

(Re)Reading Animal Imagery in the Poetry of Ted Hughes

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Abstract

Ted Hughes has published several volumes of verse and his poems have a singular approach because of the themes they explore, as well as, the manner in which they explore them. The poets before Hughes were thoroughly consumed with the harrowing backwash of the Second World War and their poetry reflected the macabre front of a stony world where the question of human existence and the absurdity of life were the engrossing concerns. Hughes was a revolutionary poet in the sense that he revolted against this post-war tendency of being evasive to the harsh realities of the times. He painted bare the nightmarish world and emotional stagnation that the Great War had resulted into. Another distinctive feature of Hughes' poetry is that he is a captivating poet of the animal world. His use of animals as a metaphor for the human world is not only intriguing but innovative. He presents not only the unruffled beauty, but also the violence and ruthlessness of the natural world. The symbolic reference to the modern mechanical world is staggering and impinges on our mind. The portrayal of this modern "waste land" is closely allied with his metaphorical usage of the faunae. It is this aspect of his poetry which the paper attempts to analyze.

Keywords- Animal World, Human Existence, Metaphor, Poetry, Wasteland

Ted Hughes was a prolific poet and is now ranked as one of the leading literary figures of the twentieth century. He has published several volumes of verse and his poems have a singular approach because of the themes they explore, as well as, the manner in which they explore them. The poets before Hughes were thoroughly consumed with the harrowing backwash of the Second World War and their poetry reflected the grim and macabre front of a stony world where the question of human existence and the absurdity of life were the engrossing concerns. Ted Hughes was a revolutionary poet in the sense that he revolted against this post-war tendency of being evasive to the harsh realities of the times. He painted bare the nightmarish world and emotional stagnation that the Great War had resulted into. Another distinctive feature of Hughes' poetry is that he is a captivating poet of the animal world. His

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use of animals as a metaphor for the human world is not only intriguing but innovative. Ultimately, Hughes is a poet of nature whose outlook on nature is not Wordsworthian but Nazi. He presents not only the unruffled beauty, but also the violence and ruthlessness of the natural world. The symbolic reference to the modern mechanical world is staggering and impinges on our mind. As already stated, Hughes' poetry was a reaction against the contemporary British poetry. His poetry reflects, at once, the distressing consequences of the post-war world and the benumbed psyche of the subsisters of the war. The portrayal of this modern "waste land" is closely allied with his metaphorical usage of the faunae.

The first poem of his eponymous collection, "Hawk in the Rain", shows the contrast between steadiness and strength of a hawk which is perched at a height, supposedly a cliff or a rock, and the sense of danger of a man, when it is raining heavily, and when a chilly wind is also blowing. The hawk is unperturbed by the heavy rain, and shows his strong will against the raging wind, whereas the man is apprehensive of his near approaching end. However, the last stanza presents completely different standpoints, when the speaker says that the hawk, too, would meet his end, when, in future, "coming the wrong way", he might be "hurled upside-down" and get killed by the destructive storm. Thus, on one hand, the poem shows the superiority of the hawk over a human being in his capability to endure the tumultuous situation, and, on the other hand, it also shows that the hawk is susceptible to harm and not altogether unassailable. The distinctive element here is that whereas the earlier nature poets saw the animals as similar to man, Hughes intentionally puts man at a disadvantage as compared with animals. The point to be noted is that whereas man is rendered incapable to rescue himself from the hardships he has been led into; the hawk is focused and composed. He is more controlled and better adapted to the rapidly alternating environment and is not handicapped like the modern man, who is unable to decide what to make of his life. That is why the poet paints a graphic image of the bird in such emphatic lines: ...

but the hawk,
Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air. (*Hawk in the Rain*, 1)

The herculean image of the hawk also appears in another of Hughes' most remembered poems, "Hawk Roosting". Here, the hawk sits on a tree top and surveys the ambience. This hawk is symbolic of a hard-boiled monarch and is so personified that we can almost refer to him as a human being. He has no moral scruples about killing and is highly optimistic in his attitude. He comes out as an extremely reasonable creature. He makes clear that he lives in a world of reality and has "no falsifying dream". He is not over-ambitious like human beings and has short-term goals of preying and satisfying his hunger. He believes that even nature, the surrounding environment, the trees and sun's rays are in conspiracy to maintain his commanding status in the world of the wild. He assumes a God-like status when he boasts that entire earth has its "face upward for my inspection". He is almost bursting with pride

when he talks of his foot, which, according to him has been especially designed by “the whole of Creation”, to let him have an unmistakably firm grip at his victim. He uses the word ‘foot’ instead of ‘claw’ and this suggests that this animal considers himself akin to human beings. The whole world is subordinate to his will and power. He vehemently declares:

I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads-
The allotment of death. (*Lupercal*)

The hawk clearly has human attributes and stands for an astute monarch’s desire to keep his reign unchallenged and secure of all possible mutiny. He feels that he has been assigned a task of ruling over other animals and punish them with death when he feels fit. He resembles a headstrong judge and his judgement his final and irrevocable. He is the final seat of authority and when he decides that his victim has to be punished with death, he hears no plea in favour of mercy toward the poor animal:

For the one path of my flight is direct.
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right: (*Lupercal*)

He assumes larger than life proportion when he brags that even the sun is behind him and nothing has altered from its habitual course since he established his reign.

Many nature poems deal with the benevolence of nature but this poem is entirely based on a contrary viewpoint. The representative of nature here is villainous and brutal. He is void of all compassion. He is well-determined that he is “going to keep things like this.” His conscience never pricks him when he is about to kill. He feels as if it is his purpose to allot death; he has been purposefully created. This also may be a hint to the fact that in the name of tradition, people continue to do whatever pleases their mind. The arrogance and sense of superiority of the hawk is symbolic of arrogance and indifference to others’ suffering in human beings. Hughes is indirectly advertising the careful reader to shun such an attitude. In the background the experiences of the after-war period are always present in the poet’s mind. With the figure of this hawk, Hughes is attempting to reflect the activities of the terrorists who kill without any remorse or pain.

No other poet has depicted animals in such an authentic, graphic and telling manner as Hughes. He grew up on local farms in animal propinquity. Animal life is all-pervasive in his poetry. Most of his poems have been directly titled on various animals. A few of his poetic collections also take the names of the animals which mostly predominate in them. His animal poems are noted for their acute portrayal of the faunal world as barbaric and ferocious. The intriguing point is that Hughes does not discriminate the animals that are bloodthirsty but, he symbolically links animal brutality, ferocity and indifference to others’

suffering with arrogance, pride, and a sense of superiority among human beings. The unfeeling human self-interest is starkly and graphically painted before the readers in the shape of the animals personified as peculiarly human traits. The violent struggle for survival is one of the chief concerns of his poetry. A most wonderful specimen of this is his “Skylarks” in which he admires the bird not for its beauty but for a different reason. The very beginning of the poem draws the backdrop of the war in Vietnam. Those were testing and troubling times. The lark is a creature of that violent era and is shown struggling for its life. It is desperately trying to defy the force of gravity and rise up in the air:

The lark begins to go up
Like a warning
As if the globe were uneasy –
Barrel-chested for heights
Like an Indian of the high Andes,
A whippet head, barbed like a hunting arrow,
But leaden
With muscle
For the struggle
Against
Earth’s centre. (*Cambridge Book of English Verse*)

It is shocking to learn that a bird which is famed for its lightness and flying dexterity has been thrice referred to as “leaden” in a single section of the poem and is struggling with perseverance to escape and survive. This bird is “crueler than owl or eagle” and is powered by the command to ‘climb’ and ‘sing’. Hughes does not refer to music of the lark but talks of the frenzy of its song. There is a cry of joy in the bird’s song but, at the same time, it is a cry of help:

All the dreary Sunday morning
Heaven is a madhouse
With the voices and frenzies of the larks,
Squealing and gibbering and cursing
Heads flung back, as I see them,
Wings almost torn off backwards – far up
Like sacrifices set floating
The cruel earth’s offerings
The mad earth’s missionaries.” (*Cambridge Book of English Verse*)

The lark cannot stop in its upward flight; it has to keep moving up despite its need of rest. Even if it desperately needs to rest, it can rest only for a second. If it halts more, it may lose the purpose of its flight. Its condition is similar to that of a mouse that bobs at the well-wall in a desperate attempt to save its life but no one seems to take any notice of its plight:

But not stopping singing
Resting only for a second
Dropping just a little
Then up and up and up
Like a mouse with drowning fur
Bobbing and bobbing at the well-wall
Lamenting, mounting a little -
But the sun will not take notice
And the earth's centre smiles. (*Cambridge Book of English Verse*)

But, when the skylark finally comes to rest by the end of the poem, the reader experiences a sense of relief. There's a sense of coming through the struggle to liberation:

The larks carry their tongues to the last atom
Battering and battering their last sparks out at the limit –
So it's a relief, a cool breeze
When they've had enough, when they're burned out
And the sun's sucked them empty
And the earth gives them the O.K. (*Cambridge Book of English Verse*)

We can compare the lark's endurance with the indefatigable energy and vigour of another of Hughes' animals, the jaguar. The caged animal, in one of his most memorable poems, "The Jaguar", is majestic and beautiful. All the other animals in the zoo, pale in significance in comparison with the jaguar. All the animals, but the jaguar, seem lifeless and indolent. They are habitually involved in their routine, lazy tasks and "lie still as the sun". The poet gives a striking expression to the scene when he says that all the cages, except that of the jaguar, stink of sleeping animals and straw, and the entire scene looks like it "might be painted on a nursery wall." They seem to have given up all hope of freedom. But, the cage of the jaguar holds all the attention of the crowd. People outside its cage stand mesmerized and stare at the raging animal:

But who runs like the rest past these arrives
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse. (*Hawk in the Rain*)

The poem shows Hughes' admiration for the adventurous spirit of the jaguar. The animal's caged life does not stop him from behaving as it would have naturally behaved if it were free. Maybe the speaker is also hinting that animals should not be kept in captivity in order to amuse and satisfy the curiosity of the amazed crowd. The jaguar behaves as if "there's no cage to him." Its creation is miraculous and its ferocious movements seem to trace horizons. He is, as if, not in bondage, but the master of the world. In a most beautiful and effective

phrase the poet says that “his stride is wilderness of freedom”. The poem has a thrilling effect on the reader and the jaguar represents Nature in all its vehemence.

Hughes is known to be a poet of violence. Most of his acclaimed poems deal with the savagery and ferocity of animals which symbolically represents the violence and indifference in human beings. For Hughes, the word ‘violence’ could be seen as a type of unrestrained energy. For him violence was a “vehement activity” (*London Magazine*). His poems are an attempt to control this energy. They are extremely convincing in their presentation of brutality. Among the most notable examples are his poems like, “Pike”, “Thrushes”, and “View of a Pig”. Human violence is effectively depicted in poems like, “The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar”. In “Pike”, the poet shows the pike as frightening and savage, yet calm and quiet. The first four stanzas graphically describe the pike, a kind of fish. The pike are “killers from the egg”. It is their inherent nature to kill. They have a malevolent grin and are stunned by their own grandeur. They are not much in length yet they are a hundred feet long. Their jaws and hooked clamp and fangs are not subject to change. They have a scary exterior. Next, the poet relates once he kept three pikes in a jar and did not provide them with sufficient food. The pikes were then reduced from three to two and then to one. That is they engaged in a murderous struggle for survival in their desperate state of hunger and insufficiency of food to feed on. The poet concludes that the pike “spare nobody”. At last, the poet describes his terror while fishing a deep pond at night. The pond held the violent pike. He fished silently, without making a stir, and he was so intensely gripped with fear that his hair experienced goose pimple:

It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast
But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move. (*Lupercal*)

Here too, the pike stand for the cut-throat struggle for survival and establishing one’s superiority among human beings. When their existence is threatened they do no spare even their fellow pikes. They kill without remorse and are quite skilled at the same. Similarly, human beings too, do not hesitate in running down others, in order to profit themselves. “Thrushes”, is a similar kind of poem in which the poet presents the thrushes as petrifying birds. They experience no “indolent procrastinations and no yawning states”. All they need is a “ravening second” to satisfy their urge to kill. They have no other purpose in mind and seem to think of nothing else. They seem extremely mechanized and “automatic”, as if a triggered bullet which has to shoot its victim. Further the poet says that Mozart had innate genius for music, and he desired no recognition for his talent. Similarly, a shark is unwavering in its aim of killing its victim. It is so anticipatory that it may devour itself is the situation so demands. But, with a man things are different. He intends to be heroic in his

actions and tries to set impeccably high standards in his work. It is almost as if “his act worships itself”. The poet stresses the fact that we all need something to focus our mind on; otherwise there are many distractions in our environment to lead us astray. He refers to the thrushes outside the lawn as “distracting devils” to which he could fall prey to any moment. The poem very appreciably distinguishes between human and animal behavior. Also, the entire final stanza of the poem has an undertone of the clamouring bells of the battlefield. The description seems to be about human preoccupation with war and the preparations for the same. For years man indulges in the bloody act of war without realizing the futility of it:

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years: (*Lupercal*)

In one of his most violent poems, “View of a Pig”, Hughes directly deals with the subject of death. Death is inevitable and a bitter reality which all must face. The pig in the poem is dead and is described as merely a weight. It is compared to a “sack of wheat” and is said to be “less than lifeless”. The speaker thumped it without feeling remorse for his action, but the pig was “too dead” to accuse and object. Now it could only be used in making pork and that way it would be sheared off its little remaining dignity. It is too dead to pity. In the last few lines of the poem, the poet mentions the various things a pig normally does:

Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.
Their bite is worse than a horse’s—
They chop a half-moon clean out.
They eat cinders, dead cats. (*Lupercal*)

These typical activities of a pig are in contrast with the lifeless, unmoving carcass of the pig lying on the floor in front of the speaker. The last stanza is a very poignant description of what would happen to the body of the pig now that he is dead. It would be scalded and its hide would be used by man for his own gains. Thus it was the life in the pig that was significant. Once it lost its life, it is no better than a “thick pink bulk”, which would be used in order to satisfy man’s greed. It is not expect a burial like human beings. This also differentiates the animal from the human beings. “The Martyrdom of Bishop Farrar”, is noteworthy for its unsettling portrayal of human violence. Here, fire burns the bones of a man but his spirit is indomitable. He rises above suffering and pain. The poem, as the title states, is about the martyrdom of Bishop Farrar, who, when burnt by his enemies, kept unwavering faith. The poem is about his stoic attitude in the face of adversity. He achieved triumph and glory through the very act which was supposed to destroy him:

Out of his mouth, fire like a glory broke,
And smoke burned his sermon into the skies. (*Collected Poems*)

No discussion on Hughes’ poetry can ever be complete without a look at his ‘Crow Poems’. Through the figure of the crow, Hughes delves deep into the human psyche. Hughes believed

that a crow has many characteristics in common with Man. In many mythologies, Crow comes across as a trickster. In Hughes' poetry, the crow is not just a normal bird, but a complex symbol. Hughes deals with many myths relating to the creation of the earth to portray the ever-present crow. Speaking on the BBC before the publication of his volume of poems titled "Crow", Hughes mentions the attributes of the bird in following words: "The Crow is the most intelligent of birds. He lives in just about every piece of land on earth and there's a great body of folk lore about crows, of course. No carrion will kill a crow. The crow is the indestructible bird who suffers everything, suffers nothing..."

It is to these attributes that Hughes refers in his Crow poems. In "Crow's First Lesson", God is attempting to teach Crow to say the word, "love." The purpose for which entire creation exists is to love. But the crow just "gaped" and is incapable of uttering the word. The crow first utters some descriptions of a deadly shark that "crashed into the sea" and then it talks of disease-bearing organisms such as a fly and a mosquito. When God gives a final try to make the crow utter the word 'love', it just starts retching. At first he vomits out a man's bodiless head and then "a woman's vulva", which drops on the man's head and both, get entangled. This is suggestive of the crow's belief that there is nothing as love and that the relationship between a man and a woman can just be physical. Even God is helpless to part these entangled parts and helplessly weeps. He was unsuccessful in creating eternal love between a man and a woman. What is interesting to note is that the crow soon realizes its mistake and flies off with a heavy sense of guilt:

The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept--
Crow flew guiltily off. (*Collected Poems*)

Thus God weeps for the sorry and degenerate state of humankind, and also at the struggle between a man and a woman. Though God was supposed to teach the crow a lesson of all-important love, He ends up learning a lesson from the crow itself.

"Crow Alights", is another celebrated poem of Hughes in which a crow witnesses the creation of the world with a detached perspective. The poem is set in the post-industrial world and deals with predicament that the modern civilization is facing. It is an ironic comment on the disasters that the two world wars have meted out to the world and its innocent people. The entire panorama is so distressing that the crow "shivered with the horror of Creation". He views such objects as a shoe "with no sole, rain sodden" and a "garbage can" which suggest the meaningless existence in the modern times:

In the hallucination of the horror
He saw this shoe, with no sole, rain-sodden,
Lying on a moor.
And there was this garbage can, bottom rusted away,
A playing place for the wind, in a waste of puddles. (*Collected Poems*)

Then he comes across a coat “in the dark cupboard” and “in the silent room” of a “silent house”. These adjectives serve to indicate the gloomy and terrifying scene of the horrors of the post-war world. All that is visible is darkness and there is not a single voice to break the monotony of the silent surroundings. Amid the smoke from the cigarette, there is visible a “motionless” hand that suggests the inactivity and futility of man’s earthly existence. Then the crow makes an attempt to bring some meaningful alteration to the scene. The poet says:

Crow blinked. He blinked. Nothing faded.

He stared at the evidence.

Nothing escaped him. (Nothing could escape.) (*Collected Poems*)

In the extremely silent, motionless and paralyzed scene, the crow’s action of blinking of his eyebrows comes as a happy change. It tries to introduce meaning into the inane environment but fails in doing so. Nothing alters. He just blankly stares at the prospect and the situation remains unaltered.

The crow in “Crow Tries the Media”, comes across as a mouthpiece of Hughes and deals with an issue that every contemporary poet thought of. A poet in those times was torn between things that he desired to write about and the things that he was obliged to write about. The crow says he wishes to write a simple, “clear song”, a sweet, lyrical poem, but he is unable to do so. True poetry must reflect an authentic picture of the time and place where it is written. As such, Hughes, like other modern poets, is faced with a pressing compulsion to write of the bitter reality facing him. He cannot escape burning issues of the time, such as war, industrialism, capitalism and as a true poet he must address these issues through his poems. The perplexing state of the crow is emphatically presented in these lines:

...this tank had been parked on his voice

And his throat nipped between the Roman Emperor's finger and thumb'

'His tongue moved like a poisoned estuary...

His voice reverberated like the slow millstone of London

Raising a filthy haze (*Collected Poems*)

Here again is made a touching expression of a monarch’s limitless power to curb all rebellion and voices of protest. The theme of the survival of the fittest glows through Hughes’ crow poems as well.

In his *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes writes that a poet must imagine what he is writing about, and see it and live it. He writes, “You write interestingly only about the things that genuinely interest you. This is an infallible rule in writing, you have to be able to distinguish between those things about which you are merely curious –things you heard about last week or read about yesterday- and things which are a deep part of your life...” Animals captured his interest from his very childhood and his poetry became a powerful medium of expressing his opinion of the world he lived in. His use of animals as a metaphor and means to reflect upon the contemporary situation is not only innovative but captivating and inspirational. He sees violence not as odious but as an assertion of identity, an abundant

energy in nature. To him the killing of one animal by the other is natural and he does not harbor grudge against those who are violent and savage. Nature in his poetry is mostly seen as either indifferent to suffering and pain or as a conspirator in the cataclysmic state of the post world-war period.

A final comment of the poetry of Ted Hughes should be made about the creative power of this great poet. Perhaps, there can be no better poem to deal with Hughes' creative genius than the poem that deals with creativity of poetic endeavour, "The Thought-Fox". It is a poem about the entire process of creating poetry. The fictitious fox is symbolic of the poetic inspiration that enters the mind of the poet and produces tangible results in the form of words on a page. The poet is sitting in a lonely room at night and there is complete silence over the place. The surrounding environment is so quiet that the ticking of the clock is clearly audible. Outside the room darkness looms large. But, there is something else that is present there, though, it is yet unidentified. This presence is seen moving in the dark night just as a fox touches the twigs and leaves with its nose. Immediately next, two eyes are seen moving and they leave their footprints on the snow. It is almost as if a fox is approaching near its prey. Then the mysterious presence comes closer and closer so that its two eyes have merged into a single green glare which keeps growing broad. Then the description goes as:

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox

It enters the dark hole of the head'. (*Collected Poems*)

What the poet actually tries to convey is that a thought enters the mind of the poet as swiftly as a fox leaps at its victim. What is necessary for a poet to write a good poem is a thought and complete silence in the surroundings so that he can develop the thought that happens to enter his mind just by mere chance. The thought takes tangible shape in the dark consciousness of the poet's mind in the same way as a fox enters a dark forest and then comes out of it suddenly. The fox here serves as a symbol for the thought which Hughes expresses in this poem. This thought or idea could be about any of the contemporary issues but to deal with it in his unique and efficacious way is testimony to Hughes' poetic fervour. Further in *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes writes: "It is occasionally possible, just for brief moments, to find the words that will unlock the doors of all those many mansions in the head and express something – perhaps not much, just something – of the crush of information that presses in on us from the way a crow flies over and the way a man walks and the look of a street and from what we did one day a dozen years ago. Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are." Playing with words and creating a meaningful poem out of them is a poet's task and how the genesis of that task occurs is beautifully elaborated in this poem. Hughes' poetry is noted for its novel method of dealing with the same issues that other coeval poets were writing of and it secures his place among the greatest poets of the twentieth century.

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(Re)Reading Animal Imagery in the poetry of Ted Hughes

BY

Shubham Singh

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