

CONCLUSION

Ted Hughes will indeed always be remembered as the greatest British writer of the second half of the twentieth century, besides being the latest addition to a great tradition of Western Literature, which includes Homer, the Greek Tragic poets, Shakespeare, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Hopkins, Yeats, Lawrance, Eliot, Dylan Thomas and many others among a galaxy of distinguished poets. Eliot's belief that every new great writer added to the tradition changes the tradition, is aptly applicable to Hughes who has changed the very way we read all these writers.

The objective of this study was to trace the underlying quest of Hughes' poetic journey that transformed his imagination and led him through painful stages, from the world of myths and symbols to a world of confession. The journey that begins with *The Hawk in the Rain*, as a "rebellion against a certain kind of demeaned mannerly voice" (*Viewpoints* 73) of the fifties, that is the battle between vitality and apathy, continues in *Lupercal*, though on a more personal and historical level. Renouncing the dramatic confrontations of opposites along with the structured resolutions of *The Hawk in the Rain*, the poet knits together the poems of his second volume, *Lupercal* with the Roman myth of Lupercalia, which runs like a leitmotif throughout the volume. The purpose of both collections is to "axe the frozen sea inside us" (*LFFE* 17), to revitalise an apathetic post-war western generation through the power of the imagination.

The psychic progress of this promising poet however, was temporarily arrested with the tragic death of Sylvia Plath. Her suicide had made him take a completely different position on the question of post-war western culture, so that in his third volume *Wodow*, Hughes tried to relinquish failed cultural beliefs in the wake of the two World Wars and his personal tragedy and tried instead to relocate himself within the awakened inner self that he discovered in eastern subjective monism. However, his serene vision towards the end of this turbulent volume was soon to be shattered in his next volume, by another personal tragedy that took the form of the death of his companion Assia and their child Shura.

When Leonard Baskin invited him to write a few little poems to accompany some engravings of crows, Hughes' mythic imagination immediately recognized the manifold mythic potentialities of the crow as trickster, as questing hero and as an embodiment of almost all the themes that seemed urgent to him then. Fascinated by the trickster element he wrote:

Beneath the Hero-Tale, like the Satyr behind the tragedy, is the Trickster Saga, a series of Tragicomedies. It is a series, and never properly tragic, because Trickster, demon of phallic energy, bearing the spirit of the sperm, is repetitive and indestructible. No matter what fatal mistakes he makes, and what tragic flaws he indulges, he refuses to let suffering or death detain him, but always circumvents them, and never despairs. Too full of spiritual ecstasy, too deathless for tragic joy, he rattles along on biological glee. (WP 24).

Once conceived *Crow*, completely possessed Hughes and became the protagonist of *The Life and Songs of Crow*. The poet drew not only on the trickster mythology but on the whole body of myth and folklore that Hughes was familiar with. *Crow* like *Wodwo*, once again reflected a disjunction between the poet's inner and the outer reality even while it anticipated his next volume *Gaudete*.

Gaudete marks a transition between the mythic surrealism of the sixties and the more spiritually liberated work of the seventies and eighties. It is a precursor to Hughes' trend of moderate thinking, rather than one of complete rejection of western culture. With the volume he begins to affirm his solidarity with the cyclic round of the suffering spirit and western thought, in the image of the flying Oak.

Hughes' use of the shamanic journey, the Lupercalia myth and other primitive rituals and symbols as organizational forms in the poetry of the sixties, affects a realization of the need to mythicize environment and construct rituals

that control or transmute aggressive and erotic drives. His use of primitive sources compels a confirmation rather than a repression of our non-rational inheritance and helps us to recognize that myth and religion have helped bring about social cohesion and personality development by channelizing the power and energy of these drives. Poetry for Hughes then, was: "the record of just how the forces of universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error". (UU 198).

As we turn to look back at the journey of the poet's soul, we see him progressing gradually towards a greater metaphysical assurance. We see him breaking down his superstructure and toning down his style to concentrate on his immediate responses to nature. A second marriage to Carol Orchard and a stable life at Moortown farm was doubtless a powerful influence in his transformation. *Remains of Elmet*, *Moortown* and *River* indicate that the poet now believes that the journey outwards and the journey inwards is similar in most respects, in that it leads to the transmutation of suffering into wisdom. There is a mood of serene acceptance in *Remains of Elmet*, which extends to include sympathy even for those who are dead and gone:

Wind slams across the tops.
The spray cuts upward.
You claw your way
Over the giant beating wing
And Thomas and Walter and Edith
Are living feathers
Esther and Sylvia.
Living feathers (NSP 181)

By descending from the farthest limits of pain and consciousness into the woods and fields among men and cattle, Hughes further recovers his universal spirit of life. As he wrote in 1978:

It's extremely difficult to write about the natural world without finding your subject matter turning ugly. In that direction, of course lie the true poems, the great

complete statements of the world in its poetic aspect.... (Poetry) seizes upon what is depressing and destructive, and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing....

(Qtd. from *FI* 257)

In terms of Hughes' emerging vision, the volumes of the seventies record a successful metamorphosis of suffering into spiritual affirmation. This spiritual illumination however, is achieved only after a descent into the surreal underworld of the sixties. *Moortown*, celebrates a renewed confidence in western attitudes towards nature, as a revived Adam now treads firmly on the world-rock, announcing that he is "no wing / to tread emptiness" (Qtd. from *FI* 257). The imagination in this volume, manifests itself chiefly in the persona's capacity to apprehend a higher reality, which is now the western energizing principle that extends vision beyond the discrete object to encompass and redeem the environment and to reconstruct time and space. *River*, sees Hughes acquiring a serenity that was rarely palpable earlier. Now, "*Only birth matters*" (*NSP* 237). This volume provides a wonderfully positive and life enhancing alternative to Crow's myopic vision.

After having arrived at the calm of an all-inclusive paradisaic unity, Hughes' meditative poetry undergoes a transmutation. In *Wolfwatching*, he once again writes about Wolves, Sparrow Hawks, Rhinos and Macaws. However, his Hawk and his Wolf are now infused with a rejuvenating poise that he has acquired after having been "there" in *River*.

The journey of this great poet finally ends with *Birthday Letters*, that is a stunningly fresh and written in an entirely different mode. Just as *The Hawk in the Rain*, his first volume came with a bang so also his last volume *Birthday Letters* as Jay Parini puts it: "rocked the world of letters" for it was indeed a beautiful, fierce and a vivid collection of poems addressed to his dead wife Sylvia Plath. The volume chronicles his relationship with Plath and his private life, divulging secrets he had never revealed before even in the toughest of times. His poetic career had begun with Hughes denouncing the confessional mode in preference of myths and symbols, to express the pain and tragedy of

his personal life. Even as he published *Birthday Letters*, he refused to be interviewed about the poems. But his letter to his editor Christopher Reid, who accepted the Forward Poetry Prize for the volume explained the book as:

a gathering of occasions...written with no plan over 25 years... in which I tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife, not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself and to feel her there listening.... Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until last year, when quite suddenly I realized I had to publish them no matter what the consequences.

This and the other letters written to friends, testify to the fact that Hughes regarded *Birthday Letters*, as a work of personal importance, acknowledging thereby, the therapeutic value of the confessional mode and belying all predictions that he would begin and end his poetic career as the foremost mythic poet of our age. Beginning his poetic career with electrifying works about animals and the natural world reflected in harsh physical images, Hughes ends his poetic journey in poems that are "tender elegiac acts of remembrance," as Nicci Gerard puts it. His journey thus progresses from the vantage position of a hawk on "top of the wood," who is "going to keep things like this" to the tender husband reminiscing over his dead wife's "pink wool knitted dress" in which, she "stood at the altar/... transfigured" into an "ocean depth / Brimming with God".