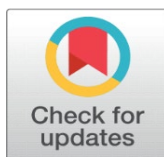


TED HUGHES, ECOSPHERIC VISION AND THE ROMANTICS: A REAPPRAISAL OF THE ROLE OF A POET

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ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes' early poetry demonstrates a profound engagement with nature, foregrounding his ecospheric imaginationa worldview that integrates human and non-human realms. This paper explores how his poetic vision aligns with Romantic traditions, especially those of Wordsworth and Coleridge, while simultaneously breaking new grounds in representing ecological interconnectedness. His early works, such as *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*, reveal an intense fascination with the raw vitality of nature, embodying an ethos that recognizes the intrinsic value and agency of the non-human world. By drawing on some key aspects of Romantic poetry, Hughes extends Romantic role of a poet and his/her preoccupation with the sublime, the pastoral, and the natural world. He reinterprets their worldview of natural world with a fresh emphasis and vision of poet and poetry. The study highlights how Hughes's role as a poet emerges from the historical and literary experiences of later half of twentieth century and ecospheric ethics. However, this happens with certain definite continuities with different poetic practices among the Romantics. The research paper examines his innovative use of imaginative and symbolic resources of romantic sensibility, language and imagery to articulate an urgent ecospheric vision. This is also an attempt to establish that without his roots in the creative practice and vision of the Romantic tradition, Ted Hughes would have been a different kind of poet. By revisiting Hughes's poetic beginnings, this paper underscores his role as a pivotal figure in literary articulation of ecological awareness carrying forward basics of his literary predecessors in 19th century. It involves intermittent references to his early works, both reflections in prose and poetry.

Keywords: Ecospheric Imagination, Romanticism, Environment, Vision and Imagery



1. INTRODUCTION

Ted Hughes is known as a visionary of ecological regeneration with a categorical mission to foreground and revive Romantic concerns of cultural simplicity and imagination. Due to his historical location in the latter half of the twentieth century, it may seem adventurous to seek romantic affiliations and continuities in his early poetry. But it is quite difficult to read his poetry, at least the early phase of his poetic world, in isolation from a general romantic view of human and non-human world, imagination and creativity. This is even more relevant in relation to his imagined role of a poet in a post-industrial society. This argument of the paper has convincing evidence in his early poetry. It is mainly expressed in Hughes's sceptic but sensitive decoding of the extra-utilitarian urges of human nature and its problematic ties with the non-human universe. His distinct response and intellectual orientation come from a sort of discomfort and aggression in his mood as well as ideology. From the vantage point of a romantic sensibility ontologically threatened, his early poetry exhibits a novel form of resilience in resistance leading to an alternative vision. His poetic works and critical writings emphatically express the conviction that on account of his/her dependence on rationalism and his/her tendency to look

upon everything around him as an object of consumption or domination, the modern sensibility is succumbing to a suicidal evasion of Nature. And this worldview is a continuation of what the Romantics could visualize only partially. Though it is risky to generalize the varied worldviews of the Romantics around any set of creative practices or dogmas, it may not be wrong to associate their 'structure of feeling' or thought patterns with the landmark beginning of a scepticism towards the perceived model of development – industrial and modern world. This aspect is aptly highlighted by P.M.S. Dawson in "Poetry in an age of revolution":

The Romantic attitude to industrialism can be caricatured as an aesthetic distaste for smoking chimneys and noisy factories and a preference for the idyllic charms of the countryside. In actual fact the Romantic Imagination responded powerfully if ambivalently to the sublimity of the new industrial landscape. The real focus of the Romantics' critique of their age is on the moral and social values in whose name both the increase of industry and the rationalization of agriculture took place. These social tendencies implied a redefinition and revaluation of human nature and of the human person to which the poets were all finally opposed. (67)

To Ted Hughes, the present cultural crisis in the Western world is a direct consequence of an over-reliance on rationalism. He distances himself from the prevailing acceptance that the earth we inhabit is "a heap of raw materials" (Hughes, *The Environmental* 186). This dominant ethos of modern world is further explicated in these words of Carolyn Egri, "Fundamental to the industrial-materialist-scientific worldview has been the exorcism of a nature which is organic, living, and spiritual. Instead, nature is regarded and treated as a machine in the service of humankind. In this mechanistic hierarchical worldview, both persons and non-human universe are objectified and valued only in the utilitarian instrumental terms rather than for any intrinsic or spiritual value." (Nature 60-61) The Romantics had an innate vision of the cultural and ecological imbalances the modern historical changes were going to precipitate in human experience and the overall ecosphere. This evasion of Nature, according to Ted Hughes, has led to irremediable distortions in modern experience. It has become a difficult enterprise to preserve and protect the internal and external ecology of human nature. Furthermore, science and Christianity have grown only to become incapable of any redemptive resources from within. Herein lies the roots of poetic journey of Ted Hughes, which he feels compelled to carry out a responsible mission of reviving the primeval dignity of all forms of natural world. Doing this, he gives vent to the unspoken fears of the Romantics. His 'dark' and pessimistic view of the cultural realities of his times has an unavoidable Romantic linkage. It is discernible in his several observations which he made in different contexts about poetry, creative process and imagination. His theoretical and philosophical positions are helpful in crystallizing the undercurrents of the Romantic worldview which in our own times can be adequately interpreted and understood with reference to the cultural anxieties of the ecological concerns. His own notion of 'imagination' is an extension of the term to a more fundamental faculty, something essential to human sensibility for an organic vision of the material and ecospheric world.

Hughes's notion of poetry is pathbreaking in many ways. In *Poetry in the Making*, he is against poetry as a mathematical problem or solution like that. He says: "Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it." (Ted, 17) This highlights Hughes's belief that poetry should emerge from vivid, lived experience rather than abstraction or mere technical construction. William Wordsworth was the first poet to express his views on this aspect. Identifying his worldview, M.H. Abrams says:

Wordsworth's cardinal standard of poetic value is 'nature', and nature, in his usage, is given a triple and primitivistic connotation: Nature is the common denominator of human nature; it is most reliably exhibited among men living 'according to nature' (that is to say, in a culturally simple, and especially a rural environment); and it consists primarily in an elemental simplicity of thought and feeling and a spontaneous and 'unartificial' mode of expressing feeling in words. (*The Mirror* 105)

In fact, Wordsworth as well as the other Romantics had perceived quite early that the kind of Humanism industrialization was breeding had inherent deficiencies in its human aspect. To them, it was destined to cause a crisis in cultural formation and threaten the available forms of community living without any viable alternatives. Ted Hughes confronts the dominant reality of industrialization and modernity with a subtle and ideological continuation of what Wordsworth visualized at the beginning of this historical process. It was basically anti-Nature mode of existence in the Western Culture and Geoffrey Hartman refers to it as a major failure in 'humanizing imagination'. Like Wordsworth, Ted Hughes advocates a future of humankind inhabited by people of 'imagination' and not of callous rationality. His statement as given under highlights this aspect, "All true art was the unmediated expression of the artist's hidden, inner self which is 'the voice of what is neglected or forbidden' . . . He warned that to live removed from this inner universe of experience

is also to live removed from ourself, banished from ourself and our real life.” (Poetry 4-5) This view of poetry is actually governed by an ‘emergent’ type of imagination closely associated with the contemporary discourse on ecology and environmental issues on one hand, and the Romantic notion of poetry, on the other. His poetry constantly distances from the modern consciousness that celebrates the domination of industrial and technocratic culture. Doing this, he also enters a fresh and creative relationship with the prevailing forms of ecological discourse. However, his cultural concerns are largely disguised in his ideological commitment to a Lawrentian negation of the heritage of modernity and Enlightenment. Another twentieth century thinker, Claude Levi Strauss who addresses these issues in his distinct manner, is also a relevant reference here, mainly because Ted Hughes imagined poet as a shaman also. The dichotomy of ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies as formulated by him is present in the vision of Ted Hughes as something intrinsic his world view, quite like that of the Romantics. The dichotomy between ‘Nature’ and culture, the primitive and the civilized, ‘the cold’ and ‘the hot’ societies and the ‘country’ and the ‘city’ central to ecocriticism and environmental discourse, find creative expression in Hughes’ poetry. The general outlook of Claude Levi Strauss and his coinage of the polarity of the modern and primitive societies as the ‘hot and the cold’ ones has given new justifications to this non-utilitarian worldview on culture and nature. The following statement by Claude Levi-Strauss is valuable in this regard:

Primitive people produce little order through their culture. Today we call them under-developed peoples. But they produce very little entropy in their societies. Generally speaking, these societies are egalitarian, mechanical, ruled by the law of unanimity . . . civilized peoples, on the other hand, produce a good deal of order in their culture, as is demonstrated by the mechanization and great work of civilization, but they also produce a great deal of entropy in their society: social conflicts, political struggles all things which, as we have seen, primitives try to prevent, perhaps in a more conscious and systematic fashion than we might have supposed. (Pace, Claude 153)

Strauss’ term ‘order’ is indicative of the ‘rationalization’ that the life-forms in the civilized and developed societies have undergone. This ‘rationalization’ is supposed to have caused the domination of the ‘monoculture’ of industrialization over the more viable forms of social and individual existence which, as Claude Levi Strass’ statement implies, the primitive societies have retained so skilfully. However, before proceeding further, it may be useful to have a look at what it means to be Ecospheric in the general context of human thinking. In “An Earth-Based Ethic for Humanity”, Stan Rowe defines it in the following manner:

Ecospheric ethics is based on the ecological valuation of Earth source and support of humanity. It is strengthened by the belief and faith that what has for years been thought as mere “environment” is a reality more important than me, you, and all of us. Humans are parts of the Ecosphere, the whole that brings into being and sustains all organic creatures. (An Earth-Based)

These perceptions confirm that ecospheric values or ethics are at the other end of what the modern value-system stands rigidly upon. This aspect is further elaborated by Rowe:

Note that the ecological perspective magnifies the value of what has traditionally been portrayed as a mostly dead environment. Liveliness exists in all things: in air, water, soil, as well as in the organisms. All parts of the living Earth or Ecosphere are important, the inorganic equally with the organic. Earth itself is not an organism in the biologist’s sense, nor is it a super-organism. The Ecosphere is supra-organismic: a higher level of organization than the inorganic and organic parts it comprises. Here is the logical basis for a drastic move in philosophic position from homocentrism and biocentrism to ecocentrism. (An Earth-Based)

This view is essentially in line with what has been traditionally known as pantheism or paganism. However, it is visibly towards a conscious construction of these ethics. Here the mode of mystification is not central to this new perception. But the context this paper places Ted Hughes and the Romantics into is not through the route of exploring intertextuality of poems but certain structural continuities. As a poet Ted Hughes, first of all awakens us to the reality of our callous humanism a direct message that our placement in the universe is not a matter of choice as dictated by this limited worldview. His early poetry is for a redefinition of the ties of the human- non-human world. Hughes’s poetry is basically innovative in its spirited reconciliation of the traditional and recent perspectives that maintain ecological balance as a primary condition of survival on and of Earth, and the only test of human supremacy, if any. His poetry is “wholly a celebration of the manifested material universe.” (Underhill, The Problem 273)

The main strength of Ted Hughes is the authentic voice he evolves in relation to the urgencies of ecological discourse. Here the argument is not to prove that he is an absolutely ecospheric mind or a simple and derivative inheritor of what the romantics had visualized in their own times. Rather this paper is a humble attempt to establish that without his inter

connection with the energy and visions of the Romantic tradition, Ted Hughes would have been a different kind of poet. Romanticism is an unconscious source of perceptiveness and pictorial quality in his poetry. More than that, he is one who retaliates against the subjugation of romantic sensibility in our times; he simply avoids the defensive posture of lamenting the situation. The horror of "Hawk Roosting" is mainly for exposing and mending this gap of which the modern consciousness is little aware. As referred above, an ecospheric imagination is unlikely to be comfortable with rationalist humanism and its aesthetic preoccupations. It is interesting to examine Hughes' view of poetry and imagination on the basis of "The Thought-Fox", a poem specifically devoted to the exploration of imagination. Generally, this poem is treated as a poetic statement on his personal mode of creativity. And its meaning is restricted to the act of creation. But it is interesting to look at this poem from a different angle, especially that may help us discover an imagination ecospherically inclined and coming into being as a distinct sensibility in the very imagery and process of the poem. The seminal task of the poem is to defamiliarize the genesis of 'imagination' through the image of a fox. Here, Hughes lays extraordinary emphasis on imagination as an alternative to the 'egocentric' subjectivity and culture suggested through the 'dark hole of the head'. (CP 21) This poem carries implicit affiliations with the romantic notions of creativity and modes of perceiving the surrounding reality. The total structure of the poem evolves organically through a well sustained and controlled tension between the human and the animal, and the rational and the irrational. Finally:

With a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still, the clock ticks,
The page is printed. (CP 21)

Commenting upon the implied contention in the poem, Ekbert Faas says, "Artistic creativity should spring with unimpeded spontaneity from the deepest core of the human mind, and no revision should be allowed to falsify this primal impulse." (Ted 39) This dimension is further explicated by Hugh Underhill:

So, this power of the poem to encode messages from 'below the conscious levels of thought and feeling' is a power to re-engage over-conscious man with the more permanent and original springs of his nature. Hughes falls into place with those moderns who wish to repudiate an over-conscious, rational-scientific and utilitarian civilization and who seem to affirm the writing of the poem itself as a kind of heroic ritual testifying to the contrary non-rational, non-utilitarian values. (The Problem 274)

This metaphorical use of 'fox' is quite crucial in understanding the culmination of the poem. It is almost in the mode of liberation that the 'head' is raided and imbued with a qualitatively new experience. The imagery and the evolution of the poem is in favour of a resolution by dislocating the supremacy of instrumental rationality. It marks a rejection of the 'egocentric' ethics which are pampered despite the 'dark hole of the head'. It is necessary to capture this initiative in the creative process that purports to reinstate authentic imagination in place of the 'Egghead' culture of modernity. Ted Hughes explains in "The Environmental Revolution":

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 the faculty without which humanity cannot really exist. It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit. (192)

At another place, Hughes makes a similar observation, "There is the inner world, which is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heartbeat." (The Environmental 42) But this emphasis on non-rational sources of creativity is not peculiar to Ted Hughes. The Romantics, right from William Wordsworth to Shelley and Keats had apprehensions about the impact of rational-scientific approach on human sensibility. It was reflected variously in their poetry and critical views on poetry, science and human ecology in cultural terms. It is interesting to note how the 'natural heartbeat' logic of Hughes is echoed quite early, in the words of P.B. Shelley:

The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave . . . The cultivation of poetry is never more to be desired than at periods, when, from an excess of the selfish and calculating principle, the accumulation of the materials of external life exceeds the quantity of the power of assimilating them to the internal laws of human nature. (The Defence)

In Shelley's views it is evident that a sort of imbalance was perceivable to him. He has hinted at the possible erosion of all that makes us human. Leigh Hunt puts it more explicitly, "Poetry begins where matter of fact or science ceases to be merely such, and to exhibit a further truth; that is to say, the connection it has with the world of emotion, and its power to produce imaginative pleasure." (What 4) This, in fact, is a step forward in the direction of perceiving art and culture as parts of an integrated continuum, a fact or myth that the rationalist approach cannot comprehend on its own. Keats' observation at 'Haydon's famous dinner' about Newton and the long-term referral potential of his views have a specific relevance here. Keats was upset with all that Newton represented because the scientist had "destroyed the beauty of the rainbow by reducing it to a prism." (qtd. in Abrams, *The Mirror* 309) The ultimate reality as conceptualized in "The Thought Fox" also serves to clarify Ted Hughes' refusal to appreciate the contributions of Sartre, Kafka and Einstein who like most of his civilized and rationalist poetic personae, have lost contact with "the elemental power circuit of the universe" (Hughes, *The Environmental* 200) or the 'final reality'. There is a structural warmth and agreement in what Shelley, Leigh Hunt and Keats were feeling and thinking in their historical context and what Ted Hughes feels compelled to conclude, when he very confidently tells us, "Science, it has often been said, which began by deposing every primitive idea, will end by reinstalling them as the essential conditions for life and as true descriptions of the Universe." (Hughes, *The Environmental* 187) But it is not a simple critique of rationalist humanism. The poem also refers to the 'green eyes' of the fox. This shift from rationality to its counter faculty and from human to the animal is emblematic of the new scopes and role Ted Hughes is searching for.

Unlike the high modernists, Ted Hughes has a broad common ground with the Romantic poets. They commonly share a mystified view of the origin of poetry and a cultural role of the poet along with unfailing visionary streak. It is not unexpected that Ted Hughes, even in his subjective manifesto i.e. *Poetry in the Making* (1967), of poetic practice, creative process and role of a poet, repeatedly refers to some of the Romantics, though his appreciation of the moderns is also noticeable.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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