ve settled on your landscape, go there. If it is not possible for you to go in person, go in imagination or memory, observing and noticing *deliberately* and *attentively*—topography, nature, human activity, evidence of the past, premonitions of the future, the stirrings of your mind, body and imagination—anything that impinges or becomes of interest. You might make notes, take photographs, collect objects. Think about how the landscape connects with the times—and with your already existing artistic interests and preoccupations. *But don’t start writing poems yet. Restrain yourself, if you can!*
- After allowing the physical landscape encounter to settle and begin to digest for a day or two, set a couple of hours aside and engage in a sustained and concentrated stream-of-consciousness brainstorm about the place. Don’t exclude any thoughts that arrive, no matter how irrelevant or odd they might seem. It might be that, in this process, the germs of a vision of the place will begin to emerge—and ideas about the nature and shape of your project. This will be a valuable resource for your sequence—but don’t start writing poems yet! Don’t force yourself on the landscape artistically. Let it come to you, or at least meet it half-way.
- Wait another day or two, to allow your unconscious to work on it—only then begin defining, planning—and if you’re ready—*writing* your project.

2. Read some landscape poetry/poetry rooted in place

Read, or re-read, some poetry in which landscape is important—perhaps some from the list below, although there are any number of others. These are simply books and poems I've re/read recently. Read as a fellow artist and a student of poetry/writing. What is the poet doing? How are they doing it? What can you learn from it? How is it similar and different to what you are thinking of doing? Have they developed a distinctive vision of the place? Is there an apocalyptic dimension?

Gillian Clark, *The Gododdin*  
 Mabel Ferrett, 'Atherton Moor, 1643'  
 (*Versions of the North: Contemporary Yorkshire Poetry*, Ed. Ian Parks)  
 Jorie Graham, *PLACE*  
 Ted Hughes, 'Mayday on Holderness'  
 (*Collected Poems*)  
 Ted Hughes, *Remains of Elmet / Elmet*  
 Brian Lewis, *White Thorns*  
 Alison Lock, *Lure*

John Montague, *The Rough Field*  
 Alice Oswald, *Dart*  
 Pascal Petit, *Mama Amazonica*  
 Lynette Roberts, *Gods with Stainless Ears*  
 Wole Soyinka, 'Idanre' (*Idanre & other poems*)  
 Harriet Tarlo, 'Fitties' (*Gathering Grounds*)  
 Harriet Tarlo, *Field*  
 William Carlos Williams, *Paterson*

However, the five poems we'll be using as exemplar texts are:

- *Workshop One*: Sylvia Plath, 'Berck Plage', *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, Faber, 2004).
- *Workshop Two*: Les Murray, 'Toward the Imminent Days', *Poems Against Economics*, Angus & Robertson, 1972
- *Workshop Three*: Nancy Gaffield, 'Peacehaven to Greenwich', *Meridian*, Longbarrow Press, 2019.
- *Workshop Four*: Peter Riley, 'Pennine Tales i-xi', *Truth, Justice and the Companionship of Owls*, Longbarrow Press, 2020)
- *Workshop Five*: Dylan Thomas, *In Country Heaven / 'In the White Giant's Thigh'*, *The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The Centenary Edition*. Ed. John Goodby. Weidenfield & Nicholson, 2014.

### More Information

*Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape* is part of an AHRC-funded research project led by Dr Steve Ely of the University of Huddersfield, entitled *Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity*. <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/tedhughes/expressionism/>. *THE:VS* is a hybrid English Literature/Creative Writing project with several outputs. The outputs include a monograph, *Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity* (Shearsman, 2025/26), a symposium at the British Library (took place on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2023), a journal article, this course (in in-person and online iterations), freely downloadable pedagogical materials, the related poetry competition and anthology, and associated launches and readings.

The *Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape* resources were devised by Ely, who is Reader in Creative Writing at the University of Huddersfield, where he is also Director of the Ted Hughes Network, a research centre into the work of the eponymous poet. He's an experienced tutor of creative writing in university, community and school contexts, in person and online. He regularly tutors for the Arvon Foundation and at the Garsdale Retreat, and has taught several courses at the Poetry School. He's published a novel, *Ratmen*, a monograph, *Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire*, and twelve books or pamphlets of poetry, including *Englaland*, *Lectio Violant*, *The European Eel* and the recently published *Lives of British Shrews* (Broken Sleep). Another book of poems, *Eely* (Longbarrow Press) will be published in January, and his apocalyptic landscape poem *Orasaigh*, a collaboration with photographer Mike Faint, will be published by Broken Sleep Books in August, 2024.

Workshop One: Introduction, 'Berck-Plage' & Landscape as 'anchor for the imagination'

1. Think about the various understandings of 'apocalypse' and 'apocalyptic'. Which might be relevant to your writing?
  - Unveiling, revelation, vision.
  - Catastrophe, crisis, the 'end of the world', Judgement Day
  - 'Visionary modernist' poets of the 1940s writing under the influence of Dylan Thomas
  
2. Think about the various understandings of 'landscape'. Which might be relevant to your writing? How does 'landscape' differ from 'place'?
  - 'A landscape is the visible features of an area of land, its landforms, and how they integrate with natural or human-made features, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal.' (Wikipedia.) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landscape>
  - 'Landscape is an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors.' (European Landscape Convention, 2000.) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/landscape>
  - 'A section or expanse of rural scenery, usually extensive, that can be seen from a single viewpoint.' Dictionary. com. <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/landscape>
  - 'Place refers to any part of the historic environment, of any scale, that has a distinctive identity perceived by people.' (Historic England, Conservation Principles, 2008.) <https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/constructive-conservation/conservation-principles/>
  - Jonathan Last's *Historic England* research report, 'Landscape – Place – People : the values of spatial terminology in heritage and beyond', contains some interesting thoughts and distinctions. [https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/8015/Landscape%E2%80%93Place%E2%80%93People\\_thevaluesofspatialterminologyinheritageandbeyond#:~:text=The%20concept%20of%20landscape%20reaches,knowing%20your%20place](https://historicengland.org.uk/research/results/reports/8015/Landscape%E2%80%93Place%E2%80%93People_thevaluesofspatialterminologyinheritageandbeyond#:~:text=The%20concept%20of%20landscape%20reaches,knowing%20your%20place)
  
3. Read the extract from Ted Hughes's 'Myth & Education' below. What are the implications for our apocalyptic landscape poetry?
 

[...] the outer world and inner world are interdependent at every moment. We are simply the locus of their collision. Two worlds, with mutually contradictory laws, or laws that seem to us to be so, colliding afresh every second, struggling for peaceful coexistence. And whether we like it or not our life is what we are able to make of that collision and struggle.

So what we need, evidently, is a faculty that embraces both worlds simultaneously. A large, flexible grasp, an inner vision which holds wide open, like a great theatre, the arena of contention, and which plays equal respects to both sides. Which keeps faith, as Goethe says, with the world of things and the world of spirits equally.

This really is imagination. This is the faculty we mean when we talk about the imagination of the great artists. The character of great works is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled to the full presence of the outer world.' (Ted Hughes, 'Myth & Education', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, Edited by William Scammell, Faber, 1994. P. 150.)
  
4. Read Sylvia Plath's 'Berck-Plage', (*Ariel: the Restored Edition*, Faber, 2004, p. 49-54), and answer the questions. In Plath's own voice: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoUasyoTNuo>
  - What landscape is the poem is 'about' or anchored in?
  - Is there an apocalyptic aspect to the landscape?

- In what ways does the poem depart from the landscape being described (outer life/inner life, objective/subjective)?
- How does the poem maintain its unity?
- How would you describe the poem's method?

#### 5. Writing Task: Landscape as anchor for the imagination

Good poems *usually* have concrete and specific settings and situations, described or evoked using sensory language. In landscape poems, the landscape itself—or aspects of it—provides that concreteness. However, a poem that comprises simply an *objective* response to the landscape—simple representation of what Hughes called the 'outer world'—won't go anywhere interesting. The poet also needs to respond to the landscape *subjectively*, transforming it using a combination of imagination, the promptings of the unconscious, spontaneous association and shaping intention. However, integrating subjectivity into landscape writing in this manner needs to be managed and controlled, because otherwise the work's digressive or excursive tendencies might run the risk of undermining the concreteness of the landscape. A technique for avoiding this pitfall is to conceive of the landscape as an objective anchor for the elasticity of the subjective imagination—the digressions and associations might stretch some distance from the landscape and even threaten to break away into something else altogether—but the poet, aware of the necessity of staying in the scene and retaining the objective landscape as a unifying device, makes sure the writing twangs back to the concrete anchor. This happens organically when a poet is in the moment. The following exercise is a little more artificial.

Write or plan a poem, or part of a poem, using the following method. You'll need four things: your landscape; a childhood memory; a recent news story; an historical or prehistorical artefact you have encountered. So, you might select: the seafront at Blackpool, a very early memory of being in a pushchair in the fog, the horrors in Gaza and the Assyrian Lion Hunt friezes at the British Museum. Obviously, it is better if you choose your own items—ones that have meaning to you. The job is now to wire them together, creating segues and transitions out of and back into the landscape. The storyboard below is formulaic but highlights the method and provides a structure. Of course, in your real work, the technique will be present much more organically.

1. Blackpool seafront: introduction, ending with transition to 2.	2. Pushchair/Fog Memory, ending with segue into 3.	3. Blackpool Seafront –different elements, ending with segue into 4	4. Gaza and segue back to seafront
5. Back to Blackpool seafront, focus on new elements, segue into 6	6. Assyrian Lion Hunt, segue back to seafront	7. Blackpool seafront, round off – or keep rolling	8. Etc. <i>Of course, everything might begin merging into everything else ...</i>

Are you generating symbols? What other techniques are you developing to wire the disparate elements of your poem together whilst maintaining the physical and figurative integrity of the landscape?

Workshop Two: 'Toward the Imminent Days'

1. Read Les Murray's 'Toward the Imminent Days' (*Poems Against Economics*, Angus & Robertson, 1972).

The poem's conceit seems to be that the speaker has failed to give a wedding present to his friends, but returning home, or to his natal landscape, he resolves to write them a poem as a belated gift. However, the poem turns into an extended meditation on, and paean to, what the speaker seems to see as the plenitude and dignity of Australian farming and rural life, rooted in marriage and the trans-generational family. Within that, the poem ranges in space, time, allusion and reference.

- What strikes you about this poem on first reading?
  - How is it organised? How does it work? How does the poem create a unity from diversity?
  - Murray was born into a Presbyterian family of Scots-Gaelic lineage, but he converted to Catholicism in 1964, aged 26. This poem is subtly suffused with Catholic imagery/allusions. Can you spot any?
  - What are, 'The Imminent Days'?
  - In what sense, if at all, is it a landscape poem?
  - In what sense, if at all, is it an apocalyptic poem?
2. Writing Task One: Think about your landscape. Think about yourself. What's coming for each of you? What are your 'imminent days'? Begin a poem that addresses both, *in the context of the wider world*. The speaker might be on the cusp of a major decision or event, such as becoming a parent or grandparent, retiring, experiencing a health crisis, or simply looking forward to something; their immediate environment might be under threat, or changing (not necessarily for the worse); and, while these things are on their mind, the world impinges. For example: a grandchild's birthday; notice of the further expansion of a local industrial estate, destroying green-belt, landscape, nature, history and memory, creating visual and auditory blight; the situation in Gaza/Israel/Palestine.
  3. Writing Task Two: poem VI in 'Toward the Imminent Days' seems to be a series of hyperbolised, comic memories about the speaker's father's attempts to manage a young Jersey bull. It is different in content, tone and form to the other poems in the sequence—a kind of 'break-out' vignette. Write a 'break-out' vignette about an animal and its relationship with a human that might be inserted into and connect with your apocalyptic landscape sequence.

#### Examples

- A recent retiree who has enthusiastically taken up nature photography as a hobby, and is endlessly trying to photograph an owl's nest in a hollow tree next to a footpath, experiencing a number of mishaps (falling out of trees, being bollocked by farmers for setting up their hide on 'private property', being attacked by indignant owls—and taking poorly framed, blurry photos of which they are, nevertheless, inordinately proud)
- Someone failing to train a dog, or engaged in an endless war with the rat colony that has established itself under their shed, or being woken at 4.30am every morning by a dawn-chorus blackbird.

More about Les Murray. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/les-murray>;  
<https://www.catholicweekly.com.au/les-murray-a-daily-sacramental-poet/>  
<https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-apocalyptic-vision-of-my-friend-les-murray/>

Workshop Three: Nancy Gaffield: '1: Peacehaven to Greenwich', from *Meridian*, Longbarrow Press, 2019.

*Meridian* is a book-length experimental poem rooted in the walks Gaffield undertook along the Greenwich Meridian line from Peacehaven in East Sussex to Sand le Mere in Holderness. The walks were conceived of as research, undertaken with the specific intent of producing this poem. Gaffield writes that the work,

'...is based on an actual journey where I walked sometimes a day at a time, sometimes two, and sometimes four. [...] I chose a four-part structure, based on the series of guidebooks I used to map the walk, and within each part, the poem is subdivided by an Ordnance Survey Map. The work as a whole contains fragments of song and poetry alongside snatches of TV dialogue, information from guidebooks, film flashbacks, all gathered together through the act of walking. While I planned each walk, I never planned the content of the poem, which always emerged from the walk itself. Along the way, I made notes, took photographs, recorded sounds including my own voice and footsteps, collected information from churches, museums, local newspapers, the people I met. After each walk, I would assemble this information and write up the day.'

This, and more, can be found here: <https://longbarrowblog.wordpress.com/category/nancy-gaffield/>

- The section of *Meridian* I've supplied is quite long, so we'll focus on pages 25-28, 'Ordnance Survey Map 135: Ashdown Forest'.
  - In what sense, if at all, can *Meridian*, or the extract supplied, be described as 'Apocalyptic'?
  - In what sense can the poem be described as a 'landscape poem'?
  - What strikes you about the poem (particularly 'Ordnance Survey Map 135: Ashdown Forest'). Any comments on form, structure, language, technique, etc. It's a high concept, experimental piece. How does this manifest?
  - What strikes you about the *encounter* with landscape presented? What does the landscape bring to the poet? What does the poet bring to the landscape?
  - 'Landscape is history'. Discuss.
- Writing Task One: Take the short line, 'Landscape Remembers' from p.25 of *Meridian*. Write a poem about the history, memory and experience contained in your landscape, using the line as a repeating refrain between stanzas or sections (any form, shape or metre).

Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah

Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah  
 Blah blah blah, blah blah blah

Landscape remembers.

Landscape remembers.

Of course, you might replace the word, 'Landscape' with the name of your landscape: 'Orasaigh remembers', or whatever. You might also generate your own refrain.

- Writing Task Two: Gaffield describes 'open field' poetics (also called 'composition by field') as 'predominating' in *Meridian*. More detail about open field poetics here: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69406/projective-verse>. Imagine you are walking through a part of your landscape. Write a *sensory* (what you see, hear, smell, feel, taste) account of that encounter, but also make a conscious decision to allow external thoughts and ideas to intervene, even if they seem excursive or irrelevant. Perhaps exploit the full length and breadth of the page to organise your words and lines, using white space as a part of the poem, in the way that Gaffield does on pages 25-28 of *Meridian*.

Born in Stockport to a 'lower middle-class' family in 1940, Peter Riley had travelled widely and lived in a range of places in the UK and abroad before moving to Hebden Bridge in 2013, aged 73. Riley's considerable poetic reputation prior to his move had been made as an avant-garde and experimental poet, part of the so-called 'Cambridge School' that developed around J. H. Prynne. However, Riley's return to the North, perhaps first signalled poetically with 2014's *The Ascent of Kinder Scout* and 2015's *Due North*, coincides with a degree of divergence from the theoretical orthodoxies of Cambridge in favour of an expression that concedes more to the lyric, and in which personal experience and autobiography inform an elegiac and reflective, but decidedly holistic engagement with the world, ideas and language. 'Pennine Tales', originally published as a pamphlet by Calder Valley Poetry in 2016, overtly draws on the Hebden Bridge and upper Calder Valley landscape. The poems include a wide range of content—the landscape, the Brontes, Ted Hughes, bus trips to the Hare & Hounds, refugees and asylum seekers, trains, canals, the Leeds Christmas Market, songs—all wrapped up in an personal, elegiac and urgent address. These websites may provide interesting context:

<https://www.hebdenbridge.co.uk/The-Interview/peter-riley.html>

<https://caldervalleypoetry.com/authors/peter-riley-2/>

<https://tearsinthefence.com/2016/07/29/pennine-ales-by-peter-riley-calder-valley-poetry/>

1. 'Pennine Tales' is a twenty-four-poem sequence. We'll focus on the first eleven poems.
  - In what sense, if at all, can 'Pennine Tales', or the extract supplied, be described as 'apocalyptic'?
  - In what sense can the poem be described as a 'landscape' poem?
  - Read the poem, highlighting words, phrases, and lines you find intriguing, exciting or puzzling. Note & think about anything that strikes you.
  - Can you see a collision of the lyric and more experimental/theoretical approaches in this sequence?
  - What strikes you about the *encounter* with landscape presented? What does the landscape bring to the poet? What does the poet bring to the landscape?
  - 'Landscape is politics.' Discuss.
  
2. *Writing Task One:* In 'Pennine Tales', everyday experience within a parochial landscape provides the basis for engagement with the self, ideas and world. As the poem develops across its twenty-four component parts, we get a very strong sense of the speaker and his environment, and a world view begins to emerge. In that context, there are recurring motifs: song/hymns/music, words, bus, owls, train, river, darkness. Task: put yourself in a particular place in your landscape. Begin describing or referring to what you see (establish the setting & situation). Then, hear a sound and react to it, using it as a transitional device that allows a segue into a thought, reflection or poetic extemporisation that is not necessarily related to the scene. Choose a recurring sound, the reoccurrence of which will trigger a return to the scene,, keeping the poem anchored and concrete, simultaneously providing a springboard to further extemporisation.

#### Example

- Hot summer night, bedroom window open, speaker sleepless, disturbed, *preoccupied with something*, music from a house party down the road intermittently intervening: setting, situation, speaker.
- Song from party #1, leading to extemporisation—go anywhere you like—where do hypnagogic dreamers go in their musings?
- Song #2, back to scene, followed by further extemporisation—same or different content.
- Song #3 etc.
- Back to scene. How does it end? Wire it together with recurring motifs and images.



3. *Writing Task Two*: 'Pennine Tales' is doubly, if subtly Apocalyptic. It reveals a singular vision of a landscape from the point of view of a politically, culturally and socially aware speaker essentially pleased with his parish, but aware of the suffering, struggle, threat and precarity written into it—and deeply concerned with the injustices he sees there and in the wider world. It is also apocalyptic in a quasi-Old Testament, eschatological sense—the longing for 'peace', 'hope', and 'Jubilee', the ancient Israelite festival in which debts were cancelled, the destitute restored to their property and slaves relieved from bondage (see Leviticus 25). There is an overt sense of solidarity with the poor and oppressed, and an emphasis on love and friendship, these motifs alluding to and flowing from a socialist politics in which solidarity, mutual aid and mutual care stand against the depredations of capital. Jubilee is a prophetic concept, critiquing the unjust present by juxtaposing it with a vision of the future in which justice is restored. *Task: write Jubilee into your landscape. Think of an aspect or aspects of your landscape which may be degraded, fallen, damaged or corrupted. Not merely the physical environment, but the human and non-human persons that inhabit it, or in terms of spirituality, morality or values. Vision its renewal. This is how one of the authors of the Book of Isaiah does it.*

*Isaiah 11*

- 1 And there shall come forth a rod out of the stemme of Iesse, and a branch shall grow out of his rootes.
- 2 And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest vpon him, the spirit of wisdome and vnderstanding, the spirit of counsell and might, the spirit of knowledge, and of the feare of the Lord:
- 3 And shall make him of quicke vnderstanding in the feare of the Lord, and he shall not iudge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his eares.
- 4 But with righteousnesse shall he iudge the poore, and reprove with equitie, for the meeke of the earth: and he shall smite the earth with the rodde of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips shall he slay the wicked.
- 5 And righteousnesse shall be the girdle of his loines, and faithfulness the girdle of his reines.
- 6 The wolfe also shall dwell with the lambe, and the leopard shall lie downe with the kid: and the calfe and the yong lion, and the fatling together, and a litle child shall lead them.
- 7 And the cow and the beare shall feed, their yong ones shall lie downe together: and the lyon shall eate straw like the oxe.
- 8 And the sucking childe shall play on the hole of the aspe, and the weaned childe shall put his hand on the cockatrice denne.
- 9 They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountaine: for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.
- 10 ¶ And in that day there shall be a roote of Iesse, which shall stand for an ensigne of the people; to it shall the Gentiles seeke, and his rest shall be glorious.
- 11 And it shall come to passe in that day, that the Lord shall set his hande againe the second time, to recover the remnant of his people which shall be left, from Assyria, and from Egypt, & from Pathros, and from Cush, and from Elam, and from Shinar, and from Hamath, and from the ylands of the Sea.
- 12 And he shall set vp an ensigne for the nations, and shall assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather together the dispersed of Iudah, from the foure corners of the earth.

More about Jubilee here: <https://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12967-sabbatical-year-and-jubilee>

*Workshop Five: Dylan Thomas, 'In the White Giant's Thigh', The Collected Poems of Dylan Thomas: The Centenary Edition, Edited by John Goodby, Weidenfield & Nicolson, 2014.*

'In the White Giant's Thigh' was written in 1949-1951. It was first published in book-form in 1952, in the six-poem limited edition *In Country Sleep*, alongside the perhaps better-known Thomas poems, 'Lament', 'Poem for his Birthday', 'Over Sir John's Hill' and 'Do not go gentle into that good night' (the sixth poem was 'In Country Sleep'). *In Country Sleep* is a short selection from Thomas's late 40s and early 50s works, but at its heart is an abortive sequence—originally conceived as a much larger piece—that in a 1950 BBC recording Thomas referred to as *In Country Heaven*. The surviving poems of this project are, 'Poem for his Birthday', 'Over Sir John's Hill', 'In the White Giant's Thigh', 'In Country Sleep', and the unfinished 'In Country Heaven'. The sequence—and each of the surviving poems—are *doubly* apocalyptic. Thomas's accounts of his concept are not articulated in a consistent or systematic way, but he makes it clear that the sequence is set during or immediately after *the destruction of the Earth in a nuclear holocaust* and that its *visionary* poems are narrated from the points of view of 'heavenly hedgerow men', or 'shepherds on the moon' who tell their elegiac but life-affirming tales of the destroyed Earth.

The sequence was to be a paean to the agony and ecstasy of creation, its divine interplay of love and strife. Writing about the 'In Country Heaven' fragment, Thomas described it as, 'an affirmation of the beautiful and terrible worth of the Earth. It grows into a praise of what is, and what could be, on this lump in the skies. It is a poem about happiness.' This characterisation might be applied to the whole sequence, and certainly to 'In the White Giant's Thigh'. The 'White Giant' in question is the famous figure carved into the side of a chalk hill at Cerne Abbas, Dorset. The date of the carving of the figure is disputed, but in Thomas's day the consensus was that it dated from the pre-Roman, 'Celtic', Iron Age. Thomas was familiar with the giant and the surrounding landscape because his mother-in-law lived at nearby Blashford, and he and his family would often visit her there. A fertility superstition attached to the giant—some believed that 'infertile' women could conceive if they had sex within the giant's phallus: in the poem Thomas coyly uses the word 'thigh', after the Old Testament's euphemistic precedent.

John Goodby writes of the poem: 'The speaker imagines walking at night on the giant's hill, and communing with the spirits of the women. It is Thomas's most Hardy-esque piece, and has a folk-tale tone. It interweaves the Dorset landscape with that of the Laugharne estuary', conflating the throats of the curlews on the hill and of the estuary rivers with those of the spirits [...] The speaker implicitly laments lost youth, but it is notable that he speaks for the 'daughters', identifying with them and celebrating their uninhibited sexuality. In its relish for bodily pleasure and poignant awareness of mortality the poem is simultaneously melancholic and carnivalesque. It is the daughters to whom the speaker finally appeals for lessons in lasting love; even as the poem progresses gravewards, their ceaseless desire counters it, and they move from barrenness to being an eternal generative-destructive principle, flaring in the darkness of the dying year.' (p.418-419)

## 1. Reading 'In the White Giant's Thigh'

- In what sense can 'In the White Giant's Thigh' be described as 'apocalyptic'?
- In what sense can the poem be described as a 'landscape' poem?
- As you read the poem, highlight words, phrases, and lines you find intriguing, exciting or puzzling. Note anything that strikes you and be prepared to share your insights and understandings.
- Although it is often downplayed nowadays, Hughes was very much under Thomas' influence early in his career and as late as 1980 was referring to him as a 'genius'. In a 1952 letter to his sister Olwyn, Hughes writes that he had gone to a Cambridge bookshop to buy 'Dylan Thomas' latest book', which the bookshop did not have, probably because the book in question was the limited edition *In Country Sleep* which was only printed in a run of fifty very expensive copies, with no trade edition. The following year, after a Cambridge poetry reading, the starstruck Hughes and his similarly smitten friends followed Thomas and his cronies around the town on their post-

reading pub crawl, hoping to overhear the great man's conversation—or perhaps to be noticed, and included in the group. However, Thomas's work continued to influence even the mature Hughes and 'In the White Giant's Thigh' echoes through several of Hughes's poems.

- I wrote above that the poem is *doubly* apocalyptic. In fact, it is *trebly* so. As well as being visionary and concerned with the 'end of the world', the poem is, of course, written in the trademark Thomas manner, combining the conscious exploration of content and a theme with the release of the unconscious, the deployment of a freely associative method and a virtuosic delight in the sensory and sonic possibilities of language. In the late 1930s, the 'Thomas-style' became the main influence on a group of young British modernist poets who first emerged, along with their 'manifesto' in the 1939 anthology, *The New Apocalypse*. These poets quickly became known as 'the Apocalyptic Poets' and their style as 'Apocalyptic'. Can you see how do the three understandings of apocalypse combine in Thomas's poetry?

2. *Writing Task One*: Think of an aspect of your landscape that you particularly love—perhaps even the whole landscape. Imagine its total obliteration in some catastrophic event. The nature of the disaster is your choice. Write a poem that is simultaneously an elegy for and a paean to the place, in the voices of a selection of the human and non-human persons that formerly lived in, and now haunt, the devastated landscape.
3. *Writing Task Two*: 'In the White Giant's Thigh' might easily be seen as a kind of magical realist poem, the whole landscape transformed to a luminous, vital, essentially erotic tableau, like the 'Fool' paintings of Cecil Collins or the 'village in Heaven' paintings of Cookham by Stanley Spencer. The aesthetic and worldview of each of these artists was deeply infused with their religious/spiritual feelings, which in all three cases might be characterised as a kind of visionary mysticism. Task: write the New Testament story of Lazarus and the Rich Man into your landscape. How you manage it is up to you. If you'd rather apply another Biblical vignette you think would work better, or would be more appropriate, by all means do so.

Cecil Collins: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/cecil-collins-930>

Stanley Spencer: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/sir-stanley-spencer-1977>

*Luke 16:19-21*

**19 ¶** There was a certaine rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linnen, and fared sumptuously every day.

**20** And there was a certaine begger named Lazarus, which was layde at his gate full of sores,

**21** And desiring to bee fed with the crummes which fel from the rich mans table: moreouer the dogges came and licked his sores.

**22** And it came to passe that the begger died, and was caried by the Angels into Abrahams bosome: the rich man also died, and was buried.

**23** And in hell he lift vp his eyes being in torments, and seeth Abraham afarre off, and Lazarus in his bosome:

**24** And he cried, and said, Father Abraham, haue mercy on mee, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and coole my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame.

**25** But Abraham saide, Sonne, remember that thou in thy life-time receiuedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus euill things, but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

**26** And besides all this, betweene vs and you there is a great gulfe fixed, so that they which would passe from hence to you, cannot, neither can they passe to vs, that would come from thence.

**27** Then he said, I pray thee therefore father, that thou wouldest send him to my fathers house:

**28** For I haue fiue brethren, that he may testifie vnto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

**29** Abraham saith vnto him, They haue Moses and the Prophets, let them heare them.

**30** And hee said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went vnto them from the dead, they will repent.

**31** And hee said vnto him, If they heare not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be perswaded, though one rose from the dead.

# Poetry Competition

## Apocalyptic Landscape

*Poems from the Expressionist Poetry Workshop*



The Climate Crisis, the End of Nature and the Sixth Extinction, the replacement of the real world with the virtual, the rise of fascism and the intensifying violence of capital—there's no doubt we live in Apocalyptic times. But Apocalypse has another meaning beyond catastrophe—it also means vision, revelation, unveiling. This competition invites entrants to turn their own 'visionary subjectivity' to a landscape of their choosing, in the context of the turbulence and complexity of the self and the world.

A poetry competition *primarily* aimed at those who have engaged with the *Writing the Apocalyptic Landscape* materials—in workshops, or simply by accessing the course materials, which can be found here: <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/tedhughes/expressionism/>. The fifty best submissions will be published in the anthology *Apocalyptic Landscape: Poems from the Expressionist Poetry Workshop*, to be published by Valley Press in September 2024.

Poems should reflect a subjective, visionary engagement with a specific landscape in the context of the self and the world.

Entrants should submit *one* sequence of up to 200 lines *or* a maximum of three extracts or individual poems of no more than 50 lines each. Three winning sequences will be published in their entirety. The Editors (Steve Ely and others *TBC*) reserve the right to select individual poems from sequences submitted.

Submit work as a Word Doc attachment to [Apocalypse@hud.ac.uk](mailto:Apocalypse@hud.ac.uk). Make sure your name and contact details (email) are clearly displayed on the Word Document containing the submission.

The deadline for submissions is 12 noon on Friday 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2024. Successful entrants will be notified by Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May. The Editors' decision is final. No correspondence will be entered into regarding unsuccessful submissions.