FIONA MOZLEY, *ELMET* (2017)

In preparing your draft answers to these questions, please use the materials available in Literature Resource Center. For more general questions, do try to incorporate relevant literary-theoretical references.

1. The novel's epigraph consists of two sentences taken from Ted Hughes' long note to the second edition of his collection of poems *Remains of Elmet* (1993). The 1993 note is a much expanded version of the prefatory note to the 1979 first edition. Mozley's epigraph omits important aspects of both versions of Hughes' note. Comment on the differences with reference to the novel itself, and include a reflection on the poem "Remains of Elmet" (which was cut from the second edition). Both the 1979 and the 1993 notes plus the poem are reproduced below.

2. The book consists of five sections identified with roman numerals containing (or followed by) a varying number of chapters, and a section VI (without further chapters) ending the book. The five sections are reminiscent of the five acts of a Shakespeare play, and the novel's subject matter has the makings of tragedy. Read up on tragedy (Wikipedia is a good start) and discuss to what extent *Elmet* can be considered a tragedy for our time. Make sure your answer includes reflection on the structure of the novel.

3. The novel's central theme is arguably the question of belonging and/or owning, a question deeply entangled in both myth and history. Read up on Robyn Hode/Robin Hood, on the history of "Enclosure" and on the "Right to Buy"-scheme (Wikipedia will do) and discuss the novel's engagement with these (hi)stories.

4. *Elmet* is not quite a *Bildungsroman*, but it is profoundly concerned with education, both in the sense of formal instruction in schools and in less formal contexts (including home education and familial character formation). The acquisition of "standard" language is an important aspect here, also in terms of the narrator's voice. Document educational scenes in the novel and comment on its various linguistic registers (including code switching).

5. Discuss the novel's reconfiguration of gender patterns and its engagement with sexuality and violence. Make sure to comment also on the italicised sections, especially section V. And don't forget the absent mothers.

Ted Hughes, Preface to *Remains of Elmet* (1979)

'The Calder valley, west of Halifax, was the last ditch of Elmet, the last British Celtic kingdom to fall to the Angles. For centuries it was considered a more or less uninhabitable wilderness, a notorious refuge for criminals, a hide-out for refugees. Then in the early 1800s it became the cradle for the Industrial Revolution in textiles, and the upper Calder became "the hardest-worked river in England". Throughout my lifetime, since 1930, I have watched the mills of the region and their attendant chapels die. Within the last fifteen years the end has come. They are now virtually dead, and the population of the valley and the hillsides, so rooted for so long, is changing rapidly.'

Remains of Elmet

Death-struggle of the glacier
Enlarged the long valley of Calder
Down which its corpse vanished.

Farms came, stony masticators
That ate each other
To nothing inside them.

The sunk mill-towns were cemeteries
Digesting utterly
All with whom they swelled.

Now, coil behind coil,
A wind-parched ache,
An absence, famished and staring
Admits tourists

To pick among crumbling, loose molars
And empty sockets.

Hughes' Notes to 1993 edition, which does not include the original title poem.

Mozley's epigraph to *Elmet* in highlight.

Notes

REMAINS OF ELMET

Elmet is still the name on maps for a part of West Yorkshire that includes the deep valley of the upper Calder and its watershed of Pennine moorland. These poems confine themselves to the upper Calder and the territory roughly encircled by a line drawn through Halifax (on the east), Keighley (on the north-east), Colne (on the north-west), Burnley (on the west), and Littleborough (on the south-west): an 'island' straddling the Yorks–Lancs border, though mainly in Yorkshire, and centred, in my mind, on Heptonstall. Elmet was the last independent Celtic kingdom in England and originally stretched out over the vale of York. I imagine it shrank back into the gorge of the upper Calder under historic pressures, before the Celtic survivors were politically absorbed into England. But even into the seventeenth century this narrow cleft and its side-ginnels, under the glaciated moors, were still a 'badlands', a sanctuary for refugees from the law. Defoe hid in Halifax to escape his creditors. In those days Halifax was a small country town, and the main stronghold, further up the valley, was Heptonstall. An old rhyme takes note of one aspect of the early shift of power:

Halifax is made of wax
  Heptonstall of stone.
Halifax has many pretty girls,
  Heptonstall's got none.

Heptonstall is now a straggly hill-top hamlet.

Physically inhospitable, cut off to north and south by the high moorland, the insularity of the valley was in some ways almost complete, in others anything but. It formed a natural highway, the pass (just north of the M62) between the Scandinavian pressures of the North Sea and the Celtic pressures of the Irish Sea; between Mersey and Humber, this was the top of the tide, from both seas: where the wrack washed up and stayed. The results – alternating between pressurized stagnation and fermenting independence – can be read into the region's history. In the Civil War the valley militia formulated

their refusal to obey any order from the King lacking the full consent of Parliament in a document that was incorporated into Jefferson's Declaration of Independence (one of his ancestors, the first Secretary for Virginia, came from the valley). The region's early prosperity was based on wool (the household industry had shaped architectural features in the old farms and cottages). So, when the time came, the spirit of the place was ready to take advantage of mass-production, and wherever water ran mills sprang up. By the end of the nineteenth century the Calder was called 'the hardest worked river in England'. The tributary known as Colden Water (the 'moor-water' in the poem titled 'Crown Point Pensioners') comes down a small side-valley as a tiny stream, easy to jump across in many places, yet at one time even this trickle was the lifeline for no fewer than fourteen mills (and up near the top of it, in the thirteenth century, the first fulling mill on record). The main valley, now shorn of its forest of chimneys (and of most of its mills), trying to adapt to tourism, prides itself on the title 'Cradle of the Industrial Revolution'. Following hard on these mills, as Jacob on Esau, the Chartist Movement sprang up in the same cradle.

This confined separateness, with its peculiar conditions and history, had its Darwinian effect on the natives. The most recent and obvious imprint on them was made by Wesley's Methodism, or rather by the local mutation of it. When Wesley first saw the place and preached here, before the mills, he called it 'the most beautiful valley in England'. But his antithesis went on – 'with the most barbarous people'. He was looking at it before that 'barbarous' population became his most fanatic enthusiasts. Which is to say, before they had registered the full impact of Parson Grimshaw – the hell-fire Methodist preacher of Haworth in the latter part of the eighteenth century. In Mrs Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* there is a vivid and convincing (familiar) account of the community, the human type, that Grimshaw had to deal with. To judge by the shock-wave, which could still be felt, I think, well into this century, he struck the whole region 'like a planet'. There is a marvellously evocative re-creation of his life in Glyn Hughes's novel *Where I Used to Play on the Green* (1982). Grimshaw's unusual force seems to have alarmed even Wesley a little. To a degree, he changed the very landscape. His heavenly fire, straight

out of Blake's *Prophetic Books*, shattered the terrain into biblical landmarks: quarries burst open like craters, and chapels – the bedrock transfigured – materialized standing in them. The crumpled map of horizons became a mirage of the Holy Land. Grimshaw imposed this vision (which was not a little neurotic), then herded the people into it.

The men who built the chapels were the same who were building the mills. They perfected the art of perching their towering, massive, stone, prison-like structures on drop-offs where now you would only just graze sheep. When the local regimes (and combined operation) of Industry and Religion started to collapse in the 1930s, this architecture emerged into spectacular desolation – a grim sort of beauty. Ruin followed swiftly, as the mills began to close, the chapels to empty, and the high farms under the moor-edge, along the spring line, were one by one abandoned. When I came to consciousness there, in the 1930s, the process was already far gone, though the communities seemed to be still intact, still entirely absorbed by the life of the factories – or by the slump. But you could not fail to realize that the cataclysm had happened: to the population (in the First World War, where a single bad ten minutes in no-man's-land could wipe out a street or even a village), to the industry (the shift to the East in textile manufacture), and to the Methodism (the new age). Gradually it dawned on you that you were living among the survivors, in the remains.