
ART AND CRAFT OF IMAGE MAKING IN THE POETRY OF TED HUGHES

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Abstract: English existential tradition remained unbroken through the Eliot revolution. Up to the present day, it has continued to produce much of the best and least fragile poetry written in English. It appears in the nineteen-fifties, for example, in the poetry of R.S.Thomas and Jack Clemo, and significantly modified by the agency of D.H.Lawrence, of Ted Hughes. Each of these poets confronts a denuded reality. R.S.Thomas's world is that of the Welsh farmer debased almost to animality by the struggle to wrest an existence from the stark countryside, Jack Clemo suffers from physical handicap of the most extreme order and translates an anguish of spirit and tissue into the terms of the bare clay landscape of Cornwall; Ted Hughes meets nature and animality in a consciously head-on collision.

Ted Hughes is one of the most outstanding figures of contemporary English literature. In his poems he deals with man's troubled relationship with his inner and outer worlds. He believes that the progress of civilization undermines spiritual values of people. He is of the opinion that;

“Poetry is the voice of spirit and imagination and all that is potential, as well as of the healing benevolence that used to be the privilege of the gods”^[1]

In a literary work the term ‘imagery’ mainly refers to simile, metaphor, descriptive words that evoke the mental pictures before our mind's eyes. It is the picture made out of words and appeals to the senses of taste, smell, hearing and touch and to internal feelings as well as the sense of sight. The imagery achieved in any literary work through a collection of images. Image making is an essential part or the poet's craft. Caroline Spurgeon uses the term ‘image’ to cover every kind or simile as well as every kind of what is really compressed simile –metaphor, Fogle refers to it as “the sensuous element in poetry”. Poets have different ways and patterns of creating images. Sir Francis Galton has discovered that;

“They significantly differ in their images – Making habits and capabilities”.

The poet's choice of imagery reveals not merely the sensory capacities of his mind but also his interests, tastes, temperaments, values and visions. In poetry recurring images occur as tone setters and structural devices. They also perform the task of explaining, clarify and making vivid what the poet has to say.

Nowotny remarks that;

“If poetry is language at full stretch, the stretching must help us to see more clearly the nature of the fabric stretched”^[3]

This can be best seen in a poet's use of images.

This paper aims to highlight the animal imagery in the selected poems of Ted Hughes. It also intends to describe the symbolic use of animals in his poems. Ted Hughes is a great English poet laureate. He has written several volumes of poems, of which the most famous are- Luperca (1960), Cave Bird (1964), Crow (1970), Hawk in the Rain (1975), Moortown (1979),

River (1983), Wodwo (1989). The poems included in these volumes contain a wide range of animal images for the poetic persona and to explore facets of the artist as both hunter and prey. These poems feel like the earth, they taste of the clay and flow like great rivers. Inspired by D.H.Lawrence, Ted Hughes makes animal imagery as his trademark in most of his poems such as The Jaguar, The Thought –Fox, The Hawk in the Rain, Hawk Roosting and Ghost Crabs. He also believes in the purity of animals, which functions as their strength and also their superiority to man. His animal imagery is mostly used as symbolic comparison to human beings and it puts forth how animals are closer to the natural source of the universe. Ted Hughes' use of imagery is typical of his poetic genius. To him an image is a fusion of the intellectual and emotional content, image-making being an outcome of a continuous poetic process. He is not in favour of an excessive use of deliberated obscure images. His nature poems impress the readers most by their powerful and skillful image creation, which are very different from that of the traditional English poems. His images are well-chosen but on the broadest sense. His subject matter is plain but of great significance. He usually adopts the commonest objects in the nature, especially animals to demonstrate the profoundest theme. He broods on violence as a principle of the universe and in particular, of the animal kingdom. He presents with marvellous solidity and precision the essential nature as well as the outward appearance of birds, beasts and fishes. It is very familiar animal image that is found effortlessly in his poems, such as pig, fish, fox, hawk, etc. What interests him most about the animal world is the obviousness of the struggle for survival. The creatures he describes notoriously violent. Those who survive do so by virtue of their single mindedness, and this is equally, for Hughes, the case with human beings. His technique is to rely upon a sustained series of images to force the reader to understand and appreciate what it is he is describing. He argues that the secret of writing poetry successfully is to;

“Imagine what you are writing about, see it and live it... just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it”^[4]

It can be said that Hughes animal poetry is based on the idea that animals are more powerful and spiritual beings when compared to men, since they live in a totally instinct based life. Animals are far from limits and social values, thus they are capable of living their own self true nature and that specialty makes them powerful and wise. Man, on the other hand, is far from living its own true nature due to the limitations and social values which block the instinct. So man is not free, confused, ignorant and lost, As Stuart Hirschberg stated;

“What Hughes admires about animals is their single-mindedness and self-centeredness. For him, they have substantiality, a realness about them that conveys qualities of security, stability and permanence that human beings simply do not have.”^[5]

With its harsh rhythms and diction, and its vivid, grandiose imagery *The Hawk in the Rain* shows Hughes is prepared to risk greater claims for poetry and to celebrate, what the movement poets thought, should be repressed: primitive energy and the power of the unconscious. *Lupercal* which is sealed Hughes’s reputation as major poet and includes many of his most popular evocations of animals including *Pike*. This general direction of development is continued through *Wodwo* and *Crow*. *Wodwo* represents a new, more paranoid use of the imagined consciousness. This trend is pushed still further in *Crow*. The poems included in the volume *The Hawk in the Rain* are praised for their admirable violence, for sensuous, verbal and imaginative power. In a poem *The Hawk in the Rain* Hughes shows an early concern for the enlightenment of virgins, and the natural synaesthesia that interprets colour into heat and heat into colour. The poem *The Thought-Fox* is not simply a description of the fox Hughes has written of this poem that;

“every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them.”^[6]

In the *Thought-Fox*, the external action takes place in a room late at night where the poet is sitting alone at his desk. Outside the night is starless, silent and totally black. But the poet senses a presence which disturbs him;

“Through the wind I see no star, something more near, through deeper within darkness, is entering the loneliness.”^[7]

The disturbance is not in the external darkness of the night, for the night itself is a metaphor for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet’s imagination in whose depth an idea is mysteriously stirring. The

remote stirrings of the poem are compared to the stirrings of an animal - a fox, whose body is invisible, but which feels its way forward nervously through the dark undergrowth;

“Cold, delicately as the dark snow, a fox’s nose touches twig, leaf”^[8]

The half-hidden image which is contained within these lines is of the soft snow brushing against the trees as it falls in dark flakes to the ground.

The *Jaguar* composed by Hughes, in a manner of a zoo-laureate, is a poem on the background of a zoo and the poem is well-known for the imagery that the poet uses to portray the condition of the encaged animals and birds and the blind energy embodied in the jaguar, the jungle - king. The poem opens with description of the cages;

“I depict them in a spiritless condition, who are engaged in yawning, and adoring their fleas”^[9]

By using such words ‘yawning’ and ‘adore’ the poet creates two powerful images which suggest that the apes have nothing urgent to do, and so feel asleepy. In the next cage the parrots shrieking as if they were on fire and shrutting like harlots attracting the onlookers for a throw of nuts, so the expressions imply to vivid images. The parrots are suffering from untold suffering in their chained life and they make sensual gestures like the street girls to attract the passers-by. The first stanza ends with the description of tiger and lion which have become fatigued and indolent, having been deprived of their natural habitat. They are idly having a sun bath. In second stanza we have the picturesque description of the boa-constrictor, so coiled and motionless as if it were doing so far ages and turned into a living fossil. And the next three lines;

“Cage after cage seems empty, or stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw if might be painted on a nursery wall”^[10]

suggest the condition of the other animals. Actually the cages are not empty; they only seem to be so as there is no spontaneity among the encaged animals. In the second stanza the poet introduces us with a cage in front of which the ‘crowd’ stands and stares and gets hypnotized at the spectacle of a *Jaguar*. Unlike other animals, the *Jaguar* is restless and a mobile machinery of destructive energy. Through the prison darkness his eyes meet those of the viewers and they are locked in a fierce-fuse that can explode any moment boredom is unknown to him. He spins from the bass to the cage, the cage then seems too small to contain him. He cannot be contained in any cage. No prison can have such ferocious energy or restrict the *Jaguar*’s inborn spirit of energy & spirit of independence. The poet ends his description with the following two striking lines;

“The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel,

over the cage floor the horizons come.”^[11]

The zoo is made a world where the jaguar is let loose to reign as the supreme power. The world lies under his feet and the horizon meets the cage bars, thus declaring the boundless power of the jaguar. The poet with the help of such vivid expressions successfully depicts the characteristics of the jaguar, the symbol of energy. Both in *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Hawk Roosting* the poet presents a vivid picture of the hawk's becoming of man's guiding star, and helping him to save his humble life. Both the poems take the image of 'hawk' as the hero of the poetic description. It can be seen that the hawk image symbolizes the wildness, adorable violence, big-heartedness of the nature power and the bravery and straight forward demonstration of its force, the personal pronoun 'I' refers to all the human beings. Faced with natural difficulties and obstacles 'I' appears to be too weak to stand up against them. Yet the hawk as a part of the natural world can remain calmly and proudly still and strong. Furthermore, the rain, the wind, and clay all represent the natural advantages over the human. Finally the will power of the hawk can even serve as the guiding star of the desperate man. The *Hawk in the Rain* is more of mobility, and it is a more winding story of a hawk, who witnesses human's fragility and weakness before the nature. But this hawk is finally beaten down by the nature and died. In the last stanza the hawk is eventually led to death by the weather "coming the wrong way". It is an example of use of small poetic charms which contain powerful animal energies. Here Hughes has used the primitive energy and the power of the unconscious which the Movement poets never used. The poem has a language that draws attention to itself. In this poem there is a thin line drawn over an image of an imprisoned force, and the inhibited violence of it, summarizes every things that is great about Hughes. Here the Hawk shown is not wild and ferocious as the Hawk of *Hawk Roosting*. In *Hawk Roosting* it is static story in which the hawk keeps depicting, boasting, thinking and reasoning for himself. This divergence in comparison with *The Hawk in the Rain* in this aspect is due to the poet's purpose in creating different images. The hawk in this poem enjoys his current situation, static but powerful, conceited but confident, silent but authoritative. Hence, by putting the hawk in a static state, the poet left the reader with the impression that the hawk can put the universe under his control even if he takes no action. *Hawk Roosting* is seen as a very symbolic nature poem, since the image of hawk is the bloodiest animal at the top of the food chain. Yet it symbolizes the vigorous and powerful nature as a whole rather than the bloody animal world itself. It is Ted Hughes's good mastery of language that moulds the

impressive image of hawk in his two representative poems with hawk as the central image. The hawk in *Hawk Roosting* proudly claims himself as the centre of all creation;

“Now I hold creation in my foot, or fly up,
and revolve it all slowly.

I kill where I please because it is all mine.”^[12]

Thus he begins his each remark with 'I'. 'I' in the poem is the sign of a supreme ego of the hawk as he sits on top of the 'wood' that stands for his kingdom. His world is limited between his hooked head and hooked feet. For action does not define him, rather, he defines action. This is no falsifying dream, a castle built in the air, but the universal truth. He dreams about "in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat." Therefore it is not the basic necessity of killing and eating that concern him, but the style of it. Thus the hawk transforms into a metaphor of supreme arrogance of man where he is haunted by power. The trees are also symbol height or achievements, enabling him to reach new heights. The air's, buoyancy enables him to float in the air, the sun's rays lend him hope. These metaphoric descriptions show that even circumstances support him. As he sits over the tree it appears to him as if the earth is laid down for his inspection.

“My feet are locked upon the rough bark; it took the
whole of Creation, to produce my foot, my each
feather,”^[13]

Creation here refers to God and by his flying up he can revolve around creation. The line is an example of metaphysical conceit. All through the poem the hawk depicts himself with great frankness and straightforwardness. He is content with his situation, his working ability and his physical and ambient superiority. The poet aims to call human attention and demonstrate the true side of the animal world which are not only of violence but also of superior adaptability and tremendous vitality of life. Thrushes is also characterized by the same kind of vivid and realistic imagery. Here the violence and ferocity of the birds has of most vividly been conveyed to us through the use of forceful vocabulary and striking combination of words. The thrushes are terrifying; they are more coiled steel than living creatures; they have a dark deadly eye. They operate suddenly, with a bounce and a stab, dragging out some writhing insect which is to serve as their morsel of food. There is nothing sluggish about their movements.

“Nothing but bounce and stab and a ravening
second.”^[14]

They have a bullet and automatic purpose, and they are no less full of energy than Mozart's brain and the shark's mouth. The swiftness of purpose of these thrushes is contrasted with the dilatoriness and procrastinations of human beings. The collection

Lupercal includes many of his most popular representation of animals including the dangerous Pike. This poem is explained by the hunting analogy, the all time favorite of Hughes with this style Hughes explained his own creative process with patient concentration. In Pike Hughes explained and introduces the superficial dimensions of the pike. He begins the poem by describing different types of pike fishes. The poet describes the perfection of the pike in the first stanza. The pike appears to be in measured dimensions; three inches long. The whole body of the pike has green and yellow stripes across it which appears like its identifying marks,

“green tigering gold” its habitat, “in ponds”, “under the heat-struck lily pads.”

The life of the pike is defined by this physical design; it is subdued to its instrument. Pike has the killer-instinct that exists right from the hatching of the egg. In this manner Hughes transforms our acquaintance with the pike solely from a material, scientific perspective. According to Hughes this violent nature of pike is hereditary;

“The malevolent aged grin.”^[15]

that stages a dance on the surface attracting the flies, asserting their presence. Hughes has always utilized animals as an exaggerated metaphor for the instinctual inclination of man. Then, of course, there are the Crow Poems. The crow in these poems has been regarded by critics as a trickster though he is, in the poems, sometimes identified with Prometheus and other heroes. In the course of time the crow seems to be approaching merely to a human status, though he does not really become a human being but

remain a crow. The first seven poems in this sequence depict the birth of the crow into earthly life; and it is a most reluctant and painful birth. Indeed the lineage of the crow is a piece of mockery;

“God begets Nothing, who begets never, who begets Crow.”^[16]

But The Horses is an altogether different kind of poem. Here we see animals that look grand in their very gentleness and passivity. No wild force is depicted in this poem. There is stillness all around the poet when he sees ten horses looking huge but absolutely still and motionless;

“They breathed, making no move, with draped manes and titled hind-hooves, making no sound”^[17]

The poet then contrasts the stillness and the silence of these horses with the din of the crowded streets, though the comparison comes only towards the end, and is made in only a few words. Here it is the gentle quality of the non-human world that has been brought into focus. On the one hand are the fierceness and wildness of Jaguar and the hawk, and on the other are the patience and silence of the horses. In Ravens, the piercing persistence of the child’s repeated question focuses attention on the poignancy of the lamb’s still-born death. In The Stag Hughes writes very much from the point of view of the hunted animal. Thus Hughes, a remarkable poet, seems to be quite outside the currents of this time. On the whole his animal poems are a formidable, awful, spectacular and fascinating array of God’s creatures in a universe which is mysterious and inscrutable.

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