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Asian Resonance

# Ted Hughes: Healer in the Post-1950s British Poetry

**Abstract**

The poetic landscape of the post-1950s England was invaded by the 'Movement.' The Movement poets stood for clarity, scepticism, traditional forms, reasonableness and witty intellectual toughness in reaction against the lush, loose neo-Romanticism of the poetry of the 1940s. With their robust, ironic, 'anti-phoney,' 'anti-wet' poetry, the Movementeers were out to replace the perceived formlessness, excess and self-indulgence of the poets of the 1940s. To the Movement poets poetry was not an autonomous or self-justifying activity but an artefact, with a social as well as a moral purpose. The Movement poets no longer deemed themselves as bard and seer experiencing 'vatic visions,' poetry, to them was rather an expression of ordered, rational self. The theme of Movement poetry is mundane human experience. But because of the paraphernalia mentioned so far, Movement poetry got marked by meagerness and triviality of subject-matter. Against such a backdrop emerged Ted Hughes with his 'inspired' poetry to write of animal life, nature and elemental forces of non-human life. Hughes's poetry was supposed to be the anodyne to the anemic English poetry of the 1950s. This essay seeks to explore how, with the power of his poetry, Ted Hughes injected new blood into the moribund poetic situation of the post-1950s Britain.

**Keywords:** Post-Fifties British Poetry: Ted Hughes

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**Introduction**

The poetic landscape of the post-1950s England was invaded by what came to be known as the 'Movement,' a loosely connected group of poets that included Philip Larkin, Elizabeth Jennings, John Holloway, Thom Gunn, Kingsley Amis, D.J. Enright, Donald Davie, John Wain, Robert Conquest et al. They stood for clarity, scepticism, traditional forms, reasonableness and witty intellectual toughness in reaction immediately against the lush, loose neo-Romanticism of the poetry of the 1940s, most famously represented by Dylan Thomas and more generally against the whole trend of modernism. They were also up in arms about the political preoccupations of the Thirties as evident in the poetry of early Auden, Spender and Day Lewis. With their robust, ironic, 'anti-phoney,' 'anti-wet' (qtd. in Timms 11) poetry, the Movementeers were out to replace the perceived formlessness, excess and self-indulgence (Corcoran 81) of the poets of the 1940s. the Movement poets were thus the "enemies of the old order" (Morrison 1) and in order to counter the irrationalities and 'blockage against intelligence' of the 'drum-rolling forties' (Alvarez 21) resorted to tactics like: an adherence to the 'rules' of English, a poetic diction having vital relationship with the spoken language, a tactful restraint in the use of words, a strict economy in the use of metaphor, a 'compactness' and 'closeness' of expression, the use of 'authentic syntax' (with a strict metre) so on and so forth (Ramanan 49-57). To the Movement poets poetry was not an autonomous or self-justifying activity but an artefact, with a social as well as moral purpose tending toward 'saying' rather than merely 'being.' The Movement poets no longer deemed themselves as bard and seer experiencing 'vatic visions,' poetry, to them was rather an "expression of ordered, rational self" (King 8). The theme of Movement poetry is mundane human experience. But because of the paraphernalia mentioned so far, Movement poetry got marked by "meagerness and triviality of subject-matter" (Amis 17).

Against such a backdrop emerged Ted Hughes with his 'inspired' poetry to write of animal life, nature and elemental forces of non-human life. Like a shaman he employed "language to conjure up the gods that control our being" (King 108). Visionary Hughes recalls the version of poet as envisaged by Coleridge by the end of his "Kubla Khan":

His flashing eyes, his floating hair!
Weave a circle round him thrice,
And close your eyes with holy dread,
For he on honey-dew hath fed,
And drunk the milk of Paradise.

Dionysian Hughes was rooted in the Blake-Lawrence tradition (will be discussed in more detail in the later part of the essay). Hughes diagnosed that cultivation of rational intellect and cognitive faculties, at the expense of emotion and imagination, had made his contemporary men cut off from the natural energies of the universe. Hughes's poetry, with its inner world of feeling, imagination and instinct was out to bridge this hiatus by reconnecting man with the instinctual sources of power in his own being. This accounts for Hughes's penchant for animals who are instinctually closer to the 'elemental power circuit' of the universe (King 109-10) than man.

Thus, in his "The Thought Fox" which may be deemed as Hughes's poetics, we find him obsessed with elements like: 'I,' 'my' and 'imagine', banished so long from the English poetic scenario:

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where *my* fingers move.
Through the window *I* see no star…

(*Collected Poems* 21; henceforth referred to as *CP*; emphasis added)

The aspect of 'Hughes the healer' gets manifested in his very poetic creed and in his interest in 'shamanism' as well. In fact, as far as the 'healing' aspect is concerned, Hughes's belief in shamanism emerges crucial. In his second year at Cambridge, Hughes changed his course of study from English to Archaeology and Anthropology. This partly explains his interest in the nation's past – its legends, its memories and also his faith in shamanism. The use of myth and animal imagery mainly constitute what is known as shamanism in Hughes. In Hughes's own words shamanism is: procedure and practice of becoming and performing as a witchdoctor, a medicine man, among primitive peoples. The individual is summoned by certain dreams. The same dreams all over the world. A spirit summons him … usually an animal or a woman. If he refuses, he dies … or somebody near him dies. If he accepts, he then prepares himself for the job … it may take years. Usually he apprentices himself to some other Shaman, but the spirit may well teach him direct. Once fully fledged he can enter trance at will and go to the spirit world … he goes to get something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs. (qtd. in Faas 206)

In Stuart Hirschberg's view, it is "the fusion with the mythical life of certain animals … the sense of power it offers, communion with cosmic life and force, and a recentering of the personality and a corresponding sense of the renewal of the universe as an ecstatic and euphoric experience" (11). Mircea Eliade refers to the shamans' belief that by identifying oneself with an animal, one could become "something far greater and stronger than himself" (460). Shamanism is a sort of "going out of the self" and attainment of a "superhuman mode of being" (Eliade 459-60). It emphasizes restoration of cosmic balance and healing. Hughes considers shamanism as a force for equilibrium as it deals with the control and harnessing of energy expressed through ecstasy, energy which can rejuvenate and empower. He defines energy as "any form of vehement activity", through which one calls upon "the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the universe" (qtd. in Faas 200). It is this power circuit which "both poet and shaman seek to plug into. For the shaman the energy is released in ecstasy, manifested in song and in dance. For the poet the same rites take place in his verse" (Sweeting 73). Shamanism thus caters to Hughes's doctrine of energy, his love for the world of nature, his metaphysical concerns, and his fascination with animals. It also provides an answer to the twentieth-century poets' problem of whether his work is relevant. As Keith Sagar explains the poet is a "medium for transmitting an occult charge from the non-human world into the psyche and thence into consciousness" ("Hughes and his landscape" 3). The biological spirit of survival Hughes dramatizes seems almost diagnostic of the world's problems. Ted Hughes is a "shamanistic maker of myths" (Gifford 131). His poetry can seem like a lifeline; and Hughes's life as a shaman is certainly not a theoretical one. Poetry, says Hughes, "seizes upon what is depressing and destructive and lifts it into a realm where it becomes *healing and energizing*" (qtd. in Lomas 410; emphasis added). For Hughes the dismissal of "nature," the loss of the paradisal egoless animal consciousness, which the shaman partially recovers, is man's original sin.

In "The Jaguar" (from the volume *The Hawk in the Rain*) Hughes dwells chiefly upon its extraordinary energy, agility and ferocity. The jaguar described in the poem is actually caged in a zoo where it is the centre of attraction for the visitors. While the other animals in the zoo – apes, tiger, lion and boa-constrictor – appear lazy or lethargic or bored, the jaguar moves to and fro inside the cage with stunning verve and vitality. Actually the jaguar's rage has been presented by Hughes in contrast to the tedium emanating from the other caged animals who are 'Fatigued with indolence' and lie immobile. The jaguar's rage, on the contrary, blinds his eyes and deafens his ears: … a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom -
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf and ear
(*CP* 19-20)

Even after he has been captured, the jaguar gives no sign of being confined to a cage. As though oblivious of the confinement, he deems himself absolutely free. He spins from the bars that are hardly regarded by him as those of a cage imprisoning him, just as a prison-cell is no prison to a rebel or an idealistic revolutionary confined to it:

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell
(*CP* 20)

The barely suppressed rage of the jaguar makes him forget about his immurement so much so that he does not even care to come to terms with his imprisonment. He reigns supreme in the cage as if he were the master and not a slave. The jaguar carries his wilderness with him and finds victory in his unconquered will:

His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.
(*CP* 20)

In "The Jaguar" Hughes is out to show that man can at best cage in the jaguar, but will fail to confine the 'jaguarness' that is the very instinct and energy of the animal.

In his second poem on jaguar, "Second Glance at a Jaguar" (from the volume *Wodwo*) we are presented with an altogether altered viewpoint. In this poem, the jaguar's rage is no longer directed outward. Here the jaguar is out to liberate himself from the very condition of being a jaguar. He tries to free himself from his status of 'jaguarness'. A jaguar is a super-charged piece of cosmic energy. He is an ancient emblem of Dionysus for he is a "leopard raised to the ninth power" (Hirschberg 34). With the look of a gangster, he meditates upon some vengeful and bloody course of action to satisfy his rage. Jaguar signifies man's baser nature pressed down into the instinctive impulses of the individual. The appearance of the jaguar reminds an onlooker of Cain, the first murderer in the history of mankind. The very marks on the jaguar's flanks are christened by Hughes 'Cain-brands' that are the jaguar's 'rosettes' – spots on the body disposed in clusters of four or five spots around a central one.

By turning his rage against himself the jaguar wants to wear out these brands (Hirschberg 34). In order to do so Hughes's jaguar takes refuge in the Indian tradition of 'mantra' that is chanted to release the personality from the shackles of bestial rage:

Muttering some mantra, some drum-song of murder
To keep his rage brightening, making his skin
Intolerable, spurred by the rosettes, the Cain-brands,
Wearing the spots off from the inside,
Rounding some revenge. Going like a prayer-wheel,
The head dragging forward, the body keeping up,
The hind legs lagging. He coils, he flourishes
The blackjack tail as if looking for a target,
Hurrying through the underworld, soundless.
(*CP* 152)

Significantly, a sort of remedy is administered here where the power of rage has been used against rage itself. Thus, the rage of the jaguar is crucial to this poem also, though it has been used in a different way for a different purpose.

The jaguar, among all other animals, is central to the concept of shamanism. Hughes consciously chose the animal, for in North and South American Indian tribes it is believed that "a shaman can turn into a jaguar at will and that he can use the form of this animal as a disguise under which he can act as a helper, a protector, or an aggressor" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 43). The Paez Indians believe that, "the jaguar-spirit, or jaguar monster, has shamanistic qualities and is a shaman's guide and helper …. in preparation for ritual actions the shaman must establish contact with the jaguar-spirit and transform himself into a jaguar" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 54). In the words of Peter Furst, "Shamans and jaguars are not merely equivalent but each is at the same time the other" (qtd. in Campbell 114). Actually both shamans and jaguars are believed to have "supernatural powers" (Campbell 114) and among these tribes there is a fundamental belief that there is a "spiritual bond and identity" (Campbell 114) between the shaman and the jaguar.

The very movement of Hughes's otter [in "An Otter" (from *Lupercal*)] also betrays the tremendously vital and potent energy of the animal:

… Wanders, cries;
Gallops along land he no longer belongs to;
Re-enters the water by melting. (*CP* 79)

Having 'webbed feet', a 'long ruddering tail' and a 'round head like an old tomcat' the otter can even 'outfish fish'. To him 'Blood is the belly of logic'; he can eat a trout to the last bit of flesh on its bones ('he will lick/The fishbone bare'). And on land he can catch hold of a female otter to have the pleasure of mating with her. 'Four-legged yet water-gifted', the otter brings 'the legend of himself.' He is 'neither fish nor beast' and of 'neither water nor land.' He seems to be searching for some world which he had lost when he first dived into water, but which he has not been able to find out since ('Some world lost when first he dived, that he cannot come at since'). This is the long-lost paradise which he once ruled. Actually, he is like a 'king in hiding.'

The otter is also very much important as far as shamanistic Hughes is concerned. The otter has an extraordinary importance among the Ojibwa Indians. According to Ojibwa myths, in order to aid the ailing humanity, an envoy of the great spirit "reveals the most sublime secret to the otter" and thereby makes it deathless so that it can "initiate and at the same time consecrate men" (Eliade 316). The double existence of the otter is of singular importance in this regard for it signifies the existence of the secret self, submerged yet ever-present. This dual existence gets manifested in another way also – the otter is a predator feeding on fish but at the same time he is a prey as well, hunted by man. Actually for Hughes the otter symbolizes the soul in hiding and according to the Ojibwa belief otters can even become shamans. In the opinion of Mircea Eliade, otters act as both "healing shamans and serve to a certain extent even as priests" (316).

What Hughes likes most in animals is their single-mindedness and steadfastness. Interestingly,

in June 1954 Ted Hughes's earliest published 'mature' (as opposed to his 'juvenile' poems) poem, "The Little Boys and the Seasons", came out in *Granta* under the pseudonym Daniel Hearing.[1]

To Hughes the urge towards poetry was a religious one – his poetry being poetry of inspiration unlike that of the Movementeers, as has already been mentioned at the earlier part of the essay. Actually, against the background of the 1950s, Hughes stood as the lone figure who believed in inner revelation: "Dare to be a Daniel, Dare to Stand Alone" (Schofield 32). This is how Hughes gets connected with the Blake-Lawrence tradition, a tradition that thrives on insight and inspiration, verve and vitality, vim and violence. As A. E. Dyson comments: "For Ted Hughes power and violence go together: his own dark gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb…He is fascinated by violence of all kinds, in love and in hatred, in the jungle and the arena, in battle, murder and sudden death." But, on the other hand, "Violence, for him, is the occasion not for reflection, but for *being*; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows itself in moments of captivity, pain or death" (Dyson 116). To Ted Hughes, as to William Blake before him, "'energy is eternal delight'; energy is creative, and its source lies in the continuum which relates man to animal and to the whole natural universe" (King 122-3).

Thus, the choice of Daniel referred to earlier had a direct reference to the state of English poetry in the 1950s. It directs to Blake of whom Hughes said, "Blake I connect inwardly to Beethoven, and if I could dig to the bottom of my strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces" (qtd. in Schofield 32). Blake's entire artistic effort was directed to reinstating the vanished Jerusalem of the English imagination. So was Hughes's as well. Hughes's poetry is "poetry written for a world that has lost its balance, poetry that can vividly portray the crisis, yet which also has a healing force through its emphasis on the holiness of the natural world and the mystery of the human psyche" (Sweeting 70). In his "Mayday on Holderness", Hughes's imagination devours almost everything:

> This mute eater, biting through the mind's
> Nursery floor, with eel and hyena and vulture,
> With creepy-crawly and the root,
> With the sea-worm, entering its birthright. (*CP* 60)

Ted Hughes can "clamp himself well onto the world like a wolf-mask, and speak with the voice of the glutted crow, the stoat, the expressionless leopard, the sleeping anaconda, the frenzied shrew, the roosting hawk – which is 'Nature herself speaking' … He forces himself and us to confront Nature at its most ugly, savage, and apparently pointless, to look into 'the shark's mouth/ That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own/ Side and devouring of itself' ("Thrushes")" (Sagar, *Laughter* 112-5). In Hughes, one can trace the connections between the depths of the human psyche and the hidden sources of everything in the non-human world.

Interestingly, in Mark Hinchliffe's epigraph to Keith Sagar's *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes*, Ted Hughes has been hailed as 'THE HEALER.' A part of the epigraph is quoted below:

> Hearing your voice
> awakened me,
> unblocked my ears,
> as if I had been underwater
> up to that moment,
> and suddenly surfaced
> to an island of
> wonderful sounds,
> . . .
>
> You stand over the pool,
> and every third thought
> is *healing*
> how to *heal*,
>
> every third thought
> is living,
> how to live.
>
> And you bury your books
> deep into the body of England,
> where they are carried
> by rivers,
>
> emerging again,
> looking all around,
> rubbing their eyes,
>
> looking for places
> to sink their roots,
> like the piper's lost children,
>
> like leaves stretching
> from a green head.
> (vi-viii; emphasis added)

Hughes's poetry was supposed to be the anodyne to the anemic English poetry of the 1950s. This healing aspect of Hughes's poetry is hinted at the very title of his volume *Lupercal*. It refers to the sacrificial feast of Lupercal, an ancient Roman fête celebrated (on the 15th of February) to restore fertility to barren women through an elaborate rite. The god of the feast was Faunus or Pan. Animals are called fauna. In Roman mythology, Fauna was the wife or daughter of Faunus, the fertility god, who corresponds closely to Pan or Dionysus. Under the name Lupercus he was worshipped in Rome at a temple on the Palatine called the Lupercal. The temple was so called (*Lupus* means wolf, hence, *Lupercus*) for it was believed to be on the site of the cave where the she-wolf (symbolizing Rome) suckled Romulus and Remus, founders of the city. Pan was supposed to keep wolves away from the flocks (Merivale 23-5). Blood of dogs and milk of goats sacrificed earlier were applied to sanctify the priests or athletes who used to speed through the streets of the city hitting the waiting women with

strips of goat-hides. Bitches were selected because of their association with the fertility symbol of the she-wolf reputed in myth to have suckled Romulus and Remus. The goat is also a symbol of sexuality for its connections with Pan, the satyr supposed to give fecundity. At the consummation of the festival, the priests (known as *Luperci*) ran through the streets swinging thongs of goat-skin a blow from which was supposed to have the ability to heal infertility. This very reference we get in the following lines from Hughes's poem "Lupercalia":

Fresh thongs of goat-skin
In their hands they go bounding past,
And deliberate welts have snatched her in
To the figure of racers.
(*CP* 89)

Even Calphurnia, wife of the legendary Julius Caesar, (in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*) once stood in the street, one of the runners being Mark Antony:

Forget not, in your speed, Antonius,
To touch Calpurnia; for our elders say,
The barren, touched in this holy chase,
Shake off their sterile curse.
(I, ii, ll 8-11)

Actually, this ritual was supposed to be an invocation to the 'maker of the world' to visit the sterile earth and unfreeze the icy wombs of the unconceiving:

Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man
Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one. (*CP* 89)

Hughes's "Lupercalia" therefore signifies man's sterility and his need for the reinstatement of those vital energies.

Thus, the poetry of Ted Hughes represents a challenge to the urbanised, industrial, post-War, denatured English society as well as culture by making, first, images and, later, myths, that would reconnect the natural energies of man with those at work in the external natural world. With the power of his poetry, Hughes the Healer injected new life into the moribund poetic situation of the post-1950s Britain.

**Notes**

1. Hughes‟s intention for choosing such a name was to relate it to the Biblical Daniel. The shamanistic, apocalyptic *Book of Daniel* (in the *Old Testament*) was written in order to make the Israelites overcome the deep spiritual crisis under the oppressive rule of Antiochus Epiphanes in the second century B.C. When the Israelite temple had been defiled, the Laws violated and the Covenant desecrated, the writer of *Daniel* thought it meet to provide his people with the means of spiritual regeneration. The selection of the *nom de plume* Daniel Herring suggests that Hughes‟s aim was that of the writer of *Daniel* – "to submit himself to the necessary discipline to hear and proclaim a message of spiritual renewal in a decadent age" (Schofield 23).

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