

The Casualty by Ted Hughes

Farmers in the fields, housewives behind steamed windows,
 Watch the burning aircraft across the blue sky float,
 As if a firefly and a spider fought,
 Far above the trees, between the washing hung out.
 They wait with interest for the evening news.

But already, in a brambled ditch, suddenly smashed
 Stems twitch. In the stubble a pheasant
 Is craning every way in astonishment.
 That hare that hops up, quizzical, hesitant,
 Flattens ears and tears madly away and the wren warns.

Some, who saw fall, smoke beckons. They jostle above,
 They peer down a sunbeam as if they expected there
 A snake in the gloom of the brambles or a rare flower,--
 See the grave of dead leaves heave suddenly, hear
 It was a man fell out of the air alive,

Hear now his groans and senses groping. They rip
 The slum of weeds, leaves, barbed coils; they raise
 A body that as the breeze touches it glows,
 Branding their hands on his bones. Now that he has
 No spine against heaped sheaves they prop him up,
 Arrange his limbs in order, open his eyes,
 Then stand helpless as ghosts: in a scene
 Melting in the August noon, the burned man
 Bulks closer greater flesh and blood than their own,
 As suddenly the heart's beat shakes the body and the eye

Opens wide childishly. Sympathies
 Fasten to the blood like flies. Here's no heart's more
 Open or large than a fist clenched, and in there
 Holding close complacency its most dear
 Unscratchable diamond. The tears of their eyes

Too tender to let break, start to the lip
 Of such horror close as mourners can,
 Greedy to share all that is undergone,
 Grimace, gasp, gesture of death. Till they look down

On the handkerchief at which his eye stares up.

The Post World War Poetry

When Ted Hughes started writing poetry in the nineteen fifties, the aftermath of the Second World War still lengthened its shadow on most of British poetry. The War had created a psychic numbness and, as Davies describes it in one of his poems, “a stubborn loss of nerve”:

If too much daring brought (he thought) the war,
When that was over nothing else would serve
But no one must be daring any more,
A self-induced and stubborn loss of nerve.

This tendency is clearly reflected in what is known as the poetry of the Movement. Robert Conquest who edited the anthology *New Lines* writes thus about the aesthetic that governed by the poetry of the Movement:

I believe the most important general point would be that it submits to no great systems of constructs nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and....is empirical, in its attitude to all that counts.

As Robert Conquest himself wrote in “Humanities,” the aim of this post-war poetry was the following:

The word on the objective breath must be
A wind to window the emotive out,
Music can generalise the inner sea
In dark harmonies of a blinded heart
But hot with certainty and keen with doubt
Verse sweats out heart-felt knowledge, clear-eyed art.

John Holloway, another poet of the Movement, warns against everything, emotive, mystic, philosophical, and romantic:

Shun the black puddles, the scrub hedge
Down to the sea. Keep to the wet streets where
Mercury and sodium flood their sullen fire.
Tonight do not disturb the water’s edge.

This kind of a quasi-Augustan pose, notes Annie Schofield, “was ostensibly, a reaction against the poetic trends of the 1940s. It was a repudiation of the ‘new apocalypics’ who were thought to have ‘opened their Blakes and splashed about in puddles of myth, delighting in portentousness and prismatic effects.” It was in a way an attempt to discard the so-called excesses of the Neo-Romantics and the visionary poetry of the kind that Blake wrote in the

eighteenth century and Eliot in his *Wasteland*. The result of this shutting off from all visions, philosophies and myths was a limited Augustanism, urbanity, prosaic simplicity and refusal to deal with anything except the commonplace.

Ted Hughes was clearly against this voluntary psychic closing. In an interview with Egbert Fass, Hughes expressed his view on Movement poetry in the following words:

One of the things these poets had in common I think was the post-war mood of having and enough.... enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the Id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs.

What made Hughes revolt against this post-war mood was the feeling that people had not learnt their lesson from the war and were being evasive in their response to the new situation. Ted Hughes, whose father had a narrow escape from a shrapnel which could have killed him but for the pocket pay-book which deflected it, realized that shutting one's eyes from the horrible reality outside was at best an evasive technique. He decided to express the holocaust, the nightmare that confronted the world in a post-Hiroshima period. Several poems dealing with the War—"Six Young Men," "The Casualty," "bayonet Charge," "Out," and many poems in *Wodow* and *Crow* paint the nightmarish world the War had created and the psychic numbness it had brought about among the survivors. In "Crow's Account of the Battle," Hughes writes,

And when the smoke cleared it became clear
 This had happened too often before
 And was going to happen too often in future
 And happened too easily
 Bones were too like lath and twigs
 Blood was too like water
 Cries were too like silence
 The most terrible grimaces too like footprints in mud
 And shooting somebody through the midriff
 Was too like striking a match
 Too like spotting a snooker ball
 Too like tearing up a bill
 Blasting the whole world to bits
 Was too like slamming a door
 Too like dropping in a chair
 Exhausted with rage

Too like being blown to bits yourself
 Which happened too easily
 With too like no consequences

Ted Hughes' second main reaction against the contemporary British poetry was in the form of **an exploration of the inner world of man**, something which the movement poetry had deliberately avoided. Hughes thinks that the unconscious, irrational and the primitive in man cannot be ignored. For they are not the creations of the human fantasy; they are rather the things man tries to keep suppressed and yet cannot. "Ghost Crabs" begin to stalk at night and invade not only the seashore but the inland, the comfortable bedrooms and laws. Being the manifestations of a repressed psyche, they roam about freely at night: "Our walls, our bodies, are no problem to them. Their hungers are homing elsewhere. We cannot see them or turn our minds from them." They are too strong to be repressed so easily because

They are the powers of this world.
 We are their bacteria,
 Dying their lives and living their deaths.
 They are the turmoils of history, the convulsion
 In the roots of blood, in the cycle of concurrence.
 To them, our cluttered countries are empty battleground.

It is for this reason that Hughes invokes the inner world of man because he believes that nothing can be gained dismissing it as either a fantasy or something evil; the best way to tackle it lies in facing it and harnessing it. Ted Hughes himself says:

So what we need, evidently, is a faculty that embraces both worlds simultaneously...The inner world, separated from the outer world is a place of demons. The outer world separated from the inner world is a place of meaningless objects and machines. The faculty that makes the human being out of these two worlds is called divine. That is only a way of saying that it is a faculty without which humanity cannot really exist. It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is imagination which embraces both inner and outer worlds in a creative spirit.

This passage provides a key to Ted Hughes' own poetry which is an attempt to synthesize the inner and outer worlds of man. He wanted poetry to do what Blake had said in the nineteenth century it ought to do:

To open the Eternal worlds, to open the immortal eyes
 Of Man inwards onto the Words of thought, into
 Eternity
 Ever expanding in the bosom of God, of Human
 Imagination

Hughes therefore returns to primeval sources of poetry: pagan and oriental mythology, experience of shamanism, of imagination and vision. And to this he adds a modernist outlook and style to call a spade a spade.

Ted Hughes and the English Poetic Tradition

Ted Hughes reacts against the post-war poetry of the Movement; he is, however, influenced by several older and earlier poetic traditions. His Nature poetry is quite close to Wordsworth's (as, for example, in "The Horses"), but what he brings to bear upon it is also a Tennysonian outlook so that he presents not only the serene beauty but also the violence and irrationality that belongs to the world of Nature. His attachment of anthropology made him look at the world of myth in a new, modern way. Robert Graves' *The White goddess* had a strong influence on him during his earlier poetic career. So did his knowledge of anthropology attract him to ancient European, oriental and American myths. At each stage in his development, Hughes has of course tried to transcend the influences which cast their spell on him for some time. His early work is clearly influenced by the work of Hopkins, Lawrence, Yeats and Dylan Thomas. Of these only the later Yeats, poems, persists as far as *Crow*. The more lasting influences have been those of Greek tragedy, medieval alliterative poetry, Shakespeare and the English Romantics. Of the Romantics, two most obvious influences are those of William Blake and Wordsworth. In addition, Ted Hughes has, as Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts point out, acknowledged two kinds of "influences, or at least kinship, to which he is receptive: in his interview with Egbert Fass, in which he speaks of the connection between the dialect of his childhood and the language of middle English poetry; and in his review of Mircea Eliade's *Shamanism*, where he says that the shaman's experience of being 'chosen by the spirits' with the consequence that he 'must shamanize or die' is the basic experience of the poetic temperament we call 'romantic'—he specifies *Venus and Adonis*, some of Keats's longer poems, *The Wanderings of Oisín* and *Ash Wednesday* as works which share this 'temperament'."

Ted Hughes and the Post-War Poetry of Eastern Europe

Hughes shows a remarkable affinity with the post-war poets of Eastern Europe, notably Vasko Popa, Zbigniew Herbert, Miroslaw Holub and Jonas Pilnszky. What may have attracted Ted Hughes and others to the poetry of East Europe were its following features, as summed up by Edwin Morgain:

One broad answer might be that they have to produce their work under extremely testing social and political circumstances, and that this has given their poetry an edge; a clear-eyed quality not quite like anything we are familiar with in our own poetry. Another answer might lay stress on the theme of survival which in fact they do share with many Western poets but which they deal within fresh and urgent ways because they see it from a different background, a different angle. Or from a third viewpoint, we might say, that there is something to be learned from their attitude to language, from their pared-down, sinewy, anti-florid expression.

The most obvious reason for Hughes' attachment to their poetry was their treatment of the Second World War Hughes had already a fascination for the poetry of Wilfred Owen and Keith Douglas, both English poets, who wrote about the War. Keith Douglas not only participated in the Second World War but died in Normandy during the war. The East European poets who actually lived and fought in the war naturally attracted Ted Hughes. In his editorial essay for *The Modern Poetry in Translation*, Ted Hughes wrote about Czech poetry:

The Western poet perhaps envies his brother in the East, for while he sings of comparative comfort, comparative freedom, comparative despair, the reality of the threat and disaster is not his. There is a tendency for the Western poet to become isolated and turn inwards, whereas the poet of the East is in tune with the rhythms of his people in a much more direct and dynamic way.

These poets expressed in a powerful way the damage that the war did to old values. In "Two Drops," for example, Holub wrote,

So firmly they did not feel the flames
 When they came up to the eyelashes
 To the end they were brave
 To the end they were similar

Like two drops
Stuck at the edge of a face.

This is the description of two lovers lost in their embrace as the sudden bombardment destroys them.

Under their influence Ted Hughes decided to confront the nightmare, especially in *Wodow* and *Crow*. “The Howling of Wolves” and “Song of a Rat” have striking similarities in theme and language to many poems of Popa. Similarly, “Pig” is rather close to Herbert’s “Minotaur”:

Only when she felt
The savage knife at her throat
Did the red veil
Explain the game
And she was sorry
She had torn herself
From the mud’s embrace.

In his surrealistic technique too, Hughes is close to the East European poets. “The Ghost Crabs” begins almost in the same way as the playful menace with which many poems of Popa and Plath begin:

At nightfall as the sea darkens
A depth darkness thickens, mustering from the gulfs
and the submarine badlads,
To the sea’s edge.

As Michael Parker, who has made a detailed comparison between Hughes’ poetry and that of the East European poets, observes, “Although we might be inclined to scorn the ‘cowboy outlaw’ world supplied by the image ‘badlands,’ any condescension is quickly crushed when the giant crabs themselves appear under flat skulls, staring inland/Like a packed trench of helmets.’ This last image simultaneously evokes the picture of a Great War Battlefield, and prepares us for Hughes’ broader presentation of the human predicament. Man is not the possessor of the world, Adam, but being possessed by dark, vicious, uncontrollable forces embedded in his subconscious, ever ready to emerge like Yeat’s Apocalyptic beast in ‘The Second Coming,’ moving its slow thighs’ towards Bethlehem.”

What Hughes wrote about Vasko Popa’s *Earth Erect* volume applies equally well to his own *Cave Birds*:

The whole sequence operates, with even greater intensity, as an organic sequence of dream-visions, drawing on many sources, charged with personal feeling, an alchemical adventure of the soul through important changes.

Hughes is thus quite close to these poets in his exposure of the blackest, innermost recesses of Man's being and his questioning of the entire metaphysical structures of the universe—something that he does remarkably well in *Crow*—which appear to ordain endless, purposeless suffering and in the startling directness with which the most horrific experiences are confronted.

Conclusion

But as mentioned earlier, Ted Hughes outgrows the influences and produces something daringly original, and daringly rebellious. This is why any talk of his being influenced by others must at best be tentative. In the alchemy of his poetic genius all these influences act as ingredients but the end product is something more complex, deeper and more profound.

The major themes and subject matter of Ted Hughes' poetry

Ted Hughes is a very important modern British poet. As a poet, he commands full individual technical superiority over most of his contemporaries. He understands modern sensibility and contemporary issues; but writes in his own perspective. He creates before us worlds which delight and instruct us and elevate us emotionally, intellectually and esthetically. Unlike some modern poets so believe that a poem should not mean but be, Ted Hughes is profoundly concerned with the subject matter of his poetry.

The major theme of his poetry is of course man, that is, the question of human existence, man's relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his own inner self. He is awfully serious about this last aspect of the problem of being, namely, the problem of human consciousness. His subjects range from animals, landscapes, war; the problem posed by the inner world of modern man, to the philosophical and metaphysical queries about the status of man in this universe. His moods and methods of presentation reveal a similar variety. Ted Hughes says about his vigor and vitality (usually associated with violence):

“Any form of violence—any form of vehement activity-invokes the bigger energy. To accept the energy, and find method of turning it to good. The old method is the only one. My poems are not about violence but vitality. Animals are not violent; they are so much more completely controlled than me”

The main theme in his poetry is this energy which has to be turned into a positive force. Violence is misunderstood in his poetry. Most of Hughes's poetry can be said to be an attempt to negotiate with these energies as we see his argument in the case of Hawk. This poem is often criticized on the ground that the hawk is a mouthpiece of fascism. What is forgotten, however, is Hughes's assertion that the Hawk symbolizes "Nature thinking." Secondly, the point of view in this poem is the hawks; that is to say, the hawk is as mortal and part of creation as any other creature, violent or timid. Right from his childhood, Ted Hughes has been interested in animals. When his parents lived in the Calder valley, Ted Hughes had a chance to see the world of the animals from close quarters. Hughes learnt the first lesson that animals were by and large victims. The wild world of the animals was at the mercy of the ordered human world. Yet, as Hughes realized and emphasized in his poetry, the human world was fascinated by the world of the animals because it had pushed into the unconscious what the animal world still possessed: untapped energies. As depicted in 'That Morning':

"Two gold bears came down and swam like men...
Eating pierced salmon off their talons"

Here, the untamed natural impulses have been beautifully externalized as the two bears representing the two visitors to the lake. He writes violence chiefly of savage animals, but violence also in human nature. Indeed, violence is one of the dominant themes in Hughes's poetry; and for this reason he has often been regarded as a poet of violence. But these poems of violence by Hughes are certainly genuine poetry; and we certainly enjoy reading them. And it is not only the sadistic persons among us who would appreciate these poems. Even the normal reader can find a certain degree of pleasure in them, especially because they are perfectly realistic, and very vivid, in their depiction of brutality and cruelty. But not violence alone but treats nature in a unique way as in:

"A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and
the clank of a bucket –"

Nature is one of the most prevalent scenes in his poetry. In a way Hughes's poetry continues the tradition of nature poetry. But unlike Wordsworth who found Nature a "nurse, guide and guardian," and Tennyson who found Nature "red in tooth and Claw" Hughes tries to take both

the Wordsworthian and Tennyson approaches to Nature. In poems like “Full Moon and Little Frieda” Hughes can describe Nature to continue the Wordsworthian tradition, but in poems like “Hawk Roosting” the “That Morning” Hughes recognizes the powerful, vital, violent and predacious Nature without commenting on it. It doesn’t mean that he copies their style. One of the causes underlying Hughes’s greatness as a modern poet is his maturity and originality of style. Hughes has experiment-ed with several different styles, ranging from the Wordsworthian and ‘their metaphysical to that of the modern East European poets. In each case, he has made the style his own as in ‘Thought-Fox’.

“The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed”

He can convey his meaning and tone through the use of diction. As in the above extract, as soon as the thought-fox springs into action, the vowels are short: “brilliantly, concentratedly.” The action reaches its climax in the last line which is virtually monosyllabic: “And the page is printed.” The poem thus shows a fine blending of vowels and consonants so as to provide a fusion of sense and sound. At other times, he uses animals as symbols. In each case, there is a remarkable mastery over the medium, whether it is to depict a scene, portray an animal, tell a story, or present a one-sided vision as that of Hawk. Even the theme of violence is handled with the lexical entities. Ted Hughes is primarily concerned with material reality not simply the reality of a superficial urbanity but the one that governs larger questions of life and death, Nature and the animal world, and above all, the inner world of man as in ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’:

“A dark river of blood, many boulders,
Balancing unspilled milk”

Instead of shutting his eyes to the metaphysical and spiritual questions about life, Hughes tries to go to their bottom. He brings round that blood can be spilled as mercilessly as milk and water. The reality is depicted in the ‘boulders’ troubles of life. Like Blake he shows a fourfold vision which progresses from knowledge of the surfaces seen from a singular and therefore one-sided perspectives to the mature philosophic perspective which goes to the heart of the matter. He finds a close kinship between the ambivalent but powerful forces within man and the

inscrutable and terrible working of the world of Nature. Equally remarkable is the fact that Hughes has treated of many modern concerns, like war and violence, with an awareness which is lacking in many of his contemporary poets. His poetry evokes a concentrated imaginative awareness of experience in a specific emotional response through language that he chooses and arranges for its meaning, sound, rhythm and a purpose.

“The Casualty”

In the “The Casualty” Ted Hughes portrays the domestication and commercialization of a tragedy. Farmers and housewives behold the plane crash with an air of indifference. They watched as if they encountered a fight between “a spider and a firefly.” The phrase “between the washing hung out” domesticates the larger scale of tragedy.” “Far above the trees” indicates their standpoint: how they comprehend that they are far away from the domain of this disaster. They wait for the evening news with interest as yet another major tragedy is commercialized. Fallen into a brambled or thorny ditch, the “suddenly smashed stems twitch.” This signifies the vegetation that is completely out of place or the human bones being smashed due to the accident. The pheasant, the hare and the wren respond with their respective reflex actions bewildered at this “unnatural occurrence. “The pheasant stands on the ruins in total astonishment. The hare that typically hops reluctantly and quizzically-thinking at every step; in response to the calamity frantically hops away flattening its ears without thinking twice. The wren goes about its duty of warning the others.

The response of people to the crash is elaborated upon in the subsequent paragraph. They “saw fall”, it was not only the fall of the plane, but the Fall of Man as well, where Nature won over science yet again. They peer just as they would look for a snake or a rare flower. Note how both are potent symbols of death. Even the grave of the dead leaves heaves as a man drops out from the air alive.

People listen to him now as he tries to regain his senses, and gropes for help. They rip apart the slum of weeds, barbed coils and leaves to raise a body. As the breeze touches the body it glows: gets slightly refreshed and oxygenated. They brand their hands onto his bones. Now that his spine has collapsed, sheaves (pulleys) are lined up to take away the dead bodies in the

background ,as he is propped up for support. It may also imply that the people who prop him up act as” heaped sheaves.”

They arrange his legs in order, *open* his eyes; and then the people stand helpless like ghosts. The term ‘ghosts’ is used in keeping with the popular conception of ghosts who want to help the living but cannot be of any practical value. The man here is a mere metaphor for people in general afflicted by such catastrophes as he tries to support himself on his legs yet again, and tries to open his eyes. August is the hottest English month, and people were literally and spiritually melting there as they encountered a major blow. They behold the flesh and blood of the bulky person in question as a heartbeat shakes the body. Eyes widen in a childish way; people seem like children in that they are worried, but do not do anything much about it. Sympathies seem to fasten to his blood like flies; nothing much but parasites feeding on the tragedy.

The heart is no more open than a clenched fist and extremely controlled in its emotions. It lies complacent, unscathed by the incident like an unscratched diamond. Their tears are too tender to let go and break. They pose as mourners. They are greedy in that, instead of helping them, their voyeuristic nature attaches more preference to knowing the juicy details of the horrific experience that the victims have gone through-“grimace, gasp, gesture of death.” All this prevails, till they encounter his frigid-eyed stare at the handkerchief above him.