

Imagery in the Poetry of Ted Hughes - A study

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Ted Hughes draws a number of images from external nature and natural things, religious lore, classical learning and cosmic concepts. Apart from religious, cosmic and natural imagery, Hughes also draws images from the world of man: from daily life such as war and domestic life and from the body such as suffering and death. Likewise, animals, myth and folklore and archetypes, serve as source of symbols and objective correlatives of Hughes's own feelings and ideas. Through his nature and animal imagery, Hughes perhaps, attempts to suggest both the malevolent and nurturing aspects of nature and 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. The landscapes together with elements provide in Hughes's poems the measure of man's original unity and subsequent separation from the natural world.

Description: Nature and its elements can become hostile when man is not in touch with them. Hughes, himself records the value of landscapes in Poetry in the Making as follows:

It is only there that the ancient instincts and feelings in which most of our body lives can feel at home on their own groundThose pre-historic feelings, satisfactions we are hardly aware of except as a sensation of pleasure...these are like a blood transfusion to us, and in wild surroundings they rise to the surface and refresh us, renew us. (p.76)

The imagery of 'Wind' (The Hawk in the Rain p.40) records the terror inspired in the observer by the immensity of the natural distances and the violence of the weather in the home country. Here, the ship is compared to a house, and the sea to the crashing woods, the booming hills and the stampeding fields. The house becomes an analogy for man's civilized world which is like a storm-tossed ship at the sea whose safety is under constant threat amidst the violent and the natural turbulence:

This house has been far out at sea all night'
The woods crashing through darkness, the booming hills,
Winds stampeding the fields under the window
Floundering black astride the blinding wet ('Wind', The Hawk in the Rain p.40)

Ted Hughes's animals are the clear manifestations of a life force that is distinctly non-human or rather non-rational in its source of

power. By exploring the animal energies of these animals, Hughes's probably attempts to seek a re-alignment with the unknown forces governing the universe. S.Hirschberg points out that through his animal poems Hughes immerses himself in the dark, irrational forces around and within him in order to purge himself of the artificial social construct, the personality. (p.12). Hughes has an obsession for sheer physical power and 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. These beasts, nonetheless, constantly hint at the dark psychotic forces latent in man. The bull in 'The Bull Moses' (Lupercal, pp.37-38) inspires not only fear but also fascination in the poet. While he celebrates the tremendous sense of the bull's vital and potent energies and the complete otherness of its animal life, on the other, he is also aware of the bull's hidden, dangerous force 'in the locked black of his powers'. Like his hawk, the bull is also single-minded, vital, undeterred by conscience or self-consciousness, and violent in function. He lives in a world that has no time or death. The blackness of bull's powers in fact, corresponds to the darkness within us:

the warm weight of his breathing,

The ammoniac reek of his litter, the holy-tongued

Mash of his cud, steamed against me. ('The Bull Moses',
Lupercal, pp.37-38)

The dark, vicious, uncontrollable forces embedded in one's subconscious also invade one's dreams and nightmares as crabs. 'Ghost Crabs' (Wodwo, pp.21-22) creates a sense of 'weird phantasmagoria' (P.R.King p.124) in which crabs are the symbolic representations of these destructive forces that lurk in our subconscious. They come out of the sea at nightfall when the sea darkens. They belong to the subterranean world of the 'Pike'. With slow, powerful, imperturbable advance, these ghost-crabs invade the land, moving towards the sleeping town. They fasten on all human lives, dominating men's thoughts and inducing their nightmares. They hunt, fight and breed in man's mind. They are the forces of that continuum which connects man with the non-human world and which he prefers to deny. Both 'Ghost Crabs' and 'Pike', (Lupercal, pp.56-57), for Hughes, symbolize the presence of dark, irrational forces at the edge of man's awareness. That is, they symbolize the suppressed life.

'Crow' is Hughes's highly complex and intricate personal symbol - an objective correlative or a mythical archetype for Hughes, through which he expresses his powerful emotions and complex ideas. Hughes's choice of 'Crow' as his personal symbol is quite interesting. In folk mythology the crow is an animal figure predominantly associated with

the twin motifs of death and guilt. He is black, ugly, solitary, the largest, the most intelligent and the least musical of all birds. He is the embodiment of boldness, intelligence, adaptability to change and twisted vitality. But for Hughes, Crow functions on a number of levels: he is an elemental force in the universe as a projection of man's instinctual nature scavenging on the dead constructs of his intellect and as a symbol for destruction and death. Thus, to sum up, Crow is a demon, a typically shamanic trickster and a human all at once. This symbol helps Hughes to explore the realm of the unconscious, the subterranean terror. The Crow sequence includes a good number of poems that display pseudo-biblical themes. These themes contain inversions, parodies and semi-burlesque accounts of the Biblical Creations and other Christian concepts. In this poem sequence Hughes revalues the Christian myth, particularly in the Genesis story.

The Bible, especially the Old Testament, is one of the principal source books of Hughes's imagery. Hughes draws a number of biblical images on the pre-Christian concepts like Creation and Logos, biblical god, Christ, Adam, Eve, Crucifixion and the serpent. These images often parodies and reverses the familiar Christian concepts. 'Christian God, for Hughes, is not a supreme deity but a little one, a bit like a pedantic scholar, given a corner of the universe to tinker about within his fumbling way' (Alan Bold, p.103). These images suggest Hughes's sense of a soured attitude toward reformed Christianity's banishment of instinctual energies. In 'Crow's First Lesson' (Crow: His Life and Songs of Crow, p.20) the imagery conveys that even the all pervasive, omnipotent God has failed to induce love into his self-created world which is full of malice and viciousness. When God tries to teach Crow love, basic to all world, Crow produces a world of sharks, blue flies, mosquitoes and lust - that are the embodiments of hate. Crow's guilt is a reflection of Adam's guilt after the Fall where man hides himself from god:

Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea

And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth

'No, no', said God, 'Say Love, Now try it. Love'

Crow gaped, and blue fly, a tsetse, a mosquito

Zoomed out and down

To their sundry flesh-spots. ('Crow's First Lesson', Crow: His Life and Songs of Crow, p.20)

For Hughes, St. George is an image for twentieth century obsession with passionless facts and statistics. He represents a modern hero, a scientist and a mathematician in his quest for the absolute number. Crow's St. George is a reversal of the archetype of the conquering hero who vanquishes chaos, evil and temptation after having conquered

elements of weakness within himself, consistent with his pattern of the hero quest myth; the opposing forces he confronts can be seen as manifestations of his own deepest fears. The demon which he encounters in Crow's account is the evil. The more he probes with his numbers the more hideous the demon becomes. The implication is that knowledge is inseparable from evil. George stands for madness which in the name of intelligence, seeks to destroy or at least dissociate itself from Nature on the grounds that Nature eats her own off spring:

He sees everything in the Universe
Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer
With delicious joy. With nimble balance
He rides those racing tracks. He makes a silence.
He refrigerates emptiness,
Decreates all to outer space,
Then unpicks numbers. ('Crow's Account of St. George',
Crow, pp.31-32)

Ted Hughes is not primarily a war poet in the sense that he, like Wilfred Owen or Keith Douglas has not written his war poetry directly out of his personal experience in the war front. But he has written some poems on war out of his memory of war. His reflections on what his father has told him about the war as well as the collective experience of the British are brought out. Hughes understands war to be a permanent aspect of human civilization - a fact which the poet notes with pity and anger, not joy. Through specific imagery of war mentioned in many of his war poems, Hughes acknowledges universal suffering and death. In 'Narcissi', (Flowers and Insects, p.9) the sound and movement of innocent narcissi are associated with the horrors of war. The sentimental image of flower rustling and dancing like happy children and such peaceful imagery carry with them the dark memories of this century:

a rustling, silent fire
Of speeded-up dancing
From the 1918 Armistice (Narcissi', Flowers and Insects, p.9)

Ted Hughes is disenchanted with the western culture. With little or no spiritual values, a culture like the western culture can mean only emptiness, dismemberment, suffering and death. His preoccupation with suffering, death and morbidity is similarly a preoccupation with the real. Death is contemplated as a process operating in the material world, rather than as the inevitable end of individual human life. Hughes draws many images that suggest nihilism, dereliction, emptiness, suffering and death that the spiritually alienated western culture can breed. Terry

Gifford and Neil Roberts commenting on the theme of suffering and death in Hughes's poems write that death, resolutely contemplated, is the type of ultimate unity of the inner self and external nature which he attempts to express in his poems celebrating internal life (p.100). Hughes associates his home village Heptonstall, (where Sylvia Plath was buried) with a centre of his pessimistic universe and a sound of decaying death. The village, for Hughes, represents one of inescapable gloom and tears of despair:

Black village of grave stones.
The hill's collapsed skull
Whose dreams die back
Where they were born. ('Heptonstall Village', Wodwo, p.165).

'The Green Wolf', (Wodwo, p.40) also contains the imagery of the hawthorn and the bean flower that have folklore associations with death. The White Goddess is both queen of May, when the hawthorn, a tree sacred to her, blossoms and Queen of Death, both Demeter and Persephone. The scent of hawthorn blossom is simultaneously deathly and erotic:

The punctual evening star,
Worse, the warm hawthorn, their foam,
Their palls of deathly perfume,
Worst of all the bean flower
Budged with jet like the ear of the tiger ('The Green Wolf',
Wodwo, p.40)

However, counter pointing the imagery of disease, decay and death, those of birth and regeneration bring in a world where goddess Nature presides. An alternate to the abstractions of Christianity, and to the death and destruction produced by the scientific mind, a sacrosanct world of light, stone, water and wind, according to Hughes, will sustain the soul. For him, the river is an image of continuity of life, renewing of life through healing. The river is continuous and immortal and resurrects people:

The river walks in the valley singing
Letting her veils blow-
A novelty from the red side of Adam
April in the lift of her arm
December in the turn of her shoulder
As if her sauntering were a long stillness

She who has not once tasted death ('Torrige', River, p.118)

CONCLUSION: Ted Hughes's imagery and symbolism are spontaneously drawn from a wide variety of sources; yet the subtlety of his sole purport of self-analysis and self-expiation through suffering, unites them all. There is inevitability about his obsessive squaring up to the problem of modern man's self-alienation from nature and the consequent spiritual torpor.

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