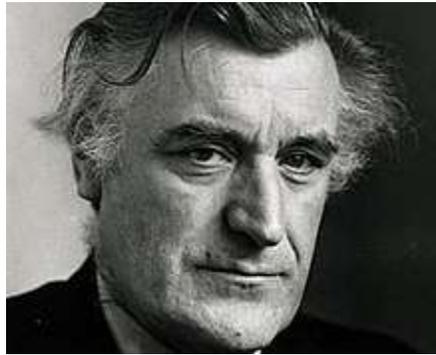


Language and Diction in Ted Hughes's Poetry

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Ted Hughes (1930-1998)

Courtesy: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ted_Hughes

Abstract

Language is quite literally the material of any writer's trade. Every literary work is a selection from a given language. Bateson states that literature is a part of the general history of language and is quite completely dependent on it (English Poetry and English Language, p. VI). Literary language does contain thought and is highly connotative. Moreover, it is far from being merely referential. It has its expressive side: it conveys the tone and attitude of the writer. Language becomes extraordinarily important for the study of poetry. The study of poetic language generally includes the study of metre, diction and syntax, metaphor and image along with its ambiguity and obscurity. The study of a poet's language is a pre-requisite in determining the quality of his work. Ted Hughes's work is not a series of ringing statements but re-enacted encounters and adventures. Hughes likes to use rough language, slangy vernacular and puts words together in an unusual combination to complement his description of savagery of animals, elemental ferocity of nature and esoteric mythology. Hughes's search of an appropriate language for his much-diversified themes produces a baffling mixture of a variety of literary forms: heroic epics, folk epic, myth, cycles, lyrics, chants, incantations etc. His verse is, of course, traditionally hyperbolic and largely relies on mimetic sound effects, onomatopoeia, and mimetic syntax.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, poetry, colloquial language, onomatopoeia, quagmire, surrealism, self-identity

Critical Analysis

Ted Hughes has praised the directness and simple colloquial language of Shakespeare and Keith Douglas. Hughes himself calls it ‘utility general purpose style’ that is marked by simple, workaday phrases deliberately dispensing with any privileges of diction. ‘A utility general purpose style, as for instance, Shakespeare’s, was that combines a colloquial prose readiness with poetic breadth, a ritual intensity and music of an extraordinarily high order with clear direct feeling, and yet in the end nothing but casual speech’ (Introduction, *Selected Poems of Keith Douglas*, p.14).

Hughes’s language clearly shows a close affinity with the language of his literary ancestors like Hopkins, D.H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, John Crowe Ransome and others. Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, Jung and his psychological studies also influence it. David Porter says ‘to say about a new language, a new poet, and a new poetry in deep reconciliation with the consciousness of our age, Ted Hughes involves us in English dialect, and in the projects of Shakespeare, Dylan Thomas and Keith Douglas, of Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath, of Yeats and Jung’ (American Poetry Review, 1975, p.13).

Apart from these literary influences, Hughes’s language also bears certain other influences: the Anglo-Saxon and the Latinate diction and syntax, the Middle-English and his own West Yorkshire dialect and the Bible. Hughes uses the Anglo Saxon/Norse/Celtic linguistic dialect because he always believes that it is there ‘our real mental life has its roots’ (Review by Turbeville Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North*, Listener, 1964, pp. 484-85). In fact, Hughes’s description of the method of Vasco Popa, ‘the trial and error’, applies equally to his own work. In the same way as Popa does, Hughes has constantly been shaping and often experimenting with his language and style, striving to achieve exactly that language ready for whatever experience comes up, agile enough to take whatever position it must, in always alert.(Introduction, *Selected Poems of Vasco Popa*, p.15).

The Hawk in the Rain: A Hyperbole

In his earlier poems, Hughes’s language is typically verbose. Hyperboles, overstatements and clichés, repetitions are hallmarks of his earlier technique. He stresses on the physical properties of words. Words often do not reinforce any symbolic meaning. They are in fact, simply verbal devices that convey the violent side of nature. It is largely lyrical. In his earlier volumes, he mostly uses elegiac quatrains, sprung rhythms, syllabic verse, couplets, and free verse. He attempts to create poetry with alliteration and assonance.

The very first line of the poem 'The Hawk in the Rain' is a classic Anglo Saxon line with three alliterative stresses. The poem is a hyperbole. The speaker of the poem struggles in an exaggerated quagmire of language. 'It is a language of the verbal ascent, a rhetorical straining for the heights' (Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, p.11). Physically violent verbs, huge adjectival phrases and a free use of run on lines; all powerfully evoke the conflict between being pulled down to the earth and striving beyond it. The ambiguity of 'hallucination' undermines the seemingly effortless stillness of the hawk, high up beyond the clutches of the earth and prepares for its end. The hawk's fall in Hughes's poem reminds us of Hopkins's closing image of a violent fall in 'The Wind hover'. Hughes's poems, thus, stray into frequent grandiloquence. Often, he uses adjectives and nouns as verbs.

I drown in the drumming plough land, I drag up.
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth.
From clay, that clutches my each step to the ankle
With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk
Effortlessly at the height hangs his still eye.
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air
Coming from the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,
Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,
The horizon traps him; the round angelic eye
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land. ('The Hawk in the Rain', p.11)

View of a Pig: A Factual Description

'View of a Pig' is one of the simplest of Hughes's poems. Hughes says the poem 'was a piece really written as a note. It was written in a moment of impatience. Maybe, I wrote it out twice, but just more or less as it is... obviously much more natural for me than water-lily style.' (Interview with Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, pp.208-09). Here the poet observes literally a dead pig that is set for slaughter. The animal is dead, and it is massive and weighs more than three men. The closed white eyelashes and the trotters holding up straight show the pitiful state of the pig. The pig is now 'too dead' and has reduced to just 'poundage of lard and pork'. The sentence 'It was like a sack of wheat' conveys the bulk and weight of the dead pig, which is neither dead nor living. It also conveys the sense of material. The poem includes some casual phrases like 'It trotters stuck straight out' and words like 'pink', 'stuck', 'thick', 'bulk', 'sack', 'weight', 'wheat' that are merely used as words. The language conveys nothing symbolic but gives a factual description of a dead pig. The pig is just as lifeless and undignified as material. With various thoughts and pieces of information about pigs, the poet, stares at the dead pig, curious how such bulk weight could be removed.

It was too dead. Just so much
A poundage of lard and pork.
Its last dignity had entirely gone.
It was not a figure of fun.
Too dead now to pity.
To remember its life, din, stronghold
Of earthly pleasure as it had been,
Seemed a false effort, and off the point.
Too deadly factual. Its weight
Oppressed me- how could it be moved?
And the trouble of cutting it up!
The gash in its throat was shocking, but not pathetic. ('View of a Pig', *Lupercal*, pp.40-41)

Thistles: A Celebration of Uncompromising Energy

Wodwo is a transitory phase in Hughes's literary career. From *Wodwo* onwards Hughes has been more preoccupied with surrealism. His language becomes increasingly symbolic, ambiguous and obscure. This surrealistic language can be found in many poems of *Wodwo*. 'Thistles' is one such interesting poem. Thistles are widely distributed herbaceous weed of the daisy family, which typically have prickly stems. The poem highlights the qualities of the thistle. Hughes uses a combination of literary devices and an exaggeratedly violent language to create a history and context for this much-maligned plant of field and wasteland. Here, Hughes describes the life cycle of the thistles, and how difficult it is to get rid of them.

'Viking' as in Anglo Saxon poetry is a Scandinavian trader and pirate. Vikings invaded Britain in marauding bands and their invasions are described in the Anglo Saxon chronicle. 'Spike', which suggests spears and battle, and prepares for 'weapons', and 'the plume of blood'. That cows' tongues and hoeing hands are vulnerable and blameless indicate that the celebration of indomitable uncompromising energy. The word 'revengeful' blended with 'resurrection' hints at the idea of forgiving one's enemies. 'Crackle' is a marvelous use of synaesthesia. The onomatopoeia of 'thistles spike' is repeated and strengthened by phrases like 'grasped fistful' or 'frost thrust'. The poem ends with powerful words like 'burst off', 'fistful of', 'pressure', and 'blood'. All these things combine to convey a sense of clenched anger and spiked aggressiveness, all that is contrary to harmony and mildness. 'A plume of blood' is a nice surrealistic imaginative complex which unites a picture of the red top to the thistles head, the idea of stylish knighthood and the horrific picture of blood spurting from a bad wound. The phrase unites realistic, aesthetic and brutal elements. 'They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects' suggests that thistles are pale at the top and Vikings are thought of as fierce, cold, Nordic blondes. 'Gutturals of dialects' implies barbarians, uncouth, and incomprehensible,

coming into a cultural world. Thistles like the Nordic blondes among civilized people seem uncouth among plants.

Everyone a revengeful burst
Of resurrection, a grasped fistful
Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up
From the underground stain of a decayed Viking.
They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects.
Everyone manages a plume of blood.
Then they grow grey, like men.
Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear,
Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground. ('Thistle', *Wodwo*, p.17)

Wodwo: Searching for Self-Identity

'Wodwo' is a light-hearted and charming poem when compared to the fiercely energetic poems like 'Thistles'. The speaker himself is a wodwo. Wodwo is a mystery word derived from the anonymous alliterative epic *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. He is the wild man of woods with whom Sir Gawain had fought. Hughes himself described Wodwo as some sort of satyr or half man or half animal, half all kinds of elemental little things, just a little larval being without shape or qualities, who suddenly finds himself alive in this world at any time (*Poetry in the Making*, pp.62-63). Hughes is a Wodwo, in fact, in all these poems, who is at once quiet and obscure, somewhat cynical about looking for an identity. Wodwo finds himself in a world inhabited by creatures whose relation to himself he does not understand. He does not know why his nose leads him to water or his hands pick bark off a rotten stump and he does not know who he is and what he is doing. He also appears to be shaped in a rather unexpected and unusual way. He concludes that all what he can do now is to explore the very queer nature of reality and is to go on looking. The language of the poem is at once quiet and obscure that mimics the obscurity of the self-identity lacking in an animal. The language becomes more questionable and uncertain. The exaggerated movement of the searching 'Wodwo' is recreated by the repetition of 'past these trees', as well as the ironic repetition in 'but there's all this what is it/roots roots roots', giving the uncertainty of the origin of the creature. Throughout 'Wodwo', the language superbly mimics a wary animal tentatively and a rather restive animal moving about in an unknown territory.

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge
I enter water. What am I to split?
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed
Of the river above me upside down very clear

What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find
This frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret
Interior and make it my own? Do these weeds
Know me and name me to teach other have they
Seen me before, do I fit in their world? ('Wodwo', *Wodwo*, p.183)

***Crow*: A Bold Experiment with Language**

Crow is a bold experiment in both style and language. Hughes, in fact, oversimplifies the range of technique to be found in *Crow* poems. The language of *Crow* poems is characterized by the absence of music and the deliberate use of a crude and colloquial journalistic language. The language is made ugly and flat. Here, Hughes's language and technique are more varied than before. The poet falls back upon the oldest poetic devices like nursery rhymes and ballads, folk songs and chants, repetitions and refrains, parallelisms and incantations. The language has not only a contemporary idiomatic ring but also echoes of ancient and traditional forms of discourse, such as the Old Testament, Anglo Saxon poetry, Milton and Marvell. The entire poetic sequence is, in fact, a hyperbole and understatement. There are few adjectives, and though the word 'black' is often used. Sentences are predominantly simple or compound, rarely complex. Hughes tries to convey whatever he wants with a minimum of words and statements taking a maximum of liberty with rhyme and rhythms. Every word is loaded with resonances and connotations from the heritage of language.

***Lineage*: A Biblical Incantatory Rhythm**

The Bible has been a great influence on Hughes's language. The *Crow* sequence includes many inversions, parodies and semi-burlesque on the popular Christian concepts. 'You spent a lifetime learning how to write verse when it's been clear from your earliest days that the greatest poetry in England is in the prose of the Bible.' (Ted Hughes, Interview with Ekbert Faas, London Magazine, 1971, pp.5-20). Hughes's language in 'Lineage' has exactly that 'air of trial and error exploration' as it improvises its parody towards the production of *Crow*. The poem employs the biblical incantatory rhythms of the Old Testament 'begot verse'.

Who begat Adam
Who begat Mary
Who begat God
Who begat Nothing
Who begat Never
Who begat Crow
Screaming for Blood
Grubs, crusts
Anything

Trembling featherless elbows into the nest's filth. ('Lineage', *Crow*, p.14)

The Battle of Osfrontalis: Language of Warfare and Phonology

Crow is a piece of super journalism. The poems are all short, and while many are rich in paradox and the kind of ironies. The colloquial or the everyday language is found in many *Crow* poems. In 'The Battle of Osfrontalis' even the simple humour becomes more interesting and sharper when Hughes juxtaposes, with the minimal statements of crow's reactions, a fanciful and satirical fusing of the language of warfare and phonology. At the end of the poem, one may arrive at a complex symbolic meaning.

Words attacked him with the glottal bomb

He wasn't listening

Words surrounded and over ran him with light aspirates

He was dozing

Words unfiltered guerrilla labials

Crow clapped his beak, scratched it.

Words swamped him with consonantal masses

Crow took a sip of water and thanked heaven ('The Battle of Osfrontalis', *Crow*, p.34)

Crow and the Birds: Discarding Angelic Use of Language

'Crow and birds' is not only a special poem in *Crow* sequence but also for Ted Hughes himself. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts say that Hughes throws out the eagles and chooses *Crow*, both literally and linguistically in the poem 'Crow and Birds' (*Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p.103). It is like discarding the angelic use of language upon finding its super simple and super ugly *Crow*. The verbs 'soared', 'trawled', 'swooped', 'flicked', 'sailed', 'zipped', 'drummed', 'tumbled', 'plumbed', 'bulbed', 'crooked', 'peered', 'spraddled', present each bird in a characteristic attitude. The verbs suggest that these birds are all trying to escape from the human world. However, *Crow*'s verb 'spraddled' is interestingly set. It stands out as neologism and shows the clumsiest of his attitudes. This verb is specifically coined to display the uniqueness of *Crow*. While other birds are trying to escape, there is something uniquely interesting in the bird, which adapts to and thrives on the detritus of a seaside resort. Hughes's celebration of his *Crow* is genuine.

When the owl sailed clear of tomorrow's conscience

And the sparrow preened himself of yesterday's promise

And the heron laboured clear of the Bessemer up glare

And the bluetit zipped clear of lace panties

And the woodpecker drummed clear of the rotovator and the rose-farm

And the peewit tumbled clear of the Laundromat

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While the bullfinch plumped in the apple bud
And the goldfinch bulbed in the sun
And the wryneck crooked in the moon
And the dipper peered from the dew ball
Crow spraddled head down in the beach garbage
Guzzling a dropped icecream. ('Crow and the Birds', *Crow*, p.37)

A Disaster: Word Can Kill People

In 'A Disaster' Hughes challenges the everyday assumptions of our language. Part of the project of *Crow* is an attempt to reveal that many concepts in the language are, in fact 'man created', false protections from reality. 'A Disaster' makes a direct confrontation with the power of a man who created 'word' to distort reality. The poem is an exaggeration of a social process. Man creates words to symbolise his perceptions of reality. Sometimes, he creates the 'word', which represents the core of his ideology or metaphysic. Such a word can kill people, and this is the startling point of the poem. Here the statement is ironical. Certainly, the word of the poem is dependent upon men, but its relationship is reversed. In reality, the word is dependent upon people for its original creation and it cannot exist without them. Hughes says the death of a word is the end of an era. 'A Disaster' is not only a declaration one part of the *Crow* project but it is a model of the form and method of many of the poems.

There came news of a word.
Crow saw it killing men. He ate well.
He saw it bulldozing
Whole cities to rubble. Again, he ate well.
He saw its excreta poisoning seas.
He became watchful.
He saw its breath burning whole lands
To dusty char.
He flew clear and peered. ('A Disaster', *Crow*, p.33)

Truth Kills Everybody: Crow- An Animated Cartoon

The language of many of *Crow* poems is repetitive. David Lodge feels that *Crow* poems invite comparison with the animated cartoons and they relate *Crow* to the birds of Walt Disney and his imitators like Donald Duck, Mickey Mouse, Tom and Jerry, the Pink Panther and all the rest ('Crow and Cartoons', *The Critical Quarterly*, 1971, p.39). In 'Truth Kills Everybody' *Crow* seeks out Proteus to know the ultimate truth. Proteus was a sea deity who had the gift of prophecy as well as the power to assume different shapes. He knew the past, present and future but would always conceal his secrets. However, he would tell the truth if someone could outplay the various guises he assumed. Therefore, *Crow* attempts to hold on Proteus to attain the truth of

self-knowledge. In this poem Proteus undergoes various metamorphoses that display great violence, horror and ugliness. First, he becomes the famous Achilles, son of the sea goddess Thetis; then he becomes the esophagus of a shark, but Crow could 'held' him. Then he changes into a naked power line 2000 volts, a screeching woman, a gone steering wheel, yet Crow could 'held' him'. Proteus assumes into the 'rising, fiery angel' and 'Christ's pounding heart' but Crow did not let him go. In final turn, Proteus assumes the shape of 'the earth' that shrinks to a size of a hand grenade and he is blasted to nothing.

A gone steering wheel bouncing towards a cliff edge

He held it.

A trunk of jewels dragging into a black depth

He held it.

The ankle of a rising fiery angel

He held it.

Christ's hot pounding heart

He held it

The earth, shrunk to the size of a hand grenade

And he held it he held it and held it and

BANG!

He was blasted to nothing. ('Truth Kills Everybody', *Crow*, p. 83)

Esoteric Mythology: Mystical and Mythopoeic Diction

With *Gaudete, Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama, Remains of Elmet, Moortown* and *River* Hughes regains much of the suggestive depth and the semantic freedom of his language. It is a renewal of his poetic language. Hughes's earlier 'ritual intensity of music' returns. The later poetry has a mystical depth. The language becomes more complex and mythopoeic. Tertiary images are in use and the language tends to become more sacred, religious and time defying. Especially Jung's writings of alchemy have largely influenced Hughes's language. Alchemy, for Hughes, is a means of magical process of transformation or combination of body and soul.

Owl Flower: Fusion of Body and Soul-Language of Alchemy

The poems of *Cave Birds* are a superb combination of word and image. The language is quite symbolic. Since the poems are a synthesis of myth and psychology, the language often becomes obscure and ambiguous. The most frequent form in which the opposites are represented is the 'soror mystica' (union of body and soul). This is symbolically conveyed in the lines: 'like two gods or mud/sprawling in the dirt/They bring each other to perfection.' The same metaphor of this union is described in the language of alchemy in many poems: 'a seed in its armour'. The alchemists' favourite image of 'stone' appears as a fusion of the grain of wheat, the

philosopher's stone- 'the egg stone', 'a gem' etc. These terms derived from alchemy suggest an alchemical fusion of body and soul. The poem is a testimony to Hughes's greatest achievement in the use of language.

The ship of flowers
Nudges the wharf of skin.
The egg-stone
Bursts among broody petals- ('Owl Flower, *Cave Birds*, p.58)

The Baptist: Submitting the Self

The phrase 'winding waters' in the poem 'The Baptist' has many mythical connotations. It is associated with the 'acqua divina' in which alchemists dissolved the impure body. It may be associated with the 'prima materia' relating to the moon, Isis and healing wisdom as mentioned in so many myths. It can be connected to Christian and other forms of baptism where the body is spiritualized. Finally, the phrase is also found among Jungian 'alchemical studies.' The poem suggests an evolving sense of submitting the self to, being lapped by, then enfolded, embalmed and bandaged in the primeval waters.

The Baptist
Enfolds you
In winding waters, a swathing of balm
A mummy bandaging
Of all your body's puckering hurts
In the circulation of sea. ('The Baptist', *Cave Birds*, p.36)

Adam and the Sacred Nine: A Celebration of Wholeness

In the poem 'Adam and the Sacred Nine', the phrase 'The Sole of a foot' conveys a celebration of wholeness. That a description of a simple sensuous act can achieve the profound symbolic unity is a clear confirmation of Hughes's artistic maturity. The complete unification of the metaphysical and the personal is suggested by the use of 'wild-rock' and 'warm'. In this poem, there is a complete unity between the vision of the poem and its language. The final statement of the poem 'I am no wing/ For you' is the human equivalent to the discovery of self-hood that concludes *Crow*. It is a personal expression of the symbolic marriage hinted at in *Cave Birds*. It is also a resolution of the metaphysical issues explored in *Gaudete*. It is a union of the blissful and humble, human with the world.

The sole of a foot
Pressed to world-rock, flat
Warm

With its human map
Tough-skinned, for this meeting
Comfortable.
Since it was star blaze,
Grateful
To the rock, saying
I am no wing
To tread emptiness.
I was made for you. ('Adam and the Sacred Nine', *Moortown*, p.170)

Salmon Eggs: A Language of Atonement

In the poetic sequence *River* the ritually intense elements of Hughes's poetic language reaches its finale. The language of these poems serves in aiming at the goal of religious consummation. A single creature is defined by its relationships with other creatures, with weather and season and landscape. Since 'All things draw to the river', it is therefore a language of atonement. The concluding poem of *River* sequence 'Salmon Eggs' is explicitly religious. The poem contains an unironic Christianised vocabulary. The poem moves through a series of oxymorons 'burst crypts', 'time-riven altar', 'harrowing crowned', 'ruptures and rendings' - appropriating on the way all the claims of the Christian mystery of transcendence - 'the pond of unending water' and the salmon egg which is its 'blessed issue', towards river's simple annunciation: 'only birth matters'.

The river goes on,
Sliding through its place, undergoing itself
In the wheel
I make out the sunk foundation
Of burst crypts, a bed rock
Time-hewn, time-riven altar. And this is the liturgy
Of earth's tidings-harrowing, crowned-a travail
Of raptures and rendings,
Sanctus, Sanctus ('Salmon Eggs', *River*, pp.120-24)

Conclusion

Ted Hughes often risks his meaning in his ceaseless exploration of the language which is, of course, the forte of the modern poet. But, when multiple meanings or ambiguity can today be acknowledged as enriching poetry, the risking of one meaning for a plethora of conflicting and protean nuances, is not only worth taking but commendable. Hughes's neologisms such as 'spraddled' are well warranted in this context and well-founded linguistically. When the sound echoes the sense or a portmanteau word hatches itself from two or more words whose fusion

articulate the new idea or feeling, its Joycean spontaneity absolves it from the odium of being a cartel phrase or a fancy nonce word such as 'blurb'. That Hughes does not fight shy of adopting the linguistic devices of earlier poets - be they metaphysical, the neo-classical poets or such modern innovators as Hopkins. This open minded and unabashed exploitation of what is available to date, together with the tireless exploration of the tremendous potential of the English language, in order to articulate his non-verbal impressions, mark him out as a unique model for those who dabble in the mystical and desire to scribble it.

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