

INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes is acknowledged as the most original and powerful English poet of the post-Second World War period. That does not mean that his poetic gifts and viewpoints were never disputed. He has had both his admirers and detractors, and when in 1984 he was named Poet Laureate, he received fresh lots of bouquets and brickbats.

Born in 1930, Hughes has been a writer of versatile genius. Apart from nearly a dozen books of poetry for adult readers, he has published a large body of writings for children. He has also written plays for the radio and the stage, besides collaborating with Peter Brook, the leading theatre director. He co-edited Modern Poetry in Translation, 1-10, from 1966 to 1971 as well as collaborating with Janos Csokits in translating the poetry of Janos Pilinszky. And his insightful critical opinions on matters literary, social and educational, though scattered in the pages of magazines and journals, in Introductions to books edited by him, and interviews, are gradually coming to be appreciated as original thoughts and ideas.¹

The present study, begun several years before I had an opportunity to meet him at the Asia Poetry Festival at Dhaka, Bangladesh, which he attended as a Special Guest, in 1989, is concerned primarily with his major works of poetry, which are characterized by a surprisingly great range, depth and intensity of vision. Rooted in the three most important

spheres of the English literary tradition, namely, the Middle English alliterative verse, Shakespeare, and the English Bible, Hughes has gone on to enrich English poetry immensely.

His poetry, it has been felt, has maintained an ongoing dialogue with history -- literary, sociopolitical, religious and intellectual. The great sweep of his imagination has taken in the most significant issues of life in the contemporary world, a world ravaged by a series of dirty and great wars, unprecedented bloodbath and carnage, threatened with extinction by nuclear stockpiles, ridden by intense psychical conflicts and horrors. His preoccupation with this dominant concern of our life has often been interpreted as perverse power-worship and obsessive admiration of violence.

Hughes has attempted to discover the bedrock from where life is struggling to triumph over the forces of death. This search takes him to discovering links between man and different aspects of Nature -- earth and fire, animals and birds, plants and flowers, stones and rivers -- and describing these relationships in terms of ancient rituals, myths and folklore. It is not a twenty-first century animism, but close observation kindling a vivid imagination that dominates his poetry.

This pattern, however, emerges in his poetry slowly. In his early poems one is struck by the presence of animals, powerful and predatory, not merely as photographic representations or impressionistic vignettes. While

describing these subjects with penetrating accuracy and empathy, Hughes becomes aware of the presence and stirrings of a tremendous, almost unmanageable, raw energy. He perceives this energy not only in obviously powerful agencies and elements, but even in apparently frail creatures and weak forces in Nature, whose real strength shows in their invincibility. This energy--amoral, inexorable, leading to death and again to revival -- is the binding force between all categories of the living and the non-living. A large number of his early poems ("The Hawk in the Rain", "Wind", "October Dawn" : HR; "Crow Hill", "Strawberry Hill", "To Paint a Water Lily", "Relic", "Thrushes", "Pike", "Snowdrop" : L) present a powerful observation of this "master-fulcrum of violence" operative at the heart of the universe.

It is an imagination kindled by a Galilean-Darwinian observation that dominates Hughes's poetry. This imagination perceives a vibrant energy to be present in man's biological being, in his instinctual drives and instinctive apprehensions. In primitive cultures man devised rituals and created myths to confront and negotiate with this energy. He could thus be at peace with himself and of benefit to his community. It also enabled him to regard himself as part of the material universe or Nature, which was then personified as Mother Earth or Mother Goddess in a destructive-creative continuum. In ancient Roman culture, the celebration of Lupercalia -- though related to a male fertility god Lupercus -- was a vestige of the primitive fertility cults. Hughes's

poem "Lupercalia" is an early attempt at reconstructing the ritual by which a barren woman, "perfect,/But flung from the wheel of the living,/The past killed in her, the future plucked out", can be fertilized. The tone in which the dogs, the goats, the racers and the "Fresh thongs of goat-skin/In their hands .../And deliberate welts" snatching the barren woman "To the figure of racers" are described, evokes the sense of awe and sacredness with which ancient men viewed the principle of generation in man and in Nature.

But the violence associated with such rituals, as well as with the processes of Nature that have been visualized in Hughes's nature poetry, has to be clearly distinguished from the violence which has been practised by men for neither the procreation nor the preservation of life, but merely for the sake of destruction or for self-aggrandizement.² Hughes's explorative poetry, from Wodwo onwards, has attempted to locate the roots of man's "destructiveness for the sake of destruction" within human nature, fragmented and perverted by a narrow puritanical-repressive religious ethos and the reign of intellect-centric, unimaginative, blinkered materialism. With the rise of these twin forces, modern Western man has been estranged from the concept of the Mother Goddess. He has tried to reform her with the concept of God as Logos, the Rational Principle and All-Good, separating the destructive aspect of the original composite and projecting it into an external source personified as the Devil. In the process the ancient Mother Goddess, and therefore woman, came

to be regarded as the Devil's partner. In breaking apart his ideal, rationalist-puritanical man divided his own nature, too, and tended to suppress the life of the body, proclaiming the supremacy of intellect and abstract reasoning. With the ritual and myths decried, he was bereft of the dramatic means of attaining fulfilment that would release his tension and free the instinctual energies in a creative way. This has left him guilt-ridden, biased, sterile, restless and violent. The suppressed energies have been turned into murderous forces and have manifested themselves in savage and mindless devastation. Several poems in Wodwo ("Logos", "Gog" and "Karma") are powerful renderings of a collision between the Mother Goddess and God. A variation on the theme, in the form of a destructive violence perpetrated by the offspring upon the mother, is presented in his Crow poems ("Crow and Mama", "Revenge Fable" and "Song for a Phallus"). Man's brute violence has occupied a large place in Hughes's poetry throughout.

Hughes's study of violence therefore is marked by a pattern. From observing violence as a fact and unavoidable process of Nature, his gaze shifts to the violence in human society, tracking it down to its roots, and finally goes beyond the shock, desolation and decay. Hughes's growing interest in the Eastern thoughts along with his interest in other cultures has played an important role in the evolution of his ideas and sympathies. In his interview at Dhaka in 1989, he referred to Attar the Sufi poet, to Tibetan

Buddhism, Indian mystic thought, and to "the spirit of the East" which should suffuse the West³. Many of his poems in Wodwo ("Wino", "Stations") contain Sufic echoes, and the Epilogue lyrics of Gaudete reflect the devotional glow of South Indian Vacana poetry. In his later poetry he is fascinated by the image of "the real samadhi -- wordless, levitated" ("Strangers", R, p. 41). Or, as in "Riverwatcher", he describes "the river-fetch" as

The yell of the Muezzin
Or the "Bismillah!"
That spins the dancer in

Her whole body liquefied
Where a body loves to be
Rapt in the river of its own music.

(R, p. 71)

This is not to praise a disguised occultism, what some would choose to dub as literary hippie-cult. Borrowing from the great religions of the world their mythological elements, Hughes rather tries to develop a syncretistic religion, which, far from being a step back towards obscurantism, is actually a step forward into the future world of hope and love and joy, free from mindless violence and one with the whole of Nature, the whole of man.

He seems to be interested in the Eastern mystic thought and practice inasmuch as he finds a basic similarity between its quest pattern and that of the archaic rituals, myths and folktales. The quest, following the formula of symbolic death and dismemberment of the false self and then the regeneration

and rebirth of the genuine self, offers him a framework and a series of images to resolve man's fragmentary experience into an integrated equation.

His early poems (HR & L) are not woven in an overall framework and remain separate pieces. In Wodwo, however, a kind of networking can be discerned in spite of some fragmentariness in some of the poems. In his next three works, his most important ones -- Crow, Gaudete and Cave Birds -- he has used sequences of interrelated poems to dramatize his vision of man's predicament along with its full implications.

For Hughes the dynamics of the self is closely related to Nature's biological dynamics. With his realisation of the possibilities of the self, he has been able to create a unique body of nature poetry in Season Songs, "Moortown" sequence in Moortown, Remains of Elmet, River and in some poems of Wolfwatching ("A Sparrow Hawk", "Little Whale Song", for instance). Here his theme is the plasticity of life, the adaptive capabilities of life, even in extreme environments. In a language which is a fusion of the scientific and the emotive, he shows how life always resumes its cycle and "death seems a superficiality/Of scaly limbs, parasitical."

His poetry acts as an audio-visual mixer of a wide range of sensibilities and perceptions as his forging of images generates physical and spiritual resonances. Sometimes the high pressure and temperature under which the images are

forged place them in an indeterminate state, hazed and fused; they become inscrutable and indecipherable. Sometimes his references are intractable and the meaning becomes obscure. But, on the whole, his metaphors and sound-patterns, free grammar and free verse, incessant compound formations and syntactic liberties telescope rich thoughts and feelings and give us an exciting experience.