

Shamanism in Ted Hughes's Poetry

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Abstract

Ted Hughes is a poet, myth maker, poet-shaman, mystic and a visionary. He is disenchanted with the western culture and he believes that it should need a sort of therapy or psychic healing. It is in this context he attempts to explore a sort of primitive spiritual technique called 'shamanism' which includes, in his own words, 'the shamanic flight and return' ('Ted Hughes and Crow: Interview with Faas', London Magazine, 1971, p.17). The shaman's song is based upon three factors: the energy, or ecstasy; the myth, expressed in some form of ritual, and a resulting catharsis or abreaction. These three components combine to produce healing, reintegration and answers to spiritual questions. The narrative poet is like a shaman whose retelling of a myth results in some display of healing power as a clairvoyant piece of information.

It is almost impossible for a modern English poet to become a shaman, but quite clearly, Ted Hughes's preoccupations with death, with the animal world and mythology show an affinity with the shaman's function. In treating occult mythology in poetry, the poet, as Thomas West says, becomes the psychic healer of the community as well as himself, a medicine man, a marabout, a shaman (*Ted Hughes*, p.37). Thus, throughout his poetry Hughes is preoccupied himself with the exploration of the concepts of primitive myth and shamanism.

Keywords: Shamanism, psychic healer, primitive myth, rational scepticism,

Introduction

Born on 17th August 1930 in Mytholmroyd in Yorkshire, Edward James 'Ted' Hughes is one of the most reputed poets of his generation. He was completely unknown in England until he won the First Publication Award in a contest sponsored by the New York City Poetry Centre. Faber and Faber published his prize-winning poems in a volume entitled *The Hawk in the Rain* in 1957. The publication of his second collection *Lupercal* in 1960 has confirmed that Hughes is a poet of remarkable talent. The subsequent publications *Wodwo* (1967), *Crow* (1970), *Gaudete* (1977) and *Moor town* (1979) have not only made him a natural successor to the great English poets like W.B. Yeats, D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot but also lead him to the eventual appointment as Poet Laureate of England in succession to Betjeman. His other major works include *Remains of Elmet*, *Moortown*, *Flowers and Insects*, *Wolf watching* and *Birthday Letters* (1998). He was married

to the American poet Sylvia Plath in 1956. His part in their relationship became controversial, as Sylvia Plath committed suicide in 1963 under mysterious circumstances. In 2008 Hughes is ranked fourth in the list of ‘The 50 Greatest British Writers since 1945.’

Shamanism

Ted Hughes regards myth and folklore as a healing force to the divided psyche. He, from the beginning, has been arguing that the scientific inquiry, rational scepticism and puritanical idealism have split man’s psyche. They have suppressed natural energies in man. Thus, the modern man, in Ted Hughes’s own words, has ignored nature and rejected religion and his inner world ‘as a bundle of fairy tales, a relic of primeval superstition’, (*Myth and Education*, G.Fox, et al, ‘Writers, Critics and Children’, p.90). These latent energies in man, if not controlled would be directed outwards in aggressive acts of violence.

So, Hughes believes that the latent energies inwardly troubling man can be controlled and diverted into more creative channels through rituals and ceremony. “If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control-rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one”. (*Myth and Education*, p.90) Since myth, fantasy, ceremonies and primitive rituals help in healing a person’s psychological as well as physical ill, they become a recurrent phenomenon in Hughes’s work. One important technique Hughes often exploits throughout his poetry is ‘shamanism’.

Shamanism is a primitive ritual practice practised by a shaman and is even now predominant in herding societies found in Siberia, Central Asia, North America, Indonesia etc. The shaman or witch doctor is believed to exhibit particular magical specialities: special relationship with spirits, superhuman capacities permitting magical flights: ascents to the sky and descents to the underworld and special affinity with animals and so on. He is supposed to perform magical healing among the community people. The primitive shaman performs some important functions: the shamanic cure that includes search for lost soul and exorcising evil spirits from the possessed. The shaman possesses other magical powers: foretelling future events, discovering of thieves, magical- religious hunt, controlling of atmospheric phenomena, facilitating birth etc.

While a shaman can have direct experience of other worlds at his will, the ordinary man can know them only through myth, fantasy and dreams. Hughes sees shamanism basically as a spiritual flight into the unconscious realm through dreams, fantasies, nightmares and surrealistic experiences. In fact, it is basic allegory of the two worlds: the hidden and the rational. These shamanic procedures are found to penetrate the realm between our ordinary minds and our deepest life. Thus Hughes thinks that myth and fantasy can keep man in touch with his own elemental energies.

Relationship between Shaman and Animals

Hughes attempts to explore a world of primordial animal totems. The relationship between Hughes and the terrifying predators he describes is like that of the shaman to his totem animal. Hughes animals like the hawk, the fox, the jaguars, the bull; the pike, the otter, the bear, the rat, the wolf etc serve as animal poems for him. Through them he seeks, as did ancient shamans, an alignment with the unknown forces governing the universe. His work is a journey beyond the rational to the primitive depths of experience to liberate the self. For Hughes, the process of writing the poem, as Stuart Hirscheberg reiterates, recreates the rite of blood brotherhood between the shaman and his animal Helper (*Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes*, p.8).

An Otter-shaman's Animal Totem

The otter is an important sacred animal for shamans. Elaide says that otters act both as healing shamans and serve to a certain extent even as priests. (*Shamanism*, p.316) As a tutelary animal, it not only enables the shaman to transform himself, but also, it is in a manner his 'double', his alter ego. In one of his finest animal poems 'An Otter', Hughes explores the double existence of the otter. He stresses its solitary nature, its elusiveness that is at once pathetic and noble.

The state of otter projects exactly the shaman's habitual mental state of being, his ability to allow his soul and body to roam about in different realms. The shamans perform the function of a psychic healer, announce the cure, go in search of the patient's soul, capture it, and make it return to rejuvenate the body that it has left. This act is nothing, but the reintegration of the self expressed in the context of the primitive religion. In this way, the otter forms an ideal totem image to dramatise the shaman's psychic life. The precarious existence of the otter described in Hughes's poem is also akin to the precarious life of the shaman whose functions also involve descent into underworld, ascension into the sky, and going into a trance, while retrieving the lost soul.

Of neither water nor land. Seeking
Some world lost when first he dived , that he cannot come at since,
Takes his changed body into the holes of lakes.
As if blind, cleaves the streams push till he licks
The pebbles of the source, from sea. ('An Otter', *Lupercal*, pp.46-47)

Second Glance at Jaguar-Shaman's Helper or Protector

In 'Second Glance at a Jaguar', Hughes not only draws on the tradition of jaguar worship among the primitive shamans, but consciously exercises a shamanic technique of identifying himself with an animal that is charged with the whole mythology of species. A Shaman believes that he can turn into a jaguar at will and that he can use the form of this animal as a disguise under which he can act as a helper, a protector, or an aggressor. The jaguar in this poem is caged and appears to be 'muttering some mantrah, some drum song of murder', and is 'going like a prayer

wheel'. According to Indian mythology, the sound of mantrah has the magical power to annihilate by dissolution the particular spirit to which it belongs. The jaguar calls up his rage to wear himself out from within to annihilate and free himself from the condition of enslavement-not to the bars but to his condition of 'jaguarness' which imprisons him.

Skinful of bowls, he bowls them,
The hip going in and out of joint, dropping the spine
With the urgency of his hurry
Like a cat going along under thrown stones, under cover.
Under his spine. ('Second Glance at a Jaguar', *Wodwo*, pp.25-26)

Pike-A Primitive Incantation

For Hughes the major way of making the secret flight is through dreams. Likewise dreams, trances, incant chanting and rituals are important to initiatory or ecstatic technique of the shaman. Hughes believes that these dreams enable to draw the readers into a heightened state of perception that has the power of magical healing. Hughes employs this dream technique in many of his poems, like 'The Thought-Fox', 'November', 'Pike', 'The Bull Moses', 'Jaguar', 'The Bear', 'Relic', 'A Woman Unconscious', etc. Elaide says that the shamanic narratives are filled with the accounts of the shaman's encounters with pike and other animals (p.213).

In the poem 'Pike' the narrator encounters various pike and meticulously records their size, number and colour. The poem is, in fact, reminiscent of a primitive incantation. The pike, like the thought fox, the hawk and the most of his animals, include among the 'helping spirits' of the shaman, who often takes animal form, arousing in the reader the feelings of terror, and acts as intermediary between the shaman and the mysterious preconscious animal world. Hughes, here, encounters with pike in order to dramatise the presence of dark, irrational forces which are latently submerged in man's subconscious mind. He explores the hidden world in 'Pike':

But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move
The still splashes on the dark pond. ('Pike', *Lupercal*, pp.56-57)

The Bear-Celebration of Timeless Quality

'The Bear' is a perfect shamanic dream. Eskimo shamans often dreamed of bears during their search for knowledge. In many cultures the bear is viewed as a mountain god. The description of the bear evokes a contrast between the enormous inanimate bulk of the mountain and the tiny gleamy life in the 'eye' of the bear. The great hibernating bear is compared to a dormant mountain. Its tiny eye is lost in vast depth of black fur. The poem is a mythical evocation of the bear, its bulk

and its omnivorous hunger. The encounter with the bear is a necessary shamanic element in the 'ecstatic rite of dismemberment of the candidate by demonic spirits'. (*Shamanism*, p.44) the images of the mountain, cave, river hint at the shamanic descent to the underworld. Similarly, skeletons or bones have an enormous importance for shamans. Bones, for shamans, have resurrecting potential, since they believe that bones can become clothed again with flesh. The poem is a celebration of the bear's timeless quality:

The bear sleeps
In a kingdom of walls
In a web of rivers.
He is the ferry man
To dead land
His price is everything. ('The Bear', *Wodwo*, p.41)

Lupercalia - A Shamanic Song

Rituals, primitive songs and ceremonies are part of shamanic rites. In Hughes's work there are numerous instances where the poet deliberately intends to describe the rituals. The poem 'Child Birth', (*The Hawk in the Rain*, p.45) Hughes looks at birth through mythic spectacles. Hughes's other poem 'Lupercalia' is based on an ancient ritual of the Roman festival. It was a ritual held to appease Faunns, or Pan, a spirit who supposedly kept wolves away from flocks. The four sections of the poem describe the four necessary participants within this Roman fertility celebration, whose main purpose was to impart fertility to barren women through an elaborate ritual: athletes, priests, goats and dogs were considered to be a source of sexual fertility. A blow from one of the goatskin thongs was believed to have the power to cure sterility. The poem ends with a prayer for life to the powers of nature that control the cycles of fertility and birth.

Fresh thongs of goatskin
In their hands they go bounding past,
And deliberate welts have snatched her in
To the figure of racers..... ('Lupercalia', *Lupercal*, pp.61-63)

Song of a Rat-Symbolic Death and Resurrection

To gain control over the process of death and rebirth is an integral part becoming a shaman. Elaide says that the main function of the shaman lies in his ability to search for the patient's lost soul (p.438). Hughes's 'Song of a Rat', presents symbolic death and resurrection. The poem includes three stages of a typical shamanic initiation: the physical death of a rat, its illumination and its resurrection.

The shaman knows how the spirits kill, dismember and consume him. During his cure, he feels the various parts of his body join together again and his personality becomes restored. In 'Song of a Rat', the process of purgation described involves physical death of the rat. The physical mutilation, agony and the death, the rat suffers serve to prepare for its dismemberment. Here, Hughes's major concern is with the rat's attitude towards its situation. The rat finds its situation totally incomprehensible. It reacts with ignorance and ferocity. It directs screams of defiance at the universe that has betrayed it to the agony and refuses to submit to its inevitable death. It can only confront the horror, which is all pain and death. For it there can be no distinction between understanding and experience.

Iron jaws, strong as the whole earth
Are stealing its backbone
For a crumpling of the universe with screeching,
For supplanting every human brain inside its skull with a rat body that knots and unknots,
A rat that goes on screeching, ('Song of a Rat', *Wodwo*, pp.162-64)

Section II 'The Rat's Vision' expands on that insight what the rat seems at that moment is the earth as a barren land, as a vast design of dereliction. Section III 'The Rat's Flight' deals with the rat's resurrection. It follows the rat beyond death into its god-death.

The horned shadow of the Rat
Casting here bt the door
A bloody gift for the dogs
While it supplants Hell. (Ibid, pp.162-64)

Although we find numerous examples of shamanic technique in Hughes's earlier work, its boldest implication is to be found in *Crow*, *Gaudete*, and *Prometheus on His Crag*. Hughes himself said that *Crow* is the product of his automatic writings; 'they wrote themselves quite rapidly'. (Interview with Faas, *London Magazine*, 1971, pp. 5-20). *Crow* includes some of the most profound shamanic initiatory experiences like the dismemberment of the body, cataleptic trances and the similar death rituals. It is full of songs, macabre dances and compressed rituals and great emphasis is put upon the search for initiatory experience. In *Gaudete* and *Prometheus on His Crag* both the initiatory and expiatory elements are combined together in terms of shamanic meditation. They include the shamanic practises like dismemberment of the body, torture by helping spirits, descent into the underworld, and abduction by spirits, symbolic birth and regeneration. *Prometheus* himself is a shaman who forms the link between heaven and earth, conversing with both the gods of Olympus and the men of Athens. He seeks to deal with the divinity on behalf of man when the problem of guilt has not been dealt with. *Prometheus* is a sublimation of the image of the self

reliant, shamanic trickster. Similarly, Prometheus's suffering and his torture by the vulture is a typical shamanic concept.

In *Gaudete*, as T. Gifford and N. Roberts rightly points out, Hughes draws a social milieu out of the ritual. In this long narrative poem, the mythic element is made a great deal more accessible by the reintroduction of a human perspective (*The Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* p.174). The career of Reverend Lumb, the protagonist of the poem, bears an unmistakable general resemblance to what Hughes has called 'the shamanic flight and return'. The sudden, psychotic breakdown, the cessation of ordinary reality and entry into a spirit world, the threats, violence and symbolic teaching undergone there, the provision of a new body and the transformed return of Lumb, all correspond to the basic concepts of shamanism.

Conclusion

What a poet like Ted Hughes ultimately shares with the shaman is a concern for psychic equilibrium. He considers shamanism as a force of equilibrium because, it deals with the control and harnessing of energy expressed through ecstasy, energy that can revitalise and empower or bring chaos and destruction. Ted Hughes's poetry is addressed to a world that has lost his balance. It is poetry that can, not only portray the crisis, but also has a healing force. The healing comes through its emphasis on the holiness of the natural world and the mystery of the human psyche. In Michael Sweating's words, 'Shamanism caters for Hughes's doctrine of energy, his love for the world of nature, his metaphysical concerns, and his fascination with animals. It also provides an answer to the twentieth century poets' problem of whether his work is relevant. (The Achievement of Ted Hughes, (ed) Keith Sagar. P.78)

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