

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 11 : 3 March 2011
ISSN 1930-2940

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**Ted Hughes's Poetry -
The Problem of the Evil of Self-Consciousness**

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Abstract

Ted Hughes's poetry hints at modern man's self-division and subsequent alienation from nature and consciously aims to integrate man with nature. His poetry concerns itself with modern man's problem of sense of superfluity. As a poet Hughes's traditional trait is chiefly that of an inspired visionary. His major poetic preoccupations are: nature and myth. He is obsessed with animals, animal energies and the darks, mysterious forces that are latently embodied in natural world.

A critical study of some of his best 'animal' poems conveys his concept of the primal energies of the natural world that stress the absolute otherness of that world and the relationship between these energies and the divided nature of man. His celebration of animal life, in a way, reflects the affirmation of all life. He is anti-rationalist and yet an agnostic. He argues that puritanical repression has alienated man from his natural instincts and laments that modern man, in the present cultural crisis, has lost his moorings and bearings in nature.

By practicing ritual and following dogmas Hughes attempts to rediscover and interpret these energies and restore them to man. Thus his poetry constantly aims at exorcising the

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evil of self-consciousness that is at the bottom of all schisms of the soul. Throughout his poetry, he quests for transcendence for release from shackles of time into timelessness and eternity. In this effort, he acquires a mystic dimension as poet.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, Edward James Hughes, popularly called Ted Hughes, is one of the most striking figures among the British poets since the Second World War. He is immensely prolific and considered as the natural successor to T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Dylan Thomas, and Philip Larkin. He is a poet of immense potential, who like D.H. Lawrence not only accepts the overwhelming power of our natural instincts but goes on to tap intensely the dark, violent, psychic forces latent in human life. He is a voluminous writer and, and he has won enormous success and high critical acclaim and has greatly influenced such contemporary poets as Peter Redgrove, Seamus Heaney, and Geoffrey Hill and others.

Ted Hughes is a nature poet, myth maker, psychic healer, poet-shaman, mystic and most importantly an entertainer at large. He has won innumerable awards for his writings including the New York Poetry Center First Publication Award (1974), Signal Poetry Award (1979), O.B.E. (Officer, Order of the British Empire (1977). He was made Poet Laureate in 1985 in succession to late John Betjeman.

Ted Hughes's Attitude to Nature and Animals

Ted Hughes's 'nature poetry' comprises mainly of his poems that explore man's relation with 'animal life' and 'landscapes' - both constantly interacting with the elements of nature. His nature poetry predominantly deals with the problem of modern man's alienation from nature. It is also an attempt to reunite man with nature.

In Hughes's view, modern man has discarded his world of feelings, imagination and pure instincts which is true to nature. But he has done so, at the cost of his own existence. So, Hughes's nature poems, on the one hand, hint at modern man's present perilous existence and on the other, attempt to redeem man from his own predicament.

However, Hughes attributes modern man's alienation from nature to his self-consciousness or his rational consciousness, to his religious compunctions and finally to his slavery to science and technology.

Effect of Religious Dogmas

Hughes believes that modern man's inner world of pure instincts has been destroyed by the abstract dogmas of Christianity. If outdoor primitive cults have bound the aboriginal to nature, organized religion has displaced his natural moorings and bearings with theology and indoor doxology- a fact that can be well understood in Hughes's own words:

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The subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature, and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature – from both inner and outer nature. The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man Since Christianity hardened into Protestantism, we can follow nature's underground heretical life, leagued with everything occult, spiritualistic, devilish, over-emotional, bestial, mystical, feminine, crazy, revolutionary, and poetic. (*The Spectator*, pp.81-83)

Both religious belief and rationality in different ways are destructive of man's unity with nature. If the abstract dogmas of Christianity had suppressed man's inner world of instinctual energies, in their own way, modern man's rational consciousness does the same in a different way.

Ever since man's self-consciousness has alienated him from nature, his self has come to be divided between his natural instincts and cultural ego. This division of self gets worse as time distances him more and more from the primitive man who lived right amidst nature as wild animals still do. This is because modern man's sophisticated sensibility, compounded by his sense of power over elements-however dubious this may be in the ultimate analysis – has actually torn his mind between his natural self and the evil of self-consciousness. This is the schism of the mind and Ted Hughes, as a poet concerns himself with the tackling of the divided mind through a recourse to the primitive and the primordial power and terror as they are still found in wild animals.

Effects of Scientific Temper

The scientific temper has spelt complete repression of man's inner energies. Science and technology have ushered in rank materialism and rationality, the sense of the mystique or the occult or the poetic has been snuffed out of man. Man has neglected nature, lost his instinctual energies and depraved his inner nature. The violence and vitality that nature abounds in, man's self-consciousness has lost - thanks to the schism of the mind. And the modern civilization or the scientific temper, being an acquired characteristic, goes asunder when a palpable chance for breaking comes its way.

Solution: Going Back to Nature

This is the reason why Hughes believes in going back to nature in all its primordial force and releasing the suppressed instincts. According to Ekbert Faas Ted Hughes, in his nature poetry, hints at modern man's self-exile from Mother Nature and of his last ditch effort to recapture some of her lost elemental force by a poetic invocation of plants and animals. (*The Unaccommodated Universe* p.16).

Animal Life – Turn to the Inner World

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Animal life, in Hughes's poetry, comprehends all non-human life of flora and fauna. Weather and landscape, in all their stirring strength, are incidental as setting for this animal life whose ferocity matches the elements of nature at their irresistible worst. His analysis of the division of self and soulful appreciation of animal life points to an effort integrating himself as modern man and poet. In these animal poems, he turns to the 'inner world', (*Myth and Education* p.85) as he calls it, to get out of the rut of his own self-consciousness. Animal nature is distinct from human civilization – of curbed instincts, studious or cultivated responses, rational puniness or theological stultification. In the words of Stuart Hirschberg, Hughes's animal poems serve a personal, psychological function so that through violence, primitive contact with repressed aggression, the sterile personality created by the society is destroyed and the instinctual suppressed self can emerge liberated.

Significant Qualities of Animals

In contradiction to modern man and his flaws Hughes's animals are endowed with certain significant qualities: they are distinctly non-rational in power, they are single minded in their action, self-centered, devoid of fantasy and act instinctually so as to condemn duality in man. Unlike man, they cope with elements perfectly to show their unity with nature and by innuendo, man's alienation from nature. Through these poems Hughes evokes the pre-historic world that was obviously connected with the lost instinctual energies and attempts to put man in touch with those lost archaic energies. P.R. King says that Hughes's animals are not mere descriptions of creatures but are intended as comments on aspects of human life. (*Nine Contemporary Poets* p.115)

Roles and Models of Animals

Thus Ted Hughes assumes a variety of roles as a fox, a hawk, a jaguar, an otter, a thrush, etc. Very often he is the protagonist as perceiver registering some startling or terrifying quality like the energy of the elemental energy, an immense pike, but making no claim to embody it in his own personality. At times, he can be a mere passive on-looker involving in recording and recreation of a slow movement in the midst of violence and suddenness. The voice or tone in almost all his poems is that of an omniscient narrator, and since Hughes is a poet of experience, his poetry, in this sense, is subjective and supremely and obsessively autobiographical. The following study of Hughes' animal poems exemplifies his attitude to nature and animals

Animal Monologue – glorification of Animal Totalitarianism?

Hawk Roosting is a dramatic monologue, as told from the point of view of the hawk sitting on the top of a tree in a trance. He is a monomaniac and a solipsist. He is single minded in his pursuit of his prey. He deals death to his victims and can crush them effortlessly. There is no 'falsifying dream' between his hooked head and hooked feet. Even in his sleep he contemplates killing. The simultaneity of his dream and achievement

denotes his unity with nature. The hawk sees himself as the apotheosis of power and thinks he is 'the self-styled ultimate heir of Creation'. He assumes that the whole creation is made suitable for his adaptation. The world revolves at his bidding and all the other creatures are only created for his prey':

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly-
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads-
The allotment of death. (The Hawk Roosting, Luperca, p.26)

There is no sophistry in his body and his manners mean simply tearing off heads. When he kills he does not think. He is not subject to self-doubt or self deception unlike men who are victims of dissociation and inner schisms within their personalities. When critics misunderstood 'Hawk Roosting' as a glorification of totalitarianism and fascism, (C.J. Rawson, pp.82-84) Ted Hughes remarked:

The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about 'Hawk Roosting', this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist..... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple may be because Nature is not no longer simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of job what they actually kicked out was Nature... and Nature became the devil. (London Magazine Interview, 1971)

The Jaguar – Contrast between Man and Animals

In another poem *The Jaguar* Hughes, again presents a simple contrast between the animal and the human, between the enraged freedom of the caged jaguar at the zoo and the fear and admiration of the onlookers, between the primal energy in the animal and the baser nature that is latent beneath human rational control. In fact, it is an encounter taking place between civilized man, in reality, the 'fallen' natural creature, looking at his own superior self which continues to exist outside him in the jaguar. This jaguar is enraged because he is caged, because he is blinded by the fury of his eyes, deafened by the beating of his own heart and he has no more freedom than a machine:

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wilderness of freedom: ('The Jaguar', *The Hawk in the Rain*, p.12)

Though a spectator, man is not passive. He admires and shares a feeling of the brute's wildness, ferocity and rage. According to G.Thurley the cages of Hughes's jaguars and macaws are doubly ironical: man is so much more caged and imprisoned than the animals, and it is the in virtue of his 'single vision' that he confines instinctive vitality behind bars (*The Ironic Harvest*, p.181)

The Thought-Fox – An Evocation of the Vital

The Thought-Fox, the first animal poem Hughes ever wrote, is also an evocation of the vital, somewhat terrible spirit of natural life that summons what is 'both a fox and a spirit', (*The Poetry in the Making*, p.20). The poem is a blend of poetic incantation and self-revelation that embodies 'a psycho-physiological process of imaginative projection' (Ekbert Faas, p.60).

The Thought-Fox is a poem about writing a poem and its theme is 'inspiration'. The fox metaphorically stands for the inspiration, which the poet hopes to get poetic creation. Thus Hughes establishes a contact between man and nature. The 'dark night' itself stands for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet's imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring. The white page is like the snow and with the verb 'entering' the fox enters in and 'sets neat prints' on the page:

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head. ('The Thought-Fox', *The Hawk in the Rain*, p.14)

Dismissing the Physical Seat of Learning in Humans

Hughes seems to suggest that the poem after its birth is independent of the poet and considers even creativity and inspiration as an instinctual response. Making a fox hole out of the human brain reveals how consistently Hughes sardonically dismisses the physical seat of learning. In this case, instinct replaces intellect. (Alan Bold p.50). Ted Hughes has an obsession for sheer physical power. Animal, as well as elemental ferocity inspire him. So, his animals are mostly either brutes or deadly predators or at least endowed with those fearful qualities that have a life of their own and an extraordinary capacity to overcome any cataclysm. In M.L. Rosenthal's words in Hughes's outstanding animal poems it is sheer bitter endurance and the devouring ferocity lurking in every depth and crevice of life that obsess him.(p.229).

Evocation and Adulation of Pre-historic Age

Many of Hughes's animal poems are also evocations of a pre-historic age that register nostalgia for a lost world or a non-existent world of instinctual responses. It is a world in which the feudal, the archaic, and the pre-historic are associated with the instinctual and the automatic, with a brutal realm of primary responses which, is equated with the most ancient and abiding recesses of England itself.

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Alan Bold is of the right opinion when he writes that as a result of his obsession with the dark mysterious world of the past, Hughes feels that the modern world does not constitute a big enough challenge and so he constantly invokes the pre-historic past. (p.55). Thus Ted Hughes's poems on the bull, the pike, the otter, the wolf, the thrush, the thistles and so on, are of this kind. Through these poems, nonetheless, constantly hints at the dark psychotic forces latent in man.

***Pike* – a poem of magical incantation**

In his powerful poem on the pike Hughes attempts to explore the unconscious realm of hidden, dark evil forces that inwardly troubles man. 'Pike' is Hughes's supreme construct with a series of descriptions, anecdotes and impressions that build up the single theme.

The poem is a sort of magical incantation and further, the language which he employs to describe the pike, gives the ordinary fish a supernatural attribute. But nonetheless the poem is constantly suggestive of the human. The pike is the most vicious and the most voracious of the British freshwater fish. It devours not only other fish but other pike. The cannibalizing pike are 'a life subdued to its instrument'.

The pike's dance is a macabre celebration of timeless, instinctive destructiveness and its murderous fascination is irresistible:

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed fry to them-
Suddenly there were two. Finally one
With a sag belly..... ('Pike', *Lupercal* ,p.56)

At this point, the poem carries the reader to a pond where the speaker fishes. The pond is transformed into depth profound with hidden meanings: 'stilled legendary depth: It was as deep as England. It held/ Pike too immense to stir.' The legendary depths of which fishing for such pike makes him aware bring into contact with a submerged life that thrills as it horrifies. When Hughes tries to explore life submerged beneath the mundane order, he finds there the same attraction and treachery, fatal powers that must be confronted.

The Duality of Man

The duality of man is however, best explored in one of Hughes's finest animal poems 'An Otter'. In the first part, the otter is shown as a hunter and in the second as the loser, a victim of man's gratuitous violence. But for Hughes the otter is an image of duality of man, neither beast nor angel, yearning for his lost home, Eden.

Living between water and land the otter must be understood in comparison with an eel and a tomcat. It is a predator, it hunts and it is shown as creature seeking its own elements. The otter is alive and constantly moving, hunting, swimming, wandering and it is, in fact, restive in search of his lost home, Eden. In the otter-hunting season man has entered the otter's elements but its hunters cannot find him, when he hides:

In double robbery and concealment-
From water that nourishes and drowns, and from land
That gave him his length and the mouth of the hound. ('An Otter', *Lupercal* pp.46-47)

Man is a real threat to its existence and if man ventures on land it should not linger. Man does not kill the otter for any useful purpose. For man, the otter serves only as an ornament or as a decorative piece.

Thrushes - Birds also Strike Terror and Awe

Even the familiar birds in Hughes's poetry do evoke the same terror and awe as his familiar animals do. Hughes's 'Thrushes' is one of his outstanding poems such as 'Hawk Roosting', 'The Jaguar', 'Wind', 'Pike', 'Thistles' etc. It presents the familiar antithesis between the functional animal and the reflective man. It is a poem about ordinary birds common to the gardens.

But Hughes's approach to thrushes is something incisive and directed to their predacity (predatory and rapacious nature). They are terrifying, aggressive and furious in their urge to eat and survive. They are light in weight but remarkably destructive and decisive in function. These birds represent not only delicacy and beauty, but also the underlying violence by which the world moves.

These birds are characteristically devoid of such human attributes as 'Indolent Procrastinations', 'yawning stares', and 'headscratchings' that Hughes dubs as negative and embodying of imagination.

Thus Hughes establishes thrushes as creatures of instinct, distinctly different from rational humans. He compares thrush's instinctive action to the genius of Mozart and to the shark's mouth:

Mozart's brain had it, and the shark's mouth
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own
Side and devouring of itself; efficiency which
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it
Or obstruction deflect.....('Thrushes', *Lupercal* , p.52).

Finally, by comparison, man is doomed by the very power of his imagination- those qualities that distinguish him from other creatures. The distracting devils keep man away

from the thrush's single-mindedness. They distract him from the highest purpose of prayer and art, as well as from the lowest instinct of automatic killing.

Conclusion

Thus, by invoking the otherness, the terrible and destructiveness of nature in animals, Ted Hughes, perhaps, attempts to establish a clear-cut anti-thesis set up in his animal poems: the pure unthinking energy of life against the rationale of modern man. However, nature is not always destructive. The positive nurturing aspect of nature to hint at regeneration and reaffirmation of life is confirmed in his later nature poetry.

Dennis Walder's remarks on Ted Hughes's animal poems may serve as an apt conclusion to this paper:

Ted Hughes is still too often labeled an 'animal poet', although more often than not, by his detractors. But for all the sympathetic clarity with which his animals, birds or fishes are imagined, the poems have ultimately to do with human suffering, creativity and survival. If Hughes explores 'extreme' emotions in his poetry, he does so under the pressure of a vision which is constantly aware of the massive ebb and flow of natural forces underlying all life. With some important exceptions, he expresses the vision most successfully when dealing with the non-human world, at least on the surface, allowing the human implications to trickle in secretly, of their accord. (*Ted Hughes, p.91*)

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