CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

What has made Ted Hughes (b. 1930) the most important poet in the contemporary British poetic scene is assuredly the vitality and vigour inherent in his verse. His poetry strikes a homogenous note of vision and expression in a forceful and strident manner in sharp contrast to the conservative, urban and reductivist tone of much of the poetry written following the Second World War. Steering clear of his contemporaries like the New Lines poets\(^1\) in whose second collection his poems too were included, Hughes, with his skilful manipulation of characters drawn both from the human as well as the non-human world, has created a new poetry rich and complex in thematic content and treatment alike. His first collection of poems, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), reveals new possibilities through his evocation of unusual spontaneities from under the apparent rubble of a decaying humanity. Further, the poems evidence the dawn of a new nature poetry in which the stillness of picturesque landscapes is induced with that vibrant vitality of the animal. It is the force and vigour of the bardic voice that found expression in a Yeats and a Dylan Thomas that again surfaces in this poet who reacted violently against the post-war mood of passivity and despondency.
The entire range of his work covering three decades culminating in *Flowers and Insects* (1986) is an exploration into the mysterious deeps of existence and exposes a mind trying to reestablish contact with the archetypal primal energy in nature. Adopting the linguistic modulations of the rural West Yorkshire dialect and drawing from the primitive mythologies of various cultures, simultaneously blending them harmoniously with issues of contemporary relevance, Hughes has evolved a unique personal mythology which is complex yet comprehensible. He has sought out universal archetypes from exclusively British situations.

His characters, drawn from a variety of sources, are poetically integrated into his visionary structure. They emphasize the drama and the passion behind the verbal surface of his poetry.

The major focus of *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* (1960) is the world of nature, animals in particular, and from there Hughes went on to explore the imaginary and the partly real in *Wodwo* (1967). His marriage and poetical partnership with the American-born Sylvia Plath, resulted in the development of a more colloquial and vital style in combination with surrealistic imagery. Taking recourse to a varied range of mythologies and folklore, Hughes deconstructed the Biblical tale and retold it in a new vein in *Crow* (1970). He chose to supplant the primordial female power in the place of the overbearing masculine deity in the wake of Robert Graves and Frazer (*Gaudete*, 1977), and evolved a new vibrant nature poetry rejecting the old romantic religion.
of nature and instilling picturesque impressions with the vitality of animal being.

Although evidently British in his description of the countryside and even in the treatment of animals (particularly the farm of Moortown, 1979 and What is the Truth? 1984) Hughes has drawn from a remarkably large variety of sources. The markedly rare combination of classical myth and primitive folklore assume newer dimensions when enlivened with his imaginative lore. His study of anthropology had exposed him to various peoples and their life—a knowledge he has used creatively in his poetry. Drawing inspiration from East-European, African, American and Oriental thought and writings Hughes has developed an exclusively British poetry which is at the same time universal in its relevance and appeal. Quite unlike most of his contemporaries he sees the poet as a visionary, a shaman who has an important role as an intermediary between man and God. But the accent of his poetry is on the human being and his aspirations or his inability to achieve a divine status.

Hughes attempted to reach through his poetry an alternative to the post-war sense of waste and despondency. In British poetry the shift in emphasis from exalted notions such as patriotism and military courage to humanitarian values and the sufferings of the soldier at the battlefront was effected by the poetry produced during the First World War. Idealized notions of loyalty and dedication to the nation lost their importance as the "pity of war" came into focus. Suddenly
national frontiers appeared limiting and the focus shifted to the broader values of humanitarianism and international brotherhood as distilled in the poetry of Wilfred Owen. The general mood of despondency and disillusionment made itself felt in the poetry of the age. What F. R. Leavis remarked in 1932, can be applied with equal relevance to the poetry of the 1950s:

No one could be seriously interested in the great bulk of verse that is culled and offered to us as the fine flower of modern poetry. For the most part it is not so much bad as dead—it was never alive.²

This insipid and unimaginative poetic scene seemed to have been a direct consequence of the living conditions in post-war England and the prevailing mood of gloom and sense of meaninglessness. Leavis attributed the state of poetic sterility to the changes in social life ushered in by the war:

Urban conditions, a sophisticated civilization, rapid change and the mingling of cultures have destroyed the old rhythms and habits, and nothing adequate has taken their place.³

Social disintegration and the alienation of the poet from society itself surfaced as one of the principal themes of poetry. Ted Hughes, it should be noted, shows a markedly different approach to both war and social ossification. In place of the passively pessimistic view on the one hand and the almost complacent attitude on the other reflected by his contemporaries like Larkin and other Movement poets, Hughes displays a healthy optimistic approach in his poems, with his realistic personae
often supplemented by imaginary and mythical figures. Hughes, it appears, would have agreed with Henry D. Thoreau who, advocating "a return to the woods" for a deliberate living fronting only the essential facts of life, wrote:

Not till we are lost, in other words, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize where we are and the infinite extent of our relations.4

Hughes juxtaposes portraits of people lacking in spirit and vitality with instances of vigorous energy and aggressive enthusiasm in order to make his readers conscious of the draining away of vital energies from contemporary life. For examples of primitive energy, he turns to the natural world, writing of animals rather than still landscapes, in order to give the stateliness of a motionless prospect a robust and living alertness. As Robert Langbaum explains in The Modern Spirit, this new nature poetry has greater movement and more subtle liveliness:

One of the reasons the new nature poetry is not recognizable as such is that it is so often about animals rather than landscapes. The poet is less likely to commit the pathetic fallacy with animals, for they have a consciousness of their own. Then animals do for the landscape what the older kind of nature poet had to do himself— they bring it to life. They are the landscape crystallized into movement and consciousness.5

The new nature poetry goes beyond the scope of the traditional poetry, for it evokes the living principle inherent in nature, its vital form. Hughes is attracted to the unaffected self abandonment in the animal world, the spontaneous and instinctive
responses of the creatures which is lacking in the human world.
He reflects the attitude of Theodore Roszak who sees progress itself as a retrograde step: "We have not stumbled into the arms of Gog and Magog; we have progressed there." As Hughes himself has recognized, this lack of direction and the spiritual uncertainty of the age had already been portrayed by a number of creative writers preceding him, and he provides a religious explanation for their approach:

What Eliot and Joyce and I suppose Beckett are portraying is the state of belonging spiritually to the last phase of Christian civilization, they suffer its disintegration.

The mood of despair and gloom is quite un-Christian in the traditional sense, for it depicts an absence of faith in a Christian God. In his introduction to *A Choice of Shakespeare's Verse*, Hughes explains the implications of the pathetic emptiness on the continuing relevance for a Christian era:

A historical development that worked itself out in theology as a War over metaphysical symbols worked itself out in the imagination and nervous system of individuals as a war over 'the dark and vicious place', a struggle over the fallen body and a final loss of the creative soul. When the physical presence of love has combined with every other forbidden thing to become a murderous devil, life itself has become a horror, the maiden has become a whore and a witch and the miraculous source of creation has become the empty hole through into Nothing.

Hughes could not watch the descent into stultified nothingness with disinterested objectivity as many of his contemporaries did. In contrast to the sober and conservative tendencies in the poetry of the 1950s, Hughes wrote a poetry of violent fury and
destructive passion. His contemporaries, on the other hand, portrayed ordinary events and the commonplace using a simple conversational language. This conservative group of poets, which came to be called The Movement and with which Hughes was associated for a time, is described by J. D. Scott in an article entitled "In the Movement":

The Movement, as well as being anti-phoney, is anti-wet, sceptical, robust, ironic, prepared to be as comfortable as possible in a wicked commercial, threatened world which doesn't look, anyway, as if it's going to be changed much by a couple of handfuls of young English writers.

They demanded that intelligence and intelligibility should be regarded as the essential virtues of poetry. The Movement comprising writers, such as John Wain, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, John Holloway, D. J. Enright and Robert Conquest was launched through the anthology New Lines edited by Conquest in 1956. It came to be recognized as "the most highly publicized conservative tendency in recent British poetry" which was probably the reason why a majority of these poets refused to associate themselves with the group later on. While Elizabeth Jennings openly refuted the existence of such a movement stating that "... it is the journalists, not the poets themselves, who have created the poetic movements of the fifties," Donald Davie apologetically acknowledged both the Movement's existence and his participation, however unwilling, in it:

All of us in the Movement had read the articles in Scrutiny about how the reputations of Auden and
Spender and Day Lewis were made by skilful promotion and publicity and it was to placate Scrutiny readers that we pretended (and sometimes deceived ourselves as well as others) that the Movement was not being 'sold' to the public in the same way; that John Wain on the BBC and later Bob Conquest with his anthology New Lines weren't just touching the pitch with which we others wouldn't be defiled. Again I limit myself to my own case; I remember nothing so distasteful as the maidenly shudders with which I wished to know nothing of the machinery of publicity even as I liked publicity and profited from it.¹²

Though overpublicized to almost a disgraceful extent, the Movement has come to represent the typical attitudes of a period, which replaced hysterical emotionalism and unbridled passions with sober, unemotional, debunking verse possessing a rational structure and employing comprehensible language. In the words of Robert Conquest, in his introduction to the New Lines anthology:

"... it submits to no great systems of theoretical constraints nor agglomerations of unconscious commands. It is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and--like modern philosophy--is empirical in its attitude to all that comes. This reverence for the real person or event is, indeed, a part of the general intellectual ambience (in so far as that it is not blind or retrogressive) of our time."¹³

Philip Larkin's severely conservative, urban poetry seems to provide an almost exact model for what the Movement claimed to seek. He presents the contemporary English lifestyle with contempt, irony and a suggestion of fear, but offers no overt condemnation of it. In the poem "Mr Bleaney,"¹⁴ for instance, Larkin portrays the bleak, gloomy existence of a fellow citizen
in post-war England, with nothing to relieve the monotonous flow of his life other than "The jabbering set" he had egged the landlady on to buy. The barren sombreness of the room with the marked absence of any frills or luxuries, the patient repeated living-out of a monotonously familiar routine, the indifferent surroundings, barren and completely lacking in warmth, is frightening to the poet who imagines Mr Bleaney as

. . . . he stood and watched the frigid wind
  Tousling the clouds, lay on the dusty bed
  Telling himself that this was home, and grinned,
  And shivered, without shaking off the dread.

When even the home is cold and comfortless, there is no refuge for the solitary individual. Larkin, while offering no direct comment, faithfully portrays the bleak social background with what Charles Tomlinson refers to as "a wry and sometimes tenderly nursed sense of defeat." Hughes, on the other hand, is virulently critical of such a passive acceptance of dullness. Though dealing with subjects that are familiar and identifiably British, Hughes exposes the broader implications of his theme and its universal concern. Yet both the human beings and the animals featured in his poetry are British citizens. M. G. Ramanan, in an essay "Macaulay's Children" puts forth his theory on the trend towards insularity among writers in England:

Indisputably the loss of the jewel in her crown was a traumatic experience for Great Britain . . . . this resulted in an insecure and embattled mental condition which in turn led writers to become more and more insular, more and more concerned with the English landscape, with the pikes, otters, hawks and crows of England, with merry England gone.
Ramanan's political explanation for the developments in the poetic scene cannot be fully applied to Hughes for he has not limited himself to a merely nationalistic or patriotic viewpoint.

For instance, Eastern Europe had a great deal to offer him: the dramatic capacity for survival against awful odds seen in poets like Miroslav Holub of Czechoslovakia, Janos Pilinsky of Hungary and VascoPopa of Yugoslavia inspired Hughes to venture a different approach to death and anguish. The compassion, honesty and sincerity in their poems provided for him a powerful possibility for an alternative during the personal crisis following the death of his wife, Sylvia Plath.

Plath and Hughes had had a unique creative relationship, constantly encouraging, criticizing and reacting to each other's poetry. Their poems were responses to certain shared experiences as well as to various individual experiences. Plath's influence in his poetry is obvious in his constant concern with death and the overwhelming presence of the powerful female deity based on Graves's myth of the White Goddess.

To surmount the overbearing influence of death, Hughes sought the mythologies and folklore of the East for an acceptable final resolution of contraries. Powerful images from Tibetan Buddhism and Oriental mysticism abound in his verse. Finding the traditional practices and rituals of conventional Christianity inadequate to serve the needs of contemporary man, he goes to the roots of Christianity. Hughes's deeper concerns have been pointed out by critics like Michael Sweeting:
Ted Hughes is a poet who is deeply concerned about his culture, a culture where it seems that, in the words of Carl Jung, 'nothing is holy any longer,' whose pursuit of material benefit has led to neglect and abuse of both the natural world and the human spirit.\[17\]

It is this concern with the spiritually deficient state of modern man that has prompted Hughes to attempt to move through the stultified nothingness back to the source of creation. He directs the course of his poetry through the sterility of modern urban society and the faded columns of organized religion in search of an elemental core of vitality and a pre-Christian faith. Finding the language of familiar objects and ordinary speech insufficient to communicate the deeper truths he wishes to express, Hughes turns to the symbolic language of mythology and folklore in order to suggest deeper levels of meaning and embody the mystery of the universe. In an essay published in 1976, he explains the significance of the myths in his poetry:

What was religious passion in the religions became in them a special sense of holiness and seriousness of existence. What was obscure symbolic mystery in the mythologies became in them a bright, manifold perception of universal and human truths.\[18\]

Mythology provided an appropriate medium to communicate his ideas efficiently to the world. Apart from furnishing a well-known example to suit the immediate social problem, the myths, particularly the Greek ones, supplied the relevant mystic and visionary aura to his works. As Hughes explains it,
Wherever we look around us now, in the modern world, it is not easy to find anything what has not somehow prefigured in the conceptions of those early Greeks. And nothing is more striking about their ideas than the strange, visionary atmosphere from which they emerge.19

For his poetic material, Hughes drew not only from Greek mythology, but also a broad spectrum of religious sources, both Western and Eastern. He was well acquainted not only with the Judeo-Christian tradition but also with the vast receptacles of folklore and myth provided by Eastern religions like Sufism, Buddhism, Manicheanism and others. In this respect he was quite unlike his contemporaries who like Philip Larkin consciously refrained from acknowledging any debt to tradition or the past: "I have no belief in 'tradition' or a common myth-kitty or casual allusions in poems to other poems."20

Hughes believed that it was the general loss of communion with this vast repository of visionary energy supplied by religion that led to the present condition of barrenness and nihilism. He put forth a deeply religious solution to the existing problematic situation:

Religious negotiations had formerly embraced and humanized the archaic energies of instinct and feeling. They had conversed in simple but profound terms with the forces struggling inside people, and had civilized them, or attempted to. Without religion those powers have become dehumanized. The whole inner world has become elemental, chaotic, continually more primitive and beyond our control. It has become a place of demons. But of course, insofar as we are disconnected anyway from that world, and lack the equipment to pick up its signals, we are not aware of it. All we register is the vast absence, the emptiness, the sterility, the meaninglessness, the loneliness.21
In the contemporary world, only a poet could have the inner visionary resources to relate the mythology to reality and thereby direct society judiciously towards spiritual rejuvenation. Myths carried down from ancient times to the present with unmitigated relevance were the perfect medium for the poet to spread the message of the fading of human values to a decadent civilization. In the comprehensive description provided by Eric Gould,

Myth is a synthesis of values which uniquely manages to mean most things to most men. It is allegory and tautalogy, reason and unreason, logic and fantasy, waking thought and dream, atavism and the perennial, archetype and metaphor, origin and end. 

Being such a complex mixture of seemingly contradictory values, it can hold in its compass a whole repository of ideas which could indicate alternative solutions to a seemingly unsurmountable cul-de-sac, thereby providing a poet of Hughes's capability with ample poetic material.

Apart from the Greek myths and the religious mythology of the world, Hughes draws mainly from primitive-pre-Christian folklore such as those of the Eskimos or the American Indians. He also creates his own network of personal mythology when the traditionally familiar stories fail to cope with a situation he wishes to elucidate. The crow myth is one such creation produced out of an urge to project both the inner and outer worlds at once inhabited by an individual in the present age.

At other times, Hughes raises the commonplace to mythical proportions with similar intentions. In his poem "Thought Fox,"
for instance, the fox assumes mythical dimensions and comes to represent the spirit of creative inspiration. Hughes describes the concretization of an idea from a vague suggestion to a multilayered fact. He has managed to capture the reality of the fox through his words in the poem so well that "every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them." In the beginning, the poet at his desk at a lonely midnight hour, is aware of a vague live presence as his fingers come alive on the blank page. The presence becomes more real as it closes in on the poet's world. It is still shrouded completely in darkness and both the poet and the reader are in the dark as to its identity. Slowly it enters the consciousness of the poet through various sense perceptions:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business

Till with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.

The first impression of coldness develops to become a touch of the fox's nose. Individual organs come into focus for sudden glimpses but the whole form is still elusive. Gradually other
characteristic traits of the creature are recognizable—the sudden movements rising in urgency, the tell-tale footprints on the snow, a hesitant shadow diving from stump to hollow—until finally the whole body is "bold to come." The clearings covered by the fox across the snow resemble the clearings separating the stanzas in the poem on a page that is now filling up with printed words corresponding to the fox's footprints. Finally the fox is so near that the poet can see only a single eye at close quarters which dissolves into "a widening deepening greenness." The concentrated impact of the eye and its brilliance suddenly disappears leaving a strong distinctive smell of the animal. It has gradually receded into "the dark hole of the head" where it can never be found, and become part of a collective unconscious. The external objects remain as they were at the beginning of the poem. The window is starless and the clock ticks. But there is one clue indicating the former presence of the fox. The blank page is now printed for the creation of the poem has been rendered possible by the creative encounter.

The process reported is very much akin to the working of the imagination described by Hughes in *Poetry in the Making*:

... the thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. The process of raid, or persuasion, or ambush, or dogged hunting, or surrender, is the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not somehow learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.

... I am talking about whatever kind of trick or skill it is that enables us to catch those elusive or shadowy thoughts, and collect them together, and hold them still so we can get a really good look at them.
The poem clearly presents an accurate picture of the working of the creative imagination as Hughes perceived it. It also portrays a real live fox with clarity and in meticulous detail. By taking the fox to a mythical level Hughes does not stray away from the characteristics of the real beast. On the other hand, he effectively enhanced several qualities of the creature to create the impact of an abstract ideal, and communicate the experience powerfully to even a casual reader.

Following close in the footsteps of Robert Graves, Hughes places the spirit of creative inspiration on a divine pedestal. Like Graves' White Goddess, she is fickle in nature, in his opinion, and has to be constantly wooed and appeased, if she is to smile upon him inspiring him with genuine creativity. She is demanding and severe, requiring the poet's complete dedication. If his devotion to her slackens in sincerity, his fate becomes that of the poet described by Hughes in the poem "Famous Poet" (H26). The poet in this poem fails in his paying of homage to the goddess by seeking fame and worldly recognition and thereby loses his contact with the vital creative core of the universe. By virtue of his former creative genius, he is constantly on display before the world. Though physically the poet appears ordinary, the narrator in the poem is horrified on seeing his

Very ordinary appearance. Neither thin nor fat,
Hair between light and dark.

And the general air
Of an apprentice--say, an apprentice house--
Painter amid an assembly of famous
Architects: the demeanour is of mouse,
Yet is he monster.
His appearance, being the epitome of conservatism and conformity assumes frightening proportions for the poet as it displays the failure of his creativity. Under the corrupting influence of a decadent society, he has lost touch with the enlivening spark of inspiration and his former creativity:

First scrutinize those eyes  
For the spark, the effulgence: nothing: Nothing there

But the haggard stony exhaustion of a near-Finished variety artist. He slumps in his chair  
Like a badly hurt man, half life-size.

His quiet sobriety and association with the superficiality of a commercial culture are the perfect indications of his downfall. Shrunken and unhealthy, he is only a tired and lifeless apology for a fading artist. Instead of inspiring the society to greater action through the force of his poetry, he seems to need help himself, desperately. Seeking the reasons for this pathetic situation, Hughes finds that it is not drink or woman, the bane of ordinary men. The truth of his collapse which the poet finds half-buried and hidden away is even more tragic and pathetic:

Once the humiliation,  
Of youth and obscurity,  
The autoclave of heady ambition trapped,  
The fermenting of a yeasty heart stopped—  
Burst with such pyrotechnics the dull world gaped  
And "Repeat that!" still they cry.  
But all his efforts to concoct  
The old heroic bang from their money and praise  
From the parent's pointing finger and the child's amaze,  
Even from the burning of his wreathed bays,  
Have left him wrecked:

It was obviously not sincere poetic inspiration or creative aptitude that had led the poet to write powerful verse once.
Frustration arising from failure to achieve worldly fame and glory had exploded in him into sensational verbal fireworks. The world mistakenly took this fake rhetoric to be real poetry and promptly demanded more. But now that the stimulating factors of "youth and obscurity" and the resultant humiliation were absent, he could not produce more dramatic verse. All the money, the admiration and the abundant attention showered upon him by young and old alike had only served to destroy him completely. All that remained of the fermenting passions and vigorous spirit was a cumbersome, outdated and horrifying monstrosity, which had now become a mere object for display, shelved carefully behind bars which would permit no escape for him. While the world moved on in front of him, pointing, staring and commenting, the famous poet was condemned to blink idiotically behind bars, isolated in his loneliness and too dull and heavy to revitalize himself or break out of the claustral situation, which was both pathetic and painful. His present plight was clearly in keeping with the tradition of poetic justice—a fitting punishment for degrading the holy art of poetry to a cheap and frivolous spectacle. But this, in fact, seems to be the fate of poetry in the current civilization—an age that apparently appreciates the loud and flippant verbiage under the mistaken label of poetry. Hughes makes repeated references to the vagaries of the age and attributes reasons for its being so. The Movement poets who were his contemporaries had had enough of the display of violent energy during the war.
So they preferred to avoid mention of the war in their poetry and chose stagnation rather than risk invoking the primaeval vital energy and be thrown into a chaotic state of existence. In Hughes's view, what the New Lines poets had in common was

the post-war mood of having had enough . . . enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs. All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park. The second war after all was a colossal negative revelation. In a sense it meant they reconciled to some essential English strengths. But it set them dead against negotiation with anything outside the cosiest arrangement of society. . . . Now I came a bit later. I hadn't had enough. I was all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there.25

Hughes regards the vital spark as an essential prerequisite for poetry. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he is prepared to take the risk and invoke the vital energy braving all the unsavoury consequences. Hughes explains his theories regarding the invoking of the vital energy in an interview with Egbert Faas:

Any form of violence--any form of vehement activity--invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the contact has been made--it becomes difficult to control. Something from beyond ordinary human activity enters. When the wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive--and that is the position with us. And that is why force of any kind frightens our rationalist, humanist style of outlook. In the old world God and divine power were invoked at any cost--life seemed worthless
without them. In the present world we dare not invoke them—we wouldn't know how to use them or stop them destroying us. We have settled for the minimum practical energy and illumination—anything bigger introduces problems, the demons get bold of it. That is the psychological stupidity, the ineptitude, of the rigidly rationalist outlook—it's a form of hubris, and we're paying the traditional price. If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control—rituals, the machin ery of religion. The old method is the only one.26

Therefore, in an age where the majority believed that no poetry was possible after the experience of the war, Hughes speaks with utmost reverence of the role of the poet. True to the Welsh bardic tradition and following in the footsteps of Yeats and Dylan Thomas, Hughes believes in the exalted notion of a poet as a visionary. Apart from seeing Truth, the poet has also to reveal it to the community. In shamanism, Hughes is able to find the ideal procedure to suit his purposes. Hughes explains what he means by shamanism:

Basically it's the whole procedure and practice of becoming and performing as a witch-doctor, 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. Now this flight to the spirit world he experiences as a dream... and that dream is the basis of the hero story.27
Hughes believes that this situation is the basic one described in almost all the folktales and legends and a majority of the narrative poems all over the world. The poet, like the shaman, should accept the nobility of his profession and bring to mankind a solution for his prevailing problems from an external world of imagination or dream. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts explain the ritualistic process involved in a shaman's flight to the world of spirits:

The shaman's practice ('shamanizing') involves singing, dancing and recitation, often in a special poetic vocabulary which is several times larger than that of ordinary language. He dresses in animal skins, and most particularly in birds' feathers since 'flight' is an important part of his function; his 'helping spirits' often have animal forms and he is believed to have a special affinity with the animal world, not altogether distinct from his affinity with the world of spirits.28

The singing, dancing and reciting aspects of the shamanistic practice can be approximated to similar features of poetic practice. The assistance from the natural world of birds and animals which the shaman receives is akin to the retreat into the instinctive and emotional recesses by the poet for aid to effect a solution to the enigma ahead of him. Mircea Eliade explains what shamanism tries to achieve:

Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing in the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed in illo tempore, in mythical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred.29

In a similar manner, by retreating into the dream world, the poet also attempts to recreate a pre-Christian world of amity
and cooperation. And by retreating into the dream world, he is attempting to penetrate his own unconscious and find the truthful foundations lying at the foot of his external activity. According to Jung, dreams are "pure nature; they show us the unvarnished natural truth, and are therefore fitted, as nothing else is, to give us back an attitude that accords with our basic human nature when our consciousness has strayed too far from its foundations and run into an impasse." So a shaman or a poet can reach into human unconscious more easily by means of entering into a dream state or trance.

Michael Sweeting's analysis of the shamanistic elements of Ted Hughes's poetry, can be summarized as follows:

The shaman's song is based upon three factors; the energy, or ecstasy, the myth, expressed in some form of ritual; and a resulting catharsis or abreaction. These three components combine to produce healing, reintegration and answers to spiritual questions. In his poetic development Hughes deals with each of these elements in turn.

In Hughes's early work, particularly the poems collected in The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal and some of the Wodwo poems, he invokes the primitive energies mainly through his animal characters. But the manifestations of force or what Mircea Eliade calls "Kratophany", seen through the poetic medium, seem to have been excessive, for he received severe critical comment as a poet of violence. Critics like Calvin Bedient went to the extent of dubbing him a mere "voyeur of violence". Apart from being closer to the instinctive vital core of the universe, the animals were also part of the shamanistic ritualistic procedure as Mircea Eliade has described it:
In preparing his trance, the shaman drums, summons his spirit helpers, speaks a 'secret language' or the 'animal language' imitating the cries of beasts and especially the songs of birds. He ends by obtaining a second state that provides the impetus for linguistic creation and the rhythms of lyric poetry.

But obviously, the animal participants are only the means to an end and not an end in themselves, for Hughes proceeds in an entirely different vein. The characters move from the real to the abstract, with the animals assuming imaginary and mythical dimensions and being amply supported by other vaguely half human and imaginary beings as in some of the Wodwo poems, Crow (1970) and Cave Birds (1975). The development is delineated in the poems he has written for children collected in Meet my Folks (1961), where the human relatives are animal-like and live in a hostile natural universe, and The Earth-Owl and Other Moon People (1963) where the unearthly beings assume frightening proportions. Gaudete published in 1977, restates the White Goddess myth, employing symbolic and ritualistic procedures to resolve what seems to be an impossible situation. Remains of Elmet (1975) Moortown (1979), and River (1982) reflect a calmer frame of mind with all passions spent where reconciliation is possible between man, nature and God. This attitude is reiterated in What is the Truth? (1984), described as "a farmyard fable for the young" and Flowers and Insects (1986) where the poet is optimistic despite the imperfect condition for there is hope of a better future situation.
Being acutely conscious of the faltering enthusiasms of man in the twentieth century, Hughes recognizes the need for a rekindling of interest in his essential vitality. To this end, he made a special effort to write about human beings and "bring people alive in words." In his poems, Hughes presents the modern man alienated from his own inner self, the natural instinctive power inherent in him. Through the human characters in his poetry, he provides a critique for the post-war mood of dull complacency and bored languor, and seeks to create an awareness of the submerged vital energetic core in every individual. Women are particularly significant in his poetic framework, for they are the earthly representatives of the White Goddess, the fertility principle, though found continually degraded in the modern world. The men also reflect the denigrated state of awareness. While providing a useful foil for displaying the vast resources of instinctive energy, the animals, particularly the predators, reveal its equally strong drawbacks. The domestic animals, on the other hand, indicate the possibility of a natural harmony between man and beast. While his imaginary characters enable Hughes to explore a greater canvas of emotions and thoughts than the merely mortal ones, the mythical beings suggest innumerable possibilities normally beyond the scope of the ordinary man. Although not in the strictly recurring order, Hughes works out through each of his characters, be they human or non-human, or the elemental powers themselves, a coherent poetic pattern invoking and holding within its framework the future possibilities of man.
This theory is illustrated by an analysis of the characters in his poetry. For the purposes of this study, the human characters have been subdivided into women and men, and the animals into the predators and the domestic animals. The imaginary and the mythical beings as well as God and his son have been grouped together for the purposes of classification.
NOTES


3 Ibid., p. 61.


19 Ibid., p. 78.


24 Ibid., pp. 57-58.

26 Ibid., p. 200.

27 Ibid., p. 206.


31 Ibid.


33 Mircea Eliade *Shamanism*, op. cit., p. 510-11.