Chapter III: Ted Hughes’s Response to Post-imperial Space
In the post-imperial England, apart from Philip Larkin, Ted (Edward James) Hughes came to reveal the extent of the hurt English pride and to 'heal' it. Besides other things, his poetry betrays his trepidation for the nation. He, like Larkin, was also concerned with 'English purity'. Hughes expressed his deep disgust over phenomena like immigration, urbanization and industrialization, which will be evident from the extract quoted below. One may note that on his return from Persia, Hughes went into partnership with his father-in-law, Jack Orchard, at Moortown farm, rearing cattle and sheep. It was situated just north of the northern edge of Dartmoor, in North Devon. The Moortown farm became for him, as Craig Robinson’s points out, “a working laboratory of co-operation between man and nature” (262). To him, Moortown was an emblem of ‘pure’ England. In his “Preface” to the volume Moortown Diary (1989), Hughes writes:

Even then, in the early 1970s, the ancient farming community in North Devon was still pretty intact and undisturbed, more so than anywhere
else in England. No industrial development or immigrant population had ever disrupted it. (*Collected Poems* 1203; henceforth referred to as *CP*; emphasis added)

Cut off by Exmoor to the east, Dartmoor to the south, and the northern coastline of high, wreckers’ cliff North Devon looked like an island. Hardly did tourists visit the area. Moreover, there was an obvious feeling there that “England (along with South Devon and Cornwall) was another country... It was common to hear visitors say: ‘Everything here’s in another century!’” (Hughes, *CP* 1203).

Over the centuries, this bred a unique isolation. Yorkshire farmers were independent and self-sufficient. Buried in their deep valleys, in age-old farms, hidden not only from the rest of England but even from each other, the old Devonians dwelt in a time of their own. However, even then, as Hughes points out, they were “alert to all the buffeting modern pressures of mass population and industry”, though they were conscious of the overwhelming presence of the bygone ‘unexorcised’ centuries, potent enough to prevent any “stray infiltrations of modernity” (*CP* 1203). From time immemorial, the old North Devon farmers lived in that long backward perspective of their ancient landscape and their homes. Because of their individuality and distinctness, they seemed to Hughes almost a separate race so much so that he could believe that “they were still that Celtic tribe the Romans had known as the *Dumnoni*, ‘the people of the deep valleys’, a confederacy of petty kings, hidden in their strongholds that were only just beginning to emerge out of the old oak forest” (*CP* 1203).
The war-affected England, much of its landscape now polluted by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization, in the succeeding decade presented a contrast to North Devon. Quite naturally, the pristine English countryside turned into Hughes’s haven of peace and tranquility. As a poet in his fifties, Seamus Heaney observes in “The New Poet Laureate,” Hughes was “regarded as slightly beyond, and other than the usual literary animal” (45-6) who “still stalks the margins, finding his poetic territory in the northern milltowns and moors of Yorkshire; in the southern rivers and farmlands of Devon and Cornwall” (46). It was in such corners of his country that the mythical spirit of old England and Englishness lived. In his heart of hearts, Hughes longed for such a virgin and immaculate England – untouched by ‘modernity’. In his post-war, post imperial worldview, England herself became the mainstay of Hughes’s poetry.

In the essay mentioned earlier, Seamus Heaney compares Hughes’s outlook with that of W. B. Yeats. He asserts that Hughes’s vision is continuous with Yeats’s vision of “renewal through a retrieval of older spiritual sources” (46). He goes on to observe that Yeats’s hope for “an Irish literature which would link the people to their land as feelingly and mythically as the literature of Greece, is paralleled by Hughes’s endeavor
to achieve a body of poetry that once again puts the English audience in vital,
imaginative context with geological, botanical, historical and legendary reality of
England itself” (46). Heaney indeed offers a very comprehensive view of Hughes’s
Englishness, which is oriented towards a grand view of the past. The elision of the
present – or its relegating to the margin – seems to be significant. The silence speaks
eloquently of his disenchantment with the present. It is interesting to note that a Poet
Laureate is expected to address public or civic concerns and would be a representative
of the nation. Hughes told, in a brief interview on the day of appointment of
laureateship, of the crown as an image of the tribe’s unity and spiritual resource”
(Heaney, “Laureate” 45). This he usually believes more by looking at the past rather
than by looking at the present. He looks upon the crown as a source of sustenance and
probes into the past to find the royal lineage. Heaney emphasizes that the “England he
physically inhabits and the one he imaginatively embraces is old, the land of King
Harold and King Alfred and King Arthur” (46). He believes that the royalty’s
relationship to the people is basically to the ‘hub centre’ of the people’s ‘psychic life,’
the royal members are the representatives of the ‘sacred axle’ (Ingelbien 84). The royal
family, as has been just suggested, forms the possible ‘core’ for Hughes’s Englishness.
That is why people invent them in the first place.

In 1984, Ted Hughes was appointed Poet Laureate. His first major Laureate
poem was “Rain-Charm for the Duchy” with the subtitle “A Blessed Devout Drench for
the Christening of His Royal Highness Prince Harry.” It was included in the volume
*Rain-Charm for the Duchy and Other Laureate Poems* (1992) but was first published in
the *Observer* (23 December 1984). The Duchy is the common name for the royal lands
of the Duke of Cornwall, Prince Charles. The poem describes a downpour after a
drought in the West country. It celebrates the rite of "the betrothal of the king to his
physical territory" (Heaney, "Laureate" 46). The rain is the key image in the poem. It
drenches the royal domain. The christening of Prince Harry coincides with the
remarkable downpour but there is certainly a suggestion of a link between the two.
Rowland finds a correspondence between this poem of Hughes and Larkin's "The
Whitsun Weddings": rain occurs at the end of both the poems. But he distinguishes
between the two poems by observing that for "Larkin this is procreation, for Hughes,
the royal family" (35). He finds 'a symbolic nexus' between the downpour on the land
and the water poured on Harry's head, and remarks that 'the sacred nature of this act,'
according to Hughes, "draws all of England together in a 'Blessed, Devout Drench,' as
the subtitle would have it" (Rowland 85). Rowland finally establishes that Hughes's
'bunting' "attempts to ensnare us in a specific, public, 'civic event': the christening of a
royal" (85).

In times of crisis, during and after the World War II, the royalty remained the
source of sustenance for Britain. Ted Hughes shows how the Queen Mother came to be
at the centre of Britain's experience:

In Britain's case, when the trial came with the Second World War, our
sacred myth, the living symbol of a hidden unity, the dormant genetic
resource, turned out to be the Crown. As it happened - helped, maybe,
by a memory of Elizabeth the First, more surely by a memory of Victoria
the mantle of this palladium settled on the Queen Mother, who was then Queen. (CP 1221)

This was more so because of the fact that for those who fought in and survived the First World War, and entertained brief hopes in the twenties, the Queen was the generation of their wives, and for those who fought in the Second and expected the Third, she was the generation of their mothers. In addition, this enhanced the mythic role of King George VI. The passage of time made it clear that the Queen “not only wore the symbol of that ‘ring of the people’, but, being who she was, rose to the occasion in such a way that she became the incarnation of it” (CP 1221). Thus, in the Section 5 (“Envoi”) of his poem “The Unicorn” (1992) Hughes writes:

Forty years later
Looking at her
All see the crown
Some, their mother.
One, his wife.
Some, their life.

(CP 834)

Despite the loss of empire and the damage done by the World War II, Queen Elizabeth II remains the mainstay of Britain. For the last ‘forty years’, ‘invisibly’ though, she has
been the ‘spine of a people’ and ‘pillar’ of the ‘scales.’ The Conservatives and the Labours, two major political parties of Britain, alternate (Left and Right/In alteration/Tremble); but she remains stable.

The Queen Mother, as “A Masque for Three Voices” clarifies, “nursed the nation’s infant soul/That watched without a word/Through their own eyes, though all deny/This miracle occurred” (CP 830).

It is evident that when the British Empire was lost and the nation had been surrendering itself to the political influences of countries like the USA, Hughes was gradually looking more within the nation and its past, than beyond, and was pinning his hope in the royalty. The poems written on the occasions of the Queen Elizabeth II’s several birthdays bear evidence to it. In his “A Masque for Three Voices” (1990), written on the ninetieth birthday of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, Hughes holds monarchy as the “only norm”:

Being British felt once more like uniform,

Once more King and Queen the only norm.

(CP 826)

It is evident that Hughes wants ‘norms’ conducive to the ‘Britishness’ to be re-established. The personal desperation is easily communicated through the phrase ‘once again,’ as the nation is going through a time of crisis when everything including
religion was in the process of getting disintegrated. Britishness is here used as an umbrella term indicating an overall British national identity. The homogeneity (indicated in the word ‘uniform’) is crucial as far as the making of nationality is concerned. To Hughes the King/Queen is the unifying factor with which the English are to regain the ‘centre’.

Regarding “Candles for the Cake”, the final section of his poem “A Birthday Masque”, (written on Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II’s sixtieth birthday 21 April 1986), Hughes establishes royalty as the ‘hub’ of the nation: “In my piece, the birds of the British Isles, thirty of them … find their true selves (their spiritual selves) by finding the spiritual unity of the Islands, which is ‘the ring of the people’, which is also the Crown (of the representative of this ‘soul’ of the Islands), which is the Queen. As in: A soul is a wheel. / A Nation’s soul/ With a Crown at the hub/ To keep it whole” (CP 1218). In the post-imperial period, shattered by the World War II and shrunk by the loss of empire, it is this nationality in which Ted Hughes wants the English find their ‘identity’:

When Britain wins, I feel that I have won.

Whatever Britain does, I feel I have done.

I know my life comes somehow from the sun.

(CP 822)
Ted Hughes, during his period as Poet Laureate, also became more and more attracted to the legend of St George, for he wanted, as we have mentioned, to unite the people of England within a mythic schema. He wrote on the theme from various angles. Antony Rowland points out that in two Emory letters from 1988 and 1992, Hughes shows that an ancient ballad forms an English version of the legend, which conveniently elides the Capadocián genesis of George. St George, the symbol of England, was lifted from his origins in Capadocia, and appropriated for an English ballad, as Hughes recounts, as the son of Lord Albert of Coventry. George was stolen and reared by a wild woman of the woods, and tutored to be a warrior. He bore three marks on his body: a dragon on his breast, a garter on his leg and a blood-red cross on one arm. While fighting the Saracens, he met a dragon, which demanded to eat fresh maidens every day. When it was the turn of the king’s daughter Sabra, George intervened and slew the dragon, whilst making the sign of the cross. Sabra then followed him to Coventry where they lived happily ever after. In the other version of the myth, George’s inclination for cross-dressing fulfils its symbolic potential when he lays a girdle around a dragon’s neck, and brings it to the terrorized city; the residents were so scared that they all converted to Christianity (84). According to Stuart Hirschberg, St George is also a ‘patron saint of knighthood’ (essentially an English virtue) who is depicted as a warrior holding a lance poised and ready to slay the evil serpent or dragon (whose nature is described in Daniel 14: 22, 27; Revelation12: 3, 7; and Isaiah 43:20).¹

Hughes’s “Crow’s Account of St George” included in the volume Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow (1970) casts England’s patron saint, St George as a
Puritan rationalist for whom “everything in the Universe/Is a track of numbers racing
towards an answer.” St George faces a female monster:

A belly-ball of hair, with crab-legs, eyeless,
Jabs its pincers into his face,
Its belly opens – a horrible oven of fangs
The claws are clawing to drag him towards it.

(CP 225)

Intimidated at the female principle, St George promptly chops it up with a sword:

He snatches from its mount on the wall a sword,
A ceremonial Japanese decapitator,
And as hacking a path through thicket he scatters
The lopped segments, the opposition collapses.
He stands trousered in blood and log-splits
The lolling body, bifurcates it
Top to bottom, kicks away the entrails –

(CP 226)

But he gets completely dumbstruck only to realize that he has in fact slaughtered his
own wife and children whom he mistakes for monsters. St George “Steps out of the
blood-wallow. Recovers –/Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the
house/Where his wife and children lie in their blood.”

Hughes’s “Mayday on Holderness”, a deserted long poem about England, revolves the main themes of *Lupercal*. It was to be a part of a sequence of poems about England. Keith Sagar points out in *Laughter of Foxes* that the central, unifying image was to be a river – Humber to be more precise (26). Sagar elsewhere asserts that the central figure of the river, “the bloodstream of England,” was “related to that of the adder, the buried, denied and feared elemental life of England” (*Art* 46). Elaine Feinstein observes that in this poem the “landscape of his [Hughes’s] Service years is evoked” (22). The very phrase ‘Hull’s sunset smudge’ portrays how the river Humber flows into the North Sea:

> From Hull’s sunset smudge
> Humber is melting eastward ...

(*CP* 60)

England has become a house of pollution. It produces rubbish, containing dung, corpses and misbirths: “Sheffield’s ores, /Bog pools, dregs of toadstools, tributary/Graves, dunghills, kitchens, hospitals.” The river, like a ‘loaded single vein’ carries them to the ‘unkillable’ North Sea. Like Larkin’s “The Whitsun Weddings”, this poem also presents us with a firsthand picture of the post-war industrial England.

Hughes placed his volume *Wodwo* (1967) in the context of the oldest sources of English poetry: the collection opens with an epigraph from *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* where the word “wodwo” appears:
Sometimes with dragons he wars, and with wolves also, / Sometimes
with wild men of the woods who lived among the crags, / Both with bulls
and bears, and boars at other times, / And giants that pursued him over
the high fell. (qtd. in CP 1250; emphasis added)

The creature in Hughes’s poem “wodwo” is an existential quester wondering at his
identity, and his search for self-knowledge can stand for Hughes’s version of the
modern English predicament:

... I suppose I am the exact centre
but there’s all this what is it roots
roots roots roots and here’s the water
again very queer but I’ll go on looking

(CP183)

The English are now experiencing an alienation from their natural environment. The
creature embarks on a quest for an identity to which medieval poetry still had access:
that of the “wodwo”. In the post-imperial period, Hughes was also in search of an
identity for the English.

In the volume Remains of Elmet (1979) Hughes turned to look at what had
actually been done to his England and her people in the Calder valley. The Calder
valley, west of Halifax, was the last ditch of Elmet, the last independent Celtic kingdom
in England to fall to the Angles. Elmet is still the name on maps for a part of West
Yorkshire that includes the deep valley of the upper Calder and its watershed of
Pennine moorland. In this volume, Hughes confines himself to the upper Calder and the
territory roughly encircled by a line drawn through Halifax (on the east), Keighley (on
the north east), Colne (on the north-west), Burnley (on the west), and Littleborough (on
the south-west); an ‘island’ straddling the Yorkshire – Lancashire border, though
mainly in Yorkshire, and centred on Heptonstall. In a letter to Stephen Spender dated 9
September, 1979, Ted Hughes thanks Spender for his kind remarks about Elmet and
informs him: “Mainly, it’s childhood impressions filtered through my mother’s feelings
for that landscape. She used to sit & cry, thinking about it” (Reid 427).

Hughes’s is a primeval landscape where stones cry out and horizons endure,
where the elements inhabit the mind with a religious force, where the pebble dreams ‘it
is the foetus of God’, ‘where the staring angels go through’, ‘where all the stars bow
down’, where, with appropriately pre-Socratic force, water lies ‘at the bottom of all
things/utterly worn out utterly clear’. It is England as King Lear’s heath which now
becomes a Yorkshire moor where sheep and foxes and hawks persuade
‘unaccommodated man’ that he is a poor bare forked thing, kinned not in a chain but on
a plane of being with the animals themselves. The air is menaced by God’s voice in the
wind, by demonic protean crow-shapes; and the poet is a wanderer among the ruins, cut
off by catastrophe from consolation and philosophy (Heaney, “Englands” 341-2). The
cry of Hughes’s “primeval landscape” can be heard throughout his Remains of Elmet.
For example: “a deep gorge under palaeolithic moorland...The voice of the dilapidated
river” (“Hardcastle Crags”) or “These stones of darkness/Which have a world to
themselves/This water of light and darkness/Which hardly savours Creation”
(“Stanbury Moor”). It is a place where “Chapels, chimneys, vanish in the brightening”,
a land “Heavy with the dream of a people” (“The Trance of Light”). The whole scene
“Lifts a cry/Right to the source of it all.” (“Long Screams”) Here dead “farms” and
dead “leaves” cling to the “long Branch of world.” (“Shackleton Hill”) It is a world
“bare of men” where the “stones roam again free” (“Grouse-Butts”). It is, as if, another
world (in Hughes’s poem “Remains Of Elmet”) where:

Death-struggle of the glacier corpse vanished.

Farms came, stony masticators
Of generations that ate each other
To nothing inside them.

(CP 468)

Hughes’s Elmet is a land “naked” as a “wound” where the sun “swabs and dabs”
(“Wadsworth Moor”). In this “lost kingdom” moor-water “toils in the valley” (“Crown
Point Pensioners”). The chimneys [“... the smoky valley never closes, /The womb that
bore him, chimney behind chimney/Horizons herded ...” (“The Dark River”) (CP
455)], chapels and dry-stone walls of the Calder Valley must collapse before there can
be any new construction (“Before these chimneys can flower again/They must fall into
the only future, into earth.”) [“Lumb Chimneys”] (II.17-8) (CP 457)]. This image of
stone returning to the earth in Hughes signifies “the restoration to Nature of her own,
the healing and rededication of the holy elements before Man can approach them again with clean hands, with respect and humility...” (Sagar, *Laughter* 151).

II

Ted Hughes’s Englishness also gets manifested in his representation of animal vitality in his poetry. The tremendous energy of animals in Hughes’s poetry can be seen as a poetic strategy to counter the lack of vitality evident in the contemporary society. To Hughes this verve was a sort of compensation for the loss of empire. In the post-imperial period, it was no longer possible for Britain to assert herself in the domain of world affair – but the animals, with their tremendous oomph, could well assert themselves in the poetic empire of Ted Hughes. This energy, traceable mostly in various animals, is also evident in human beings and even in plants in the Hughes world as will be discussed in this section. Ted Hughes was out to wrench an identity for England through his imperative voice that got manifested in the violent imagery of his poetry.

Animals, asserts Sagar, were of “tremendous importance to Hughes from the beginning, living representatives of another world, ‘the true world’, ‘the world under the world’” (“Hughes and His Landscape” 7). In order to represent such a world one needs to take one’s art to the mythic level and take help of the literary device of ‘deep
image.’ The term ‘deep image,’ as Reid points out in his editorial comment, is derived from the Spanish ‘canto jondo’ (meaning ‘deep song’) and implies, “among other things, reliance on the image as a conveyer of poetic meaning” (524). That is why ancient archetypes reverberate in his poetry and evoke a sense of continuity. Energy and vitality well off from his rendering of animals moulded in mythic shape. From the very beginning, the animals live an unchanging life. They are devoid of any sort of procrastination and this singleness of purpose was what Hughes sought after in the contemporary England.

Hughes’s volume Crow, From the Life and Songs of the Crow was published in October 1970. Hughes planned it to be an ‘epic folk-tale’ in prose, studded with songs by and about Crow. However, it remained unfinished and the available volume represents about the first two thirds of the original plan. Crow would undoubtedly have been one of Hughes’s greatest works had the vast project not been aborted in 1969. A great deal of unpublished material exists, but the project remains incomplete. Within these poems Crow emerges as a creature from a primordial world and it operates on a number of levels: as an elemental energy in the universe, as a projection of man’s instinctual makeup scavenging on the dead constructs of his intellect and as a primeval symbol out of legends and folk mythology. The protagonist in Crow is a kind of “primal man that is also primal life and primal fiend” (Holloway 96). The volume contains a sequence of poems in which the crow figures not just as a bird but a symbol. In these poems, Hughes makes use of numerous legends about creation and birth to portray the predatory, mocking, indestructible crow.
Ted Hughes replaces the song-birds of the Romantics (e.g. nightingale, skylark etc.) with the predatory birds like hawk. Steve Padley observes that the “predatory life forms that inhabit his [Hughes’s] landscapes can be read as symbolising imperialistic values” (81). However, the violence expressed by the hawk or his jaguar, pike, otter, thrush etc. is immensely creative. It helped Hughes in wrestling individuality for England. For Hughes “every image of strife is also potentially an image of rebirth” (Bromwich 252). In Hughes’s “Hawk Roosting” (from the volume Lupercal) we are hurled into the head of a hawk and thereby have a hawk’s eye view of the creation. The poem is a monologue of a hawk, though the hawk is deliberating in flagrantly human terms. Perched high atop a tree, the hawk seems to be roosting in a vast wood. Sitting with majestic pomp and grandeur, the hawk ‘in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat’. He rules the roost in his realm and everything is created to facilitate his “single-minded hunting” (Draper 131):

The convenience of the high trees!
The air’s buoyancy and the sun’s ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth’s face upward for my inspection.

(CP 68)

The hawk takes himself to be pivotal, for all the other elements – trees, air, earth, sun – are there for his convenience. Even the globe revolves at his bidding:
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot
Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly –

(CP 68-9)

The extract above shows how the hawk constructs its own image – its own superiority, mobility and agency. The power to hold the ‘creation’ in his own feet, the best that was created in the world, and to move and control everything is basically imperialistic in its connotations. It goes to the credit of the poet that he is able to transform the ordinary bird of prey into one in which a mythic spirit is breathed into. Other creatures are there only as his prey. He, like the inscrutable destiny, dispenses death to his victims. The hawk demonstrates his animal single-mindedness and his brutish strength. He has neither any room for feelings of compassion, nor any sort of doubts or scruples:

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.

(CP 69)
The hawk directly swoops down on its prey and with its powerful beak and vice-like talons pierces ‘Through the bones of the living’. He does not even need to argue his case to assert his authority that has to be taken for granted (‘No arguments assert my right’). Nothing has changed since he came into this universe for he never permitted any change to take place:

Nothing has changed since I began.

My eye has permitted no change.

I am going to keep things like this.

(CP 69)

The hawk deems himself as the apotheosis of power and is immensely proud of his power to kill.

Hughes makes the following observation about his hawk:

That bird is accused of being a fascist... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It’s not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil
out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature... and Nature
became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which
he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem
almost verbatim from Job. (qtd. in Sagar, Art 48; emphasis original)

In his The Art of Ted Hughes Keith Sagar points out that the line Hughes refers to in
Job is: “Whatsoever is under the whole heaven is mine” (Job 41:11). This has an
obvious echo in Hughes’s line: “I kill where I please because it is all mine” (“Hawk
Roosting” I 14). Later, Hughes identifies his hawk with ‘Isis, mother of the gods’
though, according to ‘The Egyptian Book of the Dead’, the hawk is not Isis, but the son
of Isis and Osiris. This son, Horus by name, is a masculine deity. The ancient Egyptians
knew the hawk, as Guirand asserts, under the name Hor that in Egyptian sounds like a
word meaning ‘sky’. The Egyptians referred to the falcon that they saw soaring high
above their heads, and many thought of the sky as a heavenly falcon whose two eyes
were the sun and the moon. The people attending worship of this bird must have been
copious and commanding; for it was carried as a totem on prehistoric standards and
from the earliest times was considered the pre-eminent celestial being. The “hieroglyph
which represents the idea of ‘god’ was a falcon on its perch” (qtd. in Sagar, Art 21).

What Hughes admires most about the hawk and by extension all predators is
their ability to administer absolute authority over their surroundings. He does not allow
things to change. Human beings are often assaulted by doubts and uncertainties while
the hawk remains firm till the last. He is totally devoid of man’s devitalizing
intellectuality, inherent infirmity and slavish obedience to rules. This steadiness,
firmness and single-mindedness of the hawk was what Hughes found missing in contemporary England. Mohan Ramanan’s comment is of singular importance here: “What Hughes seems to be saying is that this is no time for self-pity or nostalgia. This is the time to assert ourselves as we did in the good old days of empire. Hughes’s violent imagery is closely aligned with authoritarian politics” (67).

Animal steadfastness, as opposed to human indecision, is superbly presented in “Thrushes.” Thrushes arouse fear and appear more automaton-like than mere birds of flesh and blood:

Terrifying are the attentive sleek thrushes on the lawn,
More coiled steel than living –

(CP 82)

With their ‘sleek’ body, ‘delicate legs’ and hawk-like ‘dark deadly eye’ these ‘stabbing machines’ (Walcott 43) just pounce upon the insect creeping through the grass:

... – with a start, a bounce, a stab

Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing.

(CP 82)
What Hughes admires most in the thrushes is their decisiveness and swiftness of action. After seeing a prey, they seize it in the blink of an eye. There is no reluctance or vacillation whatsoever about their action:

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares.
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab
And a ravening second.

(CP 82)

Hughes simply wonders at the lightning speed of the bird, and the whole poem depicts this swiftness and agility. In this poem he evokes the “instinctual energy of thrushes with an original exactness” (Draper 132). Hughes compares the promptness and rapidity of the thrush to the quickness of the brain of the legendary German composer, Mozart. Thrushes possess a ‘bullet and automatic’ purpose which parallels the swiftness of the ‘shark’s mouth.’ Actually the “thrushes are terrifying not only for their ravening of writhing things, but for the too streamlined efficiency with which they pursue their unwavering purpose – the efficiency of a bullet (whose one path is direct through the bones of the living)” (Sagar, Art 45).

Hughes then contrasts this extraordinary efficiency with man’s habit of thinking before acting. Riding a horse, a man may perform a heroic deed, but he would think a long time before doing it. Man spends years, working on a piece of ivory in order to turn it into an artistic ornament:
*With a man it is otherwise.* Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-dairy at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years

(EP 83; emphasis added)

Thrushes attack their prey without the least delay or reluctance. Human beings, on the contrary, do never possess that kind of decisiveness and swiftness of action. Man can hardly realize his own potentialities and often get reduced to a barren life in his ivory tower. In the post-War, post-Imperial England, when people got befuddled by the rollback effect, the quickness of Hughes’s thrushes could well be a caveat to them.

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.

(From "The Jaguar")

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.

The lion is a national emblem of Great Britain. The lion image remains iconic of British supremacy. Hughes has always been obsessed with the lion motif. On the eighty-fifth birthday of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, Hughes wrote the poem "Two poems for Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother" (4 August 1985).

"The Dream of the Lion", the first of the two poems, introduces three lions: the one in Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother's maiden name, the one in her birth-sign, and the totem animal of Great Britain. Hughes himself admits, "The first and the third combined inside my head long ago, during my boyhood obsession with the animal kingdom and my boyhood fanatic patriotism, in a way that was able to stir at the surface again, in these verses, as an experience to some degree widely shared" (CP 1216). In a letter written to Keith Sagar dated 19 January 1986, Hughes gave detailed account of how the poem figured into his mind before its being born. Hughes read somewhere that one of the more well-known ancestors of Queen Mother was 'a scots Lord known as The White Lion.' He further says:
It occurred to me that she’s the focal point of odd coincidences: her maiden name Lion, her birth-sign Lion and the fact that she’s astrologically very typical, a textbook case, in that facially she somehow resembles a Lion (especially the eyes – even more so when she was younger – and the profile), and her role as bearer of the mythic crown in a collective psychic unity where the totemic symbol of union was the Lion. I thought something might be made of this that would amuse her to read. (506)

He goes on to inform that “[t]he starting point went into complications, once I began to reflect that the Lion is the only totem under which the British Isles have ever approached a state of unity, as one Federation with a reasonably shared family feelings, and their history as a united people of the lion culminated – and collapsed – in her reign, in the 2nd World War which she seemed to survive as the sole sacred representative of the idea of unity under the Lion (which she upheld apparently quite alone and in her own person after she had absorbed all the Royal qualities of her reign, on the death of King George….)” (507, emphasis added). That the poem carries and reflects Hughes’s Englishness connected with the problems associated with imperialism and War is reflected in the following observations made in the letter: “My early days are tangled in lion ideas. The idea of being English, of my father having won the war (when I was about four) etc was all tied up with the lion…. When the war came and we were painting posters endlessly all mine were simple scenes of the giant lion in action” (507). Recalling that in his childhood he used to imagine his mother looking a bit like a
lion and that he also identified her with the Queen Mother, he comments that this may be "a common English delusion (Marrying one of the Royal Family is one of the common English dreams)" (507). For Hughes the Queen, therefore, not only stands for Englishness but also for "centre of psychic wholeness and unity and harmony" (507).

He thus felt that in the poem he could "project an Eden – not just a childhood land of the animals, but a land of communal protective care, where all natural internecine impulses are suspended before the fall into division, difference and conflict. In this land every creature, of whatever kind, is also, psychically, a lion – as in a totem group" (507-8). The 'Lion-likeness' is, according to him, a powerful form of self-esteem and self-confidence and this is shared by all in the 'collective psychic unity.' This "is regarded as 'sacred' – there's a religious attitude towards it (Was!)" (508-9). In another letter he observes that Monarchy "is absolutely vital, like a biological necessity" and makes his own position clear when he says that "[i]n so far as I'm for unity above all, I'm all for Monarchy. In England, anyway" (530).

Only a few lines from the poem would suffice to prove Hughes's penchant for the animal:

...It was an ancient Land. The Land of the Lion.

Where was this land? The Land belonged to the Lion.

It could not fade, the vision of the Land of the Lion.
Dreamed that single dream: the dream of the Lion.

Surprised by being, and listening only for the Lion,

Saw the Lion a Queen in the Land of the Lion.

And on standard and icon a Lion. And Lion

The name our long-ship Island bore ...

(CP 806)

In Great Britain, the Lion and the Unicorn were first combined, as the supporters (the beasts on either side) of the royal coat of arms, by James I, in 1603. In the early 1990s, when the public plan to erect a 25-feet-high bronze Unicorn fountain in Parliament Square, as part of the celebrations of the Royal event, was postponed, Ted Hughes thought of filling the gap, provisionally, with a Unicorn in verse. On the fortieth anniversary of the accession of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, he wrote the poem “The Unicorn” (6 February 1992). Thus an animal like jaguar could well signify the existence of British power that is absent at present but needs to be revitalized.

After losing the vast empire, the predicament of the English lion was more or less like the caged jaguar – if not exactly behind bars but certainly constricted by circumstances. Even if the rage was there, the domain was lost. But in spite of everything, Hughes wanted England to keep up the very instinct or energy which was
English in spirit. 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’” (Sweeting 70).

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.

A ‘Blaze of darkness’ bedazzles the protagonist in “The Bull Moses.” Though he cannot see the bull, he can well sense his intense physicality in the ‘warm weight of his breathing, /The ammoniac reek of his litter, the hotly-tongued/ Mash of his cud…’

Then gradually, as if his ‘mind’s eye’ depicts:

The brow like masonry, the deep-keeled neck:

Something come up there onto the brink of the gulf,

Hadn’t heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,

Stood in sleep.

(CP 74)
There was a time when bulls used to be untamed, but now he is tied with a ‘ring of brass through his nostrils.’ Though the prize bull has now been reduced to enslavement, the expression – ‘the locked back of his powers’ betrays the bull’s hidden, immense power that nothing can keep in subjection. Despite his captivity, the bull connects his wild ancestors with his equally wild descendants. His unbridled forefathers used to rove the continents. His rampant heirs will also roam the earth when man’s rule comes to an end. He emerges victorious even in fetters in the sense that he inseminates (‘wombed’) lots of cows and thereby becomes the progenitor. Actually, like his namesake, the other Moses, he foresees the Promised land and guarantees the continuity of his race. His scions will be free to inherit the world. Like the jaguar, he also emerges a visionary in his cell:

... something

Deliberate in his leisure, some beheld future

Founding in his quiet.

(CP 74)

It is not for nothing that the bull is called Moses.

The very movement of Hughes’s otter (in “An Otter”) 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.’

Hughes’s “Pike” is of singular importance as far as animal ferocity is concerned. It is, “perhaps his most potent totem of ancestral Englishness” in the oeuvre of Ted Hughes (Ingelbien 127). Though just three inches long, pikes are “(k)illers from the egg.” Even a newly-born pike has an ancient, spiteful grin (“the malevolent aged grin”). These ravenous predators crop up to the surface of the pond in a dance of death “among the flies.” The mention of flies unmistakably hints at the lord of the flies and thereby extend the image of death. The pike ‘move, stunned by their own grandeur.’ Though small to our eyes, they are very large in the world to which they belong and to their smaller preys under the water, they appear really large. Hughes’s pike swell from their
initial length of “three inches long” to “A hundred feet long in their world.” Later in the poem, the pond itself enlarges from “fifty yards across” to become “as deep as England” and is still said to hold “Pike too immense to stir.” The very shape of the pike’s jaws and the arrangement of the sharp teeth inside the jaws point to the deftness this fish has reached as slayer:

The jaws’ hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

(CP 85)

The pike is “a form assumed by the devil”, an “enormous fish with great teeth, which slaughters the little fishes” (Gubernatis 337-8). Hughes presents us with two anecdotes from which it appears as if this fish lived only to capacitate its jaws to go about their undertaking. In the first case, the strongest of the three cannibals eats the other two:

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed fry to them -
Suddenly there were two. Finally one.
With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.

And indeed they spare nobody.

(CP 85)

On another occasion, two pikes, ‘six pounds each, over two feet long’, kill each other while trying to eat one another. One ‘jammed past its gills down the other’s gullet’ and the incident leaves a sense of awe and violence in its wake that is not lost even in death. In fact, Hughes’s universe is fraught with irrationality and violent death for which the fierce, cannibalistic pikes are an apt symbol. Thus, in his poem “Ghost Crabs” we find the crabs ‘stalk’ each other, ‘fasten’ on to each other, ‘mount’ each other, and ultimately ‘tear’ each other to pieces. They just utterly ‘exhaust’ each other.

Not just in the animal kingdom, Hughes finds vigour and violence even in the vegetational world. While cows are busy eating the grass and men are busy doing their agricultural work, Hughes’s thistles (in “Thistles”, the opening poem of the volume Wodwo) burst into life under a natural pressure and rise sharply into the air:

Thistles spike the summer air

Or crackle open under a blue-black pressure.

(CP 147)

Every thistle seems to have come into being with a revengeful motive. The pointed leaves and white beard of the weed form an image of the weapons of Viking soldiers.
Actually, each thistle reminds the onlooker of some Viking, representative of potent, fighting powers, though he now lies buried underneath and his body has now been reduced to dust. That is why each thistle seems to have a touch of blood about it, and thus strengthening the impression that each thistle is a Viking who has come back to life in order to wage war once again:

Every one a revengeful burst

Of resurrection, a grasped fistful

Of splintered weapons and Icelandic frost thrust up

From the underground stain of a decayed Viking.

They are like pale hair and the gutturals of dialects.

Every one manages a plume of blood.

(CP 147)

Here Hughes uses the alliterative devices of Anglo-Saxon poetry to suggest that natural cycles still embody a form of continuity with a ‘submerged Englishness’ (Ingelbien 119). The consonant clusters like ‘sp’ (‘grasped’), ‘spl’ (‘splintered’), and ‘st’ (‘burst’, ‘fistful’, ‘frost’, ‘thrust’, ‘stain’) etc. are literally ‘spiky’ (Sagar, *Art* 63) and add to the violent visage of the wild plant. The expression - “Burst of resurrection” attains ‘the same kind of effect as Shakespeare’s use of the word “aggravate”, which produced “a short-circuit to the concrete Anglo-Saxon ‘gr’ core of growl, grind, eager, grief, grate, etc.”’ (Hughes, *Winter* 105). Actually here, ‘resurrection’, with the violent
r's and consonant clusters, adds to the 'aggressively alliterative music' of the lines. This is how the 'Latinate Christian concept of resurrection' has been endowed with 'pagan and Germanic overtones' by force (Ingelbien 119). Hughes uses the very word, as Ingelbien rightly observes, as a tool to bring back 'remnant of ancestral Englishness' (119). Vikings are noted for their fierceness in fighting, revengeful attitude, brutality, cruelty, and barbarity. Hughes finds the same brutal violence and bloodthirstiness in the thistles. They carry the Nordic heritage of Britain, the "gutturals of dialect" (Ingelbien 119). In course of time thistles will grow grey, like men, and will eventually be killed (cut down), like men fighting in a battle. However, the battle would not come to an end as they are indestructible in their violence – they always reappear, armed with weapons, to carry on the fighting. Actually the thistles remind Hughes of the warriors of the olden times fighting over the same ground where the original Norsemen had fought at one time:

Then they grow grey, like men.
Mown down, it is a feud. Their sons appear,
Stiff with weapons, fighting back over the same ground.

*(CP 147)*

Thus, Hughes's "Thistles" may be read as a poem about the hostility man perceives in the natural processes.

Hughes's poem "The Warriors of the North" (in *Wodwo*) could be read as a companion-piece of "Thistles." Hughes is found here dealing directly with the place of
the 'Nordic element in the multi-layered matter of England' (ingelbien 119). His use of plosives, strong stresses, consonant clusters and sibilants creates the same 'Germanic roughness' (ingelbien 119) typical of "Thistles": the Vikings are "[b]ringing their frozen swords, their salt-bleached eyes, their salt-bleached hair" (CP 167).

In the other hawk poem, "The Hawk in the Rain" (the title poem of the volume The Hawk in the Rain) man is pitted against nature while the bird is above the struggle man is engaged in. The persona finds himself exposed to the elements as he slogs through the sucking, clinging ploughed field in torrential rain:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
With the habit of the dogged grave...

(CP 19)

In these few lines "the consonantal grip - the clenched fist of the old Anglo-Saxon line in contemporary free verse - tightens in direct response to the 'I' s psychological need to keep clear of the matter 'lowest down' which seems to menace its authority" (Bishop 4). While he is struggling through the mud a hawk, perched at a height, looks downwards calmly without showing any sign of discomfort. The hawk sits 'effortlessly', maintaining the perfect equilibrium. His wings seem to hold all creation without having to exert themselves in the least:
... but the hawk

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.

His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet

(CP 19)

The weight and bodily limitations of the persona contrasts sharply with the 'weightless quiet' of the bird, his firm balance on the storm and his commanding attitude holding 'all creation'. The man writhes like the victim already in the predator’s mouth or flounders like one drowning at sea. Thus, man's desperate and uncertain capacity to struggle against the elemental forces looks limited, and futile against the bird's masterful composure. In fact, the persona's ordeal ceases to be a mere walk across a field, but becomes a lifelong condition. The hawk's apparent centrality and poise is what the man envies. It is so different in its firmness from the commotion around it that it appears like a 'hallucination' (‘Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air’). The hawk sits steadily without being in the least shaken by the strong and cold wind that strikes against the body of the man, hitting every organ of his body. Indeed, the persona feels that the rain is as if cutting through his head and reaching his very bones, while the hawk sits determinedly and displaying thereby his unflinching willpower. The bird's liberty from the wrestle with the forces of nature becomes a matter of admiration to the man and provides him with a sense of something to surpass. The persona sees the hawk's mastery as the 'diamond point of will'. He apprehends that he would be swallowed by the mud. In this poem, we are pitched into the thick of the war between
life and death. Three out of the four elements appear to be in alliance with death. Earth, even the ploughed earth, supposed to be fertile, is in actuality an open grave that 'dogs' our life. Water is out to drown. Instead of engendering new life, rain turns the rich earth into down-dragging death trap. Air is converted to life-snatching gale. The only ray of life is located only in the eye of the hawk, which seems effortlessly, by an act of will, to master it all, to be the exact centre, the eye of the storm, the 'master-Fulcrum of violence'. Thus, Hughes's hawk assumes a god-like self-sufficiency.

However, even the hawk's command cannot last forever. A day would come when the hawk, taking a wrong direction in the course of a furious storm, would be forced downwards and flung down to the earth, only to be killed instantaneously – his blood finally mixing with the same slime of the land that claims the man at the inception:

That may be in his own time meets the weather

Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,

Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,

The horizon traps him; the round angelic eye

Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land.
But even death cannot dwarf the spirit of the bird. Death is common end of every life. But the hawk snatches a martyr’s triumph even in destruction and it is this victory of the hawk that Hughes imaginatively enters into. The difference between hawks, (and by extension, animal in general) and man is not that the animal can escape the ultimate doom but that it can adapt itself to the elemental forces. The hawk is a part of nature in a way that man can never be. The ‘animal’ energy matters and it is this energy that Hughes puts emphasis on. Hughes’s tomcat (in the poem “Esther’s Tomcat”) is “unkillable. From the dog’s fury, / From gunshot fired point-blank he brings/ His skin whole, and whole/ From owlish moons of bekittenings/ Among ashcans” (CP 67).

To Hughes even writing poetry was capturing animals:

The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own. (Poetry 17)

Thus, in “The Thought Fox” his creative purpose is metaphorically represented as a vulpine visitation. In his early childhood Ted Hughes once came across a fox which remained in his unconscious mind as a symbol of “unquenchable life whether in the natural world or in the human psyche” (Sagar, “Hughes and his landscape” 8).
At the inception of the poem, we find the persona in the act of imagination and with a 'blank page.' The persona imagines himself inside a forest at midnight. He perceives that a fox is approaching with stealth. He feels that the fox’s nose has touched a twig and, next, a leaf and as it moves onwards, it leaves distinct footprints on the snow. The fox continues to move forward and then, suddenly and abruptly enters the dark hole of the persona’s head:

... with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox

It enters the dark hole of the head.

(CP 19)

The window is starless still; the clock ticks even now; but the page is no longer blank – the fingers move over it and a poem is printed on it:

The window is starless still; the clock ticks,

The page is printed.

(CP 19)

Thus, the poem is about the mind’s creation of an imaginary fox meant to symbolize the creative faculty of the artist. Capturing animals was the childhood passion of Ted.
Hughes and significantly, he compares his creative purpose with the arrival of a wily fox, perhaps the most difficult one to catch. In Hughes’s own word:

An animal I never succeeded in keeping alive is the fox. I was always frustrated: twice by a farmer, who killed cubs I had caught before I could get to them, and once by a poultry-keeper who freed my cub while his dog waited. Years after those events I was sitting up late one snowy night in dreary lodgings in London. I had written nothing for a year or so but that night I got the idea I might write something, and I wrote in a few minutes “The Thought Fox”; the first animal poem I ever wrote. (qtd. in Sagar, “Hughes and his landscape” 7)

The persona in “The Horses” also gets fascinated by the primeval energy of the animal. The poem begins with “A world cast in frost”, just in the “hour-before-dawn dark”. The scene was absolutely silent and still. “Not a leaf, not a bird” could be heard making any sort of sound. The cold was intense, and the air seemed to have ‘evil’ intentions. The very breath of the persona got frozen when he exhaled it. Against such a backdrop he saw a herd of horses (ten to be exact) standing still without making any movement except for their breathing. Their size appeared to be enormous though they stood absolutely motionless, as though in a sort of stupor, with their manes draped and their hind hooves tilted to one side. It seemed as though they had never budged and
never would from their primitive statuesqueness. As the persona passed them none of them even snorted or jerked his head:

... And I saw the horses:

Huge in the dense grey-ten together-
Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,

With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,
Making no sound.

I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.

(CE 22)

Afterwards, when the sun rose higher and higher brightening the valleys the horses remained standing in the same posture (‘But still they made no sound./Not one snorted or stamped’). Only this time their breath was fully visible in the sunlight and the persona saw their draped manes and tilted hind-hooves slightly moving as the frost began to thaw in the sunshine:

There, still they stood,

But now steaming and glistening under the flow of light,
Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves

Stirring under a thaw while all around them

The frost showed its fires.

(\textit{CP 22})

Thus, though not a predator like other Hughes animals (e.g. hawk, pike, jaguar, etc.) his horses brave the nature even in its most extreme manifestations by maintaining their calm and more importantly, by their trust in and tryst with it.

Like his jaguar, Hughes's macaw, in “Macaw and Little Miss” is also confined to a “cage of wire-ribs” in the “old lady’s parlour” and “hangs as in clear flames, / Like a torturer’s iron instrument.” Behind bars, the “size of a man’s head” the bird “bristles in a staring/Combustion...” The old lady has “a grand-daughter” — the Little Miss of the poem who ‘cajoles’ and ‘rocks’ the bird ‘gently’ and also “caresses, whispers kisses” with the dream of a “warrior... Smashing and burning and rending towards her loin.” Actually Hughes’s macaw ceases to be a mere bird of flesh and blood and becomes an image of what the little girl and her grandmother have done to the principle of masculinity. The little miss’s caresses and tantrums make the “beak, wings, talons, crash/ The bars in conflagration and frenzy.”

Quite in the same vein Hughes’s bullfrog (in the poem “Bullfrog”) “pump out/Whole fogs full of horn — a threat/As of a liner looming.”

Hughes sings of the life force in his volume \textit{Season Songs} (1976) as well. In “A March Calf”, even the new-born calf is destined to make its way to the slaughterhouse:
"What did cattle ever find here
To make this dear little fellow
So eager to prepare
himself?
He is already in the race,
and quivering to win—"
Not just the calf, his whole
lineage is tied up in a system of butchers and markets. However, what Hughes wants to
bring home to us is the life force that:

...shivers for feel of the world licking his side.

He is like an ember — one glow
Of lightning himself up
With the fuel of himself, breathing and brightening. (CP 308)

This life force one can trace in the oak tree: "...it is a giant brazier/Of invisible glare,
an invisible sun./The oak tree’s soul has returned and flames its strength" ("Spring
Nature Notes"), or in the sudden diving and wheeling flight of the swifts: "... With a
bowing/ Power-thrust to left, then to right, then a flicker they/Tilt into a slide, a tremble
for balance./Then a lashing down disappearance" ("Swifts"). It is promise of life that
one gets in "March morning unlike others": "After the frightful operation./She lies
back, wounds undressed to the sun./To be healed ... While we sit, and smile, and wait,
and know/ She is not going to die." Even the grass (in "Hay") is happy: "The grass is
happy/To run like a sea, to be glossed like a mink’s fur/By polishing wind.” In
"Mackerel Song” Hughes is all praise for the fish’s ‘hunger’ and ‘gormless plenty’:
"While others sing the mackerel’s armour... I sing his simple hunger. / While others
sing the mackerel’s swagger... I sing his gormless plenty.” True, Season Songs abounds
in death. The young swift that falls from its nest dies: “The inevitable balsa death. /Finally burial… Of my little Apollo –” (“Swifts”). The lamb also dies: “So he died, with the yellow birth-mucus... He did not survive a warm summer night./Now his mother has started crying again.” (“Sheep”) The pheasant dies: “the pheasant who hangs from a hook with his brothers... Is folded in feathers/With its head in a bag.” (“The Seven Sorrows”) Foxes are hunted to death: “the fox’s sorrow/The joy of the huntsman, the joy of the hounds... Till earth closes her ear/To the fox’s prayer.” (“The Seven Sorrows”) The cranefly is also approaching its death, slowly but steadily: “the simple colourless church windows of her wings/Will come to an end” (“A Cranefly in September”). However, death does not cancel “vitality, for all the deep compassion it evokes” (Sagar, Art 163) and the very life force remains victorious till the end.

Hughes’s volume Moortown Diary (1979) also emerges celebratory of the élan vital that remains invincible even in death. True, the rage or what is known as the ‘violence’ in Ted Hughes (conspicuous in the first few volumes of Hughes e.g. The Hawk in the Rain, Lupercal etc.) is rather mitigated by now. However, what is very much present here is the death-defying oomph. In Hughes’ Moortown we are presented with the animal vitality that gets manifested in the death-defying message in many a poem of the volume. In “Foxhunt”, the fox always runs the risk of getting hunted: “Will he run... Or will he/Make a mistake; jump the wrong way, jump right/Into the hound’s mouth?” However, in spite of the menacing presence of the hunters and their hounds the fox remains alive till the end: “He runs still fresh, with all his chances before him.” The ailing calf in ‘Struggle’ perished despite all the nursing provided: “We poured his mother’s milk into him/But he had not strength to swallow... his eye just lay suffering
the monstrous weight of his head... He could not make it.” But significantly, “He died called struggle” (CP 510; emphasis added). Everything born dies, what matters is struggle. “February 17th” describes how the persona had to decapitate (“Sliced the lamb’s throat-strings, levered with a knife/Between the vertebrae and brought the head off”) a half-born dead lamb (“A lamb could not get born”) in order to save the mother’s life. The persona tried to hook out the body of the dead lamb (“I pulled against/The corpse that would not come.”). But surprisingly the dead one comes out as a “Parcel of life” and beside the cut-off head the body lay “born”:

And after it the long, sudden, yolk-yellow
Parcel of life
In a smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups –
And the body lay born, beside the hacked-off head.

(CP 519)

Thus even death comes with the promise of life. In “Birth of Rainbow” the promise of survival remains alive even when exposed to the elements: “the world blurred/And disappeared in forty-five degree hail/And a gate-jerking blast.” While humans “got to cover”, the cow and even her new-born (Rainbow by name) are “[l]eft to God”. In “Orf” a lamb was suffering badly from the ulcerous infection known as Orf or Lewer: “Because his nose and face were one festering sore/That no treatment persuaded, month after month... Which could only stand and no more.” Since there was no hope of recuperation the persona had to kill him: “I shot the lamb./I shot him while he was
looking the other way. / I shot him between the ears.” But the very ‘lamb-life’ emerges unassailable:

But the lamb-life in my care
Left him where he lay, and stood up in front of me
Asking to be banished,
Asking for permission to be extinct,
For permission to wait, at least,
Inside my head
In the radioactive space
From which the meteorite had removed his body.

(CP 523)

In “Little red twin” the young calf was suffering from ‘scour’, a chronic condition of diarrhoea (“sister of little black twin, / Is sick. Scour”) and in spite of the nursing provided, it died (“There she lies dead”). But what is important is the resurrection:

...Yet she is alive!

[...]

...We leave her
To her ancestors, who should have prepared her

For worse than this. The smell of the mown hay
Mixed by moonlight with driftings of honeysuckle
And dog-roses and foxgloves, and all
The warmed spices of earth
In the safe casket of stars and velvet

Did bring her to morning. And now she will live.

(CP 526-7)

So far, it has been animals of different sorts. But in “Bayonet Charge,” basically a war-poem, one can have a glimpse of the animal within. The young soldier wakes up from his dreams of patriotic sentiments about war and starts running. He becomes aware for the first time of the inhuman, calculated and mechanical way in which the nations had sent them to battle only to be slaughtered there like cattle. That is why in “bewilderment then he almost stopped.” Stripped of all values and emotions save a desperate will to survive he concentrates only on the charge and this is the time when he does take charge of himself. He forgets all man-made abstract concepts and kills only to subdue his own fears of getting killed and his sense of futility of the whole business of war. Thus, he forces himself on into the centre of a climactic energy and it is only at this moment his inner animal instinct comes out:
He plunged past with his bayonet towards the green hedge,

King, honour, human dignity, etcetera

Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm

To get out of that blue cracking air

His terror’s touchy dynamite.

\[(CP\ 43-4)\]

This is the moment when they cast aside all the so-called ‘human’ emotions and let the animal within come out to face death as a mere fact of their everyday life.

Thus, in the post-World War II, post-imperial period when the contemporary England had very little to offer, Ted Hughes drew on violent animal energy and myths of various kinds in order to get the required succour and solace with which he was to heal the hurt English pride.

\[III\]

The aspect of ‘Hughes the healer’ gets manifested in his interest in ‘shamanism’ and in his very poetic creed as well. With the power of his poetry, Ted Hughes was to inject new life in the moribund poetic situation as well as that of the English psyche of the period. In the oeuvre of Ted Hughes, one may seek the much-needed anodyne with
which to 'heal' the scar of the loss of empire. As far as this '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 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.

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 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.²

To Hughes the urge towards poetry was a religious one – his poetry being poetry of inspiration unlike that of the Movementeers. 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, “Hughes and the Movement” 32). This is how Hughes gets connected to 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, “Hughes and the Movement” 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, “Hughes and Shamanis” 70). With the animal verve and vitality, Hughes was out to fill in the post-Imperial vacuum. 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
depth 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.

\textit{(CP 89)}

Even Calphurnia, wife of the legendary Julius Caesar, (in Shakespeare’s \textit{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.

\textit{(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:

\textit{Maker of the world,}

\textit{Hurrying the lit ghost of man}

\textit{Age to age while the body hold,}

\textit{Touch this frozen one.} \textit{(CP 89)}
Hughes's "Lupercalia" therefore signifies man's sterility and his need for the reinstatement of those vital energies. Hughes originally intended his volume *Lupercal*, as we have already seen in the Section I of this chapter, to include a whole sequence of about England.

Thus, the poetry of Ted Hughes represents a challenge to the urbanised, industrial, post-War, post-imperial, 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.

Notes

1. Angelo De Gubernatis is of the view that Hughes here may be drawing on the "legend of Lambert of Aschaffenburg where a pilgrim sees in a dream a horrid crow which caws and flies round Cologne and which is haunted away by a splendid horseman; the pilgrim explains that the crow is the devil and the horseman St George" (254). Carl Jung opines that, "In the Christian legend of
St George slaying the dragon, the primeval rite of sacrificial slaughter again appears” (237).

2. 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, “Hughes and the Movement” 23).


