

# RELIGIOSITY, IMAGINATION AND TED HUGHES: HIS EARLY POETRY AND THE ROMANTICS

Dr. Jaibir Dhariwal<sup>1</sup>✉, Dr. Rajbir Parashar<sup>2</sup>✉

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, RKSD College, Kaithal, Haryana, India



## Corresponding Author

Dr. Jaibir Dhariwal,  
[1980dhariwal@gmail.com](mailto:1980dhariwal@gmail.com)

DOI  
[10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.6238](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v5.i5.2024.6238)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

**Copyright:** © 2024 The Author(s). This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

With the license CC-BY, authors retain the copyright, allowing anyone to download, reuse, re-print, modify, distribute, and/or copy their contribution. The work must be properly attributed to its author.



## ABSTRACT

In his early poetry, Ted Hughes is anxious to make an exit out of industrial imagery of his times. His use of animal imagery purports to inculcate a reverence for the otherness of the various living beings existing outside and independent of the human world. Like the Romantics, this inheres a strategy to compensate the lost life of 'imagination and emotion' modern world has suffered towards the close of the twentieth century. This abundance of animal imagery is an inverted dialogue with the simple and easily connectable forms of Nature. In Hughes's early poetry, poetic personae or narrators are basically located in highly industrialized cultural contexts, having 'hole in the head'. In place of rationalist humanism and instrumental rationality, Ted Hughes posits imagination itself as a distinct source of spiritual experience, a sort of foundation of religiosity in later part of 20th century. In order to re-establish its due place in the human ecology, it requires reliable tools to expose and discredit the rigidly 'egocentric' tendencies of the civilized modern man. His early poetry is an example of this part of his vision where poetry becomes a spiritual and healing practice for the poet as well as the reader. Even multiple critical approaches to his poetry, appreciative or more critical of his worldview, all undeniably acknowledge this underlying centrality of poetry as spiritual linguistic endeavour of the poet. This aspect of his poetry brings him close to some of the prominent Romantic poets in British literature.

**Keywords:** Animal Imagery, Imagination, Spirituality, Romanticism, Religiosity, Industrial Modernity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes started his poetic venture with a reliance on imagery and symbolism outside human world. He was initially regarded as obsessed with animal world or totems and myths. But in the course of his poetic journey and the rise of global readership of his poetry, his spiritual cravings as a poet have come to the fore. It is interesting to revisit some of his early collections of poetry in the light of this essential thread of spirituality. In fact, his view of poetic imagination and the mystic qualities needed for spiritual awakening or light are intertwined closely. To him, poetry cannot spring out of over intellection or sole dependence on conscious construction. His early poems loudly announce a return to a realm of human and poetic experience bringing together imagination and religiosity in a subtle manner. The early poetry of Hughes is marked by an intense search for alternative modes of associating with the non-human universe. In the Romantics, the emphasis on spontaneity and imagination was for preserving their humanity, in Hughes' case, this concern becomes an obsession but with an additional awareness that the 'human' cannot be protected in a universe where all other forms of life and the organic laws of Nature are threatened. That is why, it proceeds with a critique of

industrialization and modernity as inbuilt aberrations in the modern attitude and provide a system of images and dramatic situations that propose and authenticate a radical scepticism initiated by the romantics.

To Ted Hughes, the human existence in a highly urbanized and industrialized society is characterized by a state of diffused and diminished functional efficiency. There are poems like "The Horses", "A Dream of Horses", "Winds", "Bull Moses" and "The Jaguar" in which, through irony and satire, Ted Hughes intends to communicate his vivid perceptions about the changing equations of humankind and Nature in the modern world. Mainly dwelling upon the structural dichotomy between the civilized and the natural mode of existence, these poems implicitly express his concern about the increasing gap between the rational and the irrational, and the human and the animal in an urban and industrial society. "The Horses" and "A Dream of Horses" express the need to rejuvenate oneself through a real or an imaginative affirmation of the free-play of the instinctual energies. While in the former this view is conveyed through a dramatic encounter of the persona with the animals which standing in a knotted posture of arrested motion in a "world cast in frost" exemplify a oneness with the elements unimaginable to the persona, in the latter the narrator grooms along with his fellow grooms resorts to a fantastic imagining in which the unheroic horses of their real present will find a natural release of their instinctual energies and the grooms who are despondent and desperate now, will then rejoice with the emancipated animals of their good olden days. "The Horses" mainly dwells upon the persona's narration of a simple experience when one day he "climbed through woods in the hour-before-dawn dark" (CP 22) and ironically returns with an intense awareness of his outcast's response to the natural surroundings:

I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.

Grey silent fragments Of a grey silent world. (CP 22)

While perceiving the calm and still horses in an equally lulled natural setting, the persona is continuously aware of the malodorous and "crowded streets" which now are indirectly forming his response. As a result, there is no genuine initiative on his part. Instead, he tries to overcome it by postponing any practical affinity with Nature. His romantic wish "May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place" (CP 23) in Ted Hughes' code of conduct is self-subversive as it is primarily a rational evasion of any intimate ties with Nature. Thus, the persona practically succeeds in containing his inner discontent and preserving his self-repressive attitude despite the shock and jolt he has momentarily received through his intense contact with the elemental universe.

Wordsworth's "Daffodils", "Lucy Gray", "Cuckoo" or even "Solitary Reaper" are organically located and celebrated in his poetic experience. This experience enriches his worldview and consolidates his sense of being human. In Ted Hughes' case there is a cluster of experiences. But the rhythm of William Wordsworth is conspicuous by absence. Ted Hughes' poetry is torn between the subjective and the objective world. There are rare poems such as "Gnat-Psalms" and "Skylarks" which like "The Thought Fox" and "Full Moon and Little Frieda" that achieve a connecting thread to bridge "notorious chasm between outer and inner worlds" and succeed in capturing "the mystery and wonder residing in the everyday and actual" (Underhill, *The Problem* 276) without making any direct assault on the dominant sensibility of rationalism in the modern world. Having lost the joyous confidence in the violent and physically powerful animals and their ability to triumph over the hostile conditions, Ted Hughes finds a different set of creatures which not only transcend the crisis-ridden conditions of the rat, jaguar and the wolf, but also manifest a supreme life force in their actions which seem to be vastly superior to those of the earlier assertive animals and birds or any human action or construction. "Gnat-Psalms" begins with, a proverb "The Gnat is of more ancient lineage than man". Ted Hughes as Stuart Hirschberg tells us, is of the view that "although infinitesimal and incredibly vulnerable, the species is durable, perhaps more so than man." (Myth 63) But this durability or authenticity of existence in Hughes' value-system is quite inseparable from a spontaneous immersion into the dark realm of one's instincts. Both, the skylarks and the gnats have some built-in mechanism in their animalhood. They would not buy survival through being anything less than that or drag on with a degraded or compromised being. The skylarks have launched a relentless struggle against "Earth's Centre" and are as "obedient as to death a dead thing". (CP 173) The gnats too display a formidable dance which ironically is self-consuming. But like the bird in "Hawk Roosting", they need no arguments to assert the purity and authenticity of what they are doing. Though far more vulnerable than the hawk or jaguar, they are the supreme paradigms of spontaneity at the inner as well as the external level of their being:

That the cycles of this universe are no matter

That they are not afraid of the sun

That the one sun is too near

It blasts their song, which is of all the suns

That they are their own sun. (CP 181)

And gradually, the poem is imbued with mystic overtones that emanate from the ecstatic experience of the persona who almost merges with the mode of existence displayed by the small creatures. Such lines are essentially rare in the early poetry of Ted Hughes:

You are the angels of the only heaven!

And God is an Almighty Gnat!

You are the greatest of all the galaxies!

My hands fly in the air, they are follies

My tongue hangs up in the leaves

My thoughts have crept into crannies

Your dancing

Your dancing

Rolls my staring skull slowly away into outer space. (CP 182)

In "Skylarks" too, the persona's "idleness curdles". In fact, the personae in both these poems get absorbed in the physical processes represented by the larks and the gnats. It is not the creatures alone which become at the end "conscience perfect", rather the persona's spiritual and ecstatic condition is also implied in his liberation from the 'skull' which is the emblem of his rationalistic conditioning. The ritualistic diction of "Gnat Psalms" in particular, helps the poet-persona in gaining access to a rare experience which is imagined to be beyond the domain of the self-complacent rationality of the modern man. Both these poems are essentially remarkable for a bold use of imagination. Here the poet visualizes not only what is actually present but also what is potential and could be realized only at the point of culmination. However, it is in their unfolding of a new dimension of the poet's world-view that the actual importance of these poems lies.

But this harmonizing infiltration of ideology achieved through tentative resolution of the opposites in Hughes' poetry is a rare phenomenon. Even such poems keep intact his major ideological contention that the surrender of intellect to the instinctual forces symbolized by various animals is the ultimate fate of the rationalistic world-view, all historical development and scientific progress. That is why, whether by evoking a mystic reverence for the non-human world or by direct assault on the value-system of the civilized world, Ted Hughes constantly inverts the reader's faith in the humanistic vision. He has a foreknowledge of this startling apotheosis of rational and scientific thought. There are several poems such as "October Dawn", "Strawberry Hill", "The Bear", "Ghost Crabs" and "Song of a Rat" which express his conviction that the marginalized forces of Nature are destined to regain a central place in the Universe. "October Dawn" announces that the "ice-age had begun it heave". "Song of a Rat" which is primarily about a rat's trapped condition, depicts the small creature as "attacking heaven and earth with a mouthful of screeches like tom tin". Subsequently, all the physical agonies of the rat culminate "With a little beseeching of blood on its nose end". (CP 169) But the elements around implore it to be either alive or remain present in the universe as an unkillable and revengeful presence. Thus, the rat "Crossing into power/Never to be buried" (CP 170) as a symbol has wider implications. Elaborating this point, Stuart Hirschberg observes pertinently:

Amidst thunder and lightning the spirit of the rat heralded by the biblical signs of glory and power (vide there were voices, and thundering and lightning and earthquakes' Revelation 8.5) assumes domination over the universe. The irrational bestial forces freed by man's brutality and represented here in the character of the rat becomes a permanent presence and an active principle of evil in the world. As a result, the rat's spirit 'supplants hell' by taking over Satan's task of making evil predominate. For Hughes, then, the new order brought about by the rat is a universe of implacable metaphysical evil arising from man's inhumanity and characterized by terror, violence and death. (Myth 58)

But it is in "The Bear" that we witness the real resurrection of an evil and destructive spirit, as hinted by Stuart Hirschberg in the context of the rat. Like the hawk half-asleep in "Hawk Roosting", the bear is in hibernation. The hawk's arrogant and inhuman demeanour was tactically defended by the poet saying that "in this hawk Nature is thinking." (Hughes, *The Environmental* 199) The first-person narrative was essentially the foundation of this mythical logic. "The Bear" is depicted from the narrator's point of view and the poet cannot disown the amoral and anti-humanistic stance that is implicit in the bear-spirit "capable of swallowing all we are." The reader is forewarned:

The bear is digging  
In his sleep  
Through the wall of the Universe  
With a man's femur. (CP 160)

Moreover, the bear is the "ferryman/ To dead land" and his "price is everything". (CP 161) The fantasy inherent in the creation of "The Bear" gains momentum in "Ghost- Crabs". The poet commemorates the destructive potential of the invading irrational forces:

They are the powers of this world.  
We are their bacteria,  
Dying their lives and living their deaths. (CP 150)

To Ted Hughes such powers are the real "turmoil of history". What Stuart Hirschberg observes in the context of "Song of a Rat" is also appropriate in the context of this poem: "By pandering to the primitive elements of his nature man has admitted an influx of evil into the world and abrogated his place of supremacy I in the universe." (Myth 58) The crabs, undoubtedly, are the symbols of the perverted elemental forces that have gone completely out of human control. For them: "our cluttered countries are empty battleground". The intellectual overtones of "Song of a Rat", "The Bear" and "Ghost Crabs" are essentially aggressive and unsettling in their fantastic imaginings. Ted Hughes, as these poems display, is of the conviction that cultural evolutionism and rationalist humanism are inevitable consequences of Western man's philosophical aberrations and are fated to culminate into a widespread cultural chaos and the reversal of the historical and evolutionary process.

As revealed in the discussion of the poems from *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*, Ted Hughes' poetry in these early collections, marks a meaningful intervention in the established forms of Man-Nature relationship. At one level, especially in its bold use of animal imagery and implied exhortation of the reader to enter into new and fresh relations with the non-human world around him and to reconsider and re-examine the role and place of the irrational or the instinctual in our highly mechanical forms of life, the poetry of this phase tends to be exhilarating and liberating. At this stage he appears to carry forward the project of romantic interpretation of the universe in a radical manner. His voice is determined, and his perceptions are blunt or even sweeping. He constantly refuses to align with the value system and cultural forms of modernity and scientific humanism. For him, poetry is a tool to revisit a romantic past where nature and humankind are mutually interactive with abundant, though invisible, sources of negotiation and understanding. The authentic ties that William Wordsworth felt with nature as a representative of his times are simply missing in the historical experience of Ted Hughes. Yet he ventures to bridge the gap and doing this he recreates new grounds for the interaction of the humankind with the natural world. But this exercise turns out to be an agonizing enterprise as it involves a great deal of cleansing of the modern human consciousness. As a poet Ted Hughes is an overburdened, sensibility. His primary task is to enter the dark unknown world of nature and recover its vestiges for the present generation. He is a gatherer of the proofs of Man-Nature relationship that the earlier romantics lived and recreated through their poetry. But he does try to get attuned to the disturbed rhythm of nature only at the imaginative level. His early poetry is a powerful example of how a modern sensibility retains its romantic connections and aspires to be an ecospheric imagination. In fact, his early poetry asserts a structural linkage with the Romantic worldview. Commenting upon this aspect Hugh Underhill observes:

Ted Hughes' poetry is at odds with Auden's kind of de-romanticizing humanism, with its import that the redeemer works in very worldly ways. Hughes gives the salient expression in the latter part of the century, among British poets anyway, to the Romantic primitivism I have examined in Lawrence and Graves. 'Like most men today, he is a stranger to nature': that estrangement is Ted Hughes' obsessive theme. (The Problem 269)

Taking account of these views of it is difficult to consider Ted Hughes out of place with the British Romantics who had the courage and vision to locate long-term devastation in apparent direction of progress and modernity. His poetic works and critical writings are the most vibrant expressions of the collective urge of all the Romantic poets for an alternative humanism a sort of imaginative outlook towards the organic realities of the universe. Hughes shares this central concern of the Romantics and extends it according to an alternative kind of spiritualism, mythical and literary. But imagination remains its foundation.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

## REFERENCES

- Dawson, P.M.S. "Poetry in an age of revolution", in Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism, Ed. by Stuart Curran, CUP 1993, pp. 56-81.  
[https://www.hansrajcollege.ac.in/hCPanel/uploads/elearning/elearning\\_document/poetry\\_in\\_an\\_age\\_of\\_revolution.pdf](https://www.hansrajcollege.ac.in/hCPanel/uploads/elearning/elearning_document/poetry_in_an_age_of_revolution.pdf)
- Egri, Carolyn. "Nature in Spiritual Traditions: Social and Cultural Implications for Environmental Change." Living with Nature: Environmental Politics as Cultural Discourse, edited by Frank Fisher, and Maarten A. Hajer, Oxford University Press, 1999, pp. 58-80.
- Faas, Ekbert. Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe. Black Sparrow Press, 1978.
- Hirschberg, Stuart. Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes. Wolfhound Press, 1981.
- Hughes, Ted. Collected Poems. Edited by Paul Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003.
- . "The Environmental Revolution". Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe, Ekbert Faas, Black Sparrow, 1980, pp. 186-88.
- . "Interview with Ted Hughes: Ted Hughes and Crow." Interview by Ekbert Faas. London Magazine, vol. 10, issue 10, Jan. 1971.
- Underhill, Hugh. The Problem of Consciousness in Modern Poetry. Cambridge University, Press, 1992.
- Abbreviation: Collected Poems (CP)