CHAPTER VI

VIOLENCE: A TIMELESS MYTH AND ARCHETYPE.

The consistent and organic development of poetic imagination necessarily stems from a vision that penetrates beyond the peripheral order of things. Poetic minds permeated with universal problems of existence compulsively modulate into artifacts embodying contemporary realities. Yet by necessity, most often, they transcend the temporal dimensions of such realities. This is realized in full measure in the poetic career of Hughes. His poetic vision of violence, which appears as an affirmation of life in The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal assumes a shamanic mode of ritualistic primitivism in Wodwo. It reaches the intensity of a paradox of creation and destruction in Crow, and becomes an apocalyptic ceremony in Gaudete. Finally it grows into a timeless myth in River and an archetype in Wolfwatching.

The poems in River can be considered as a continuation of the theme of Gaudete. In Gaudete, the abused female principle in Nature finds acceptance and the ego undergoes an apocalyptic change healing the wound of dichotomy in Nature. "Hughes explores the psychological and spiritual catharses that are to be gained from a total submission to and immersion in the forces of Nature as a stage in the recreation of harmony between inner and outer world, self and others."¹ This meaningful fusion and co-existence of the inner and outer world celebrated in the epilogue poems of Gaudete, finds its full significance in the River poems.

In River, Hughes reaches the culmination of his quest, recognizing that the self is inseparable from Nature. Thus, the ego, which appears as a powerful self-projected "I" in the

early volumes sublimates itself completely and merges with Nature as a radiant principle in his later volume River:

Nature becomes radiant before it becomes symbolic. The threat of the brain god logos of old is simply overwhelmed by the evidence of the surface of things, including the surface of the arch organ of duplicity, the eye: more than anywhere else, in River one feels the possibility that the eye can be a purely or at least dominantly sensual organ rather than an organ of fore-and-hind-sight.²

The significance of river as an originator of life and a timeless principle is a commonly accepted truth. Hughes himself has touched upon the subject in his first collection The Hawk in the Rain. The answer of the droplet to the man's query in "The Man Seeking Experience Enquires his Way of a Drop of Water" reveals the indestructibility and timelessness of water. "This droplet was clear simple water still/it no more responded than the hour-old child".³ Though water goes through transformation after transformation, it finds itself indestructible and ageless, retaining its pristine clarity.

The Biblical significance of river as a life force is upheld by the baptism of Christ in the waters of river Jordan by John the Baptist. Numerous parables in the Bible further speak of "the waters of life" or "the living water". "Psychologically, therefore, water means spirit that has become unconscious. So the dream of the theologian is quite right in telling him that down by the water he could experience the working of the living spirit like a miracle of healing in the pool of Bethseda." ⁴ Thus, the timeless aspect of the energy of life finds its best expression in river.

Ancient Greek philosophy and modern science equally attribute the origin of life to water. Moreover, all the poems in the collection, invariably touch upon the timeless aspect of energy which the river embodies. "Every poem, that is, deals with the 'theme', the river. And, though written over a period of about six years, the collection has, throughout the feel of a design, bringing many aspects of the river and its bank into one winding source of life during the course of a solstitial year." This unified nature of the poems and their significance as a timeless myth are also attested by Nicholas Bishop who renders a deconstructive analysis of Hughes's poems. According to him "The River is Hughes's most closely unified collection of poems to date. There is a real sense of completed re-emergence into the 'outer' world of Nature, of the recovery of the 'other' on all possible levels."  

The cleansing of the ego and its merger with Nature, or the archetypal collective unconscious, is fully realized in all the poems in River. "River habitually attempts to examine Nature from its own point of view, in an elevation of the narrative practice of Gaudete, its Dionysian readiness to speak in the idioms of the nearest dramatic presence, human or natural in all situations." Since the ego transcends its limitations of time and space by merging into the archetypal collective unconscious, the violence which appears in the poems of River (1983) becomes a timeless myth. The same energy, when expressed through animal archetypes such as the Wolf and the Hawk, becomes archetypal energy in Nature as portrayed in Wolfwatching (1989). The second section of this

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5 Thomas West, op. cit., p. 116.
7 Ibid., p. 241.
chapter will take up a detailed analysis of Wolfwatching in which violence becomes an archetype endowed with an ecological significance.

1. River: A Timeless Myth

In *River*, Hughes's unified vision of Nature prompts him to consider its vital energy as indestructible and timeless. River symbolises this timeless aspect of energy most palpably by its constant motion signifying life. Thus, in this volume Hughes invests the river and the organisms in it with a symbolic significance of timelessness. The parameters of modern psychology further amplify this observation. Carl Gustav Jung, in his essay "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious" deals elaborately with the significance of river as a timeless myth. Jung says that the dichotomy of matter and spirit becomes an integral principle in the form of water. "When our natural inheritance has been dissipated, then the spirit too as Heraclitus says, has descended from its fiery heights. But when spirit becomes heavy it turns to water... This water is no figure of speech, but a living symbol of the dark psyche." 8

Jung further elaborates the idea by bringing in the dream of a Protestant theologian who dreamt of a lake of water in which he wanted to enter but was afraid. Finally when he approaches the water, everything becomes dark and uncanny and a wind blows over the surface of the water. What is of significance here is Jung's explanation of the dream in which the river become a timeless myth, beyond the compass and the comprehension of human ego:

This dream shows us natural symbolism. The dreamer descends into his own depths, and the way leads him to the mysterious water.... Man's descent to the water is needed in order to evoke the miracle of its coming to life. But the breath of the spirit rushing over the dark water is uncanny, like everything whose cause we do not know—since it is not ourselves. It hints unseen presence, a numen to which neither a human expectation nor the machinations of the will have given life. ⁹

This explanation of Jung confirms the Hughesian notion of river as an incessant flow of indestructible energy making it a timeless myth.

The biotic community in river, especially the fishes embody an organic vision of life. The influence of Jung on Hughes is further indicated by Hughes's employment of salmon in the sequence as a recurring symbol signifying the unity of being. Explaining a gnostic hymn Jung says: "We must surely go the way of waters, which always tend downward, if we would raise up the treasure.... Mankind looked and waited and it was a fish "levatus profundo" (drawn from the deep) that became the symbol of the saviour, the bringer of healing." ¹⁰ The significance of the fish salmon in the collection is explicated by Thomas West thus: "the salmon virtually creates the poem for the poet, it is itself in Ezra Pound's sense, very nearly the adequate symbol, living out before the eyes, the unity of death birth and marriage, in one place, in one moment." ¹¹ Hence the role of salmon in River is of vital significance.

Hughes's concept of river as a radiant principle which transcends the duality of life into an all-encompassing unity

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¹⁰ Ibid., p. 216.
¹¹ Thomas West, op. cit., p.117.
is thus a poetic expression of Jungian psychology. As the poems in the volume are oriented towards this main idea, it would be relevant to recall the psychological axioms that prove water as an essence captured in space but beyond the scope of spatio-temporal reality. To Jung, the river is a collective sympathetic nervous system as opposed to the cerebro-spinal system of perception and muscular activity which operates in space and time. According to him, the river, "though functioning without sense organs, it maintains the balance of life and through the mysterious pathways of sympathetic excitation, not only gives us knowledge of the innermost life of other beings but also has an inner effect upon them." Thus, the river is a timeless myth which holds the key to the secrets of life. So Hughes employs it as the apt symbol of indestructible energy of life transcending the figurations of time and space.

Richard Chase, in his study of myth draws a close analogy between myth and river. "We should think of myth as river which flows eternally; sometimes it is clear and deep but sometimes it becomes shallow and muddy by having to flow over broad flat land." The significance of river as myth is further confirmed by Chase's description of the functions of the myth. He believes that the myth has a purely psychological aspect, it is a blaze of reality that performs a cathartic function. So he says: "myth performs the cathartic function of dramatizing the clashes and harmonies of life in a social

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natural environment."\textsuperscript{14} Thus, the river, as a myth performs the cathartic function of unifying man's divided psyche. In this sense, the struggling and divided anthropocentric persona of the earlier poems achieves a unified biocentric vision of life in the poems of River.

The first poem, symbolically begins on the day before Christmas. As Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ, a messiah who mediates between man and God, the earth itself radiates a harmonious wholeness, instead of an oppressive dichotomy.

Everything had come to a stand still in a brand new stillness.
The river-trees, in a blue haze,
Were fractured domes of spun ghost.\textsuperscript{15}

The opening lines of the book thus bespeak of a brand new stillness and a timeless life energy as seen in salmons. Hughes gives a detailed description of how eggs and milts of a few fishes multiply into thousands in a hatchery by human connivance. Eventhough human beings interfere here in the life process, it is not seen as a violation of natural law, on the other hand it only enhances and perpetuates the timeless life principle in Nature. "Naturalistic sexuality and conniving midwifery-- here and in a few other poems-- slip into a higher gear of cheery hermaphroditism, where doubles and sexes merge into the essential unity which all but the purest, sensual vision obscures-- where molecules mix and 'inner' atoms commune with 'outer ones'."\textsuperscript{16} The death of a few fish doesn't create repulsion, horror or shock in the poet but

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p. 249.
\textsuperscript{15} Ted Hughes, River (London: Faber, 1983), p. 8
\textsuperscript{16} Thomas West, op. cit., p. 117.
he accepts it effortlessly because it entails the birth of thousands of new life.

In the second poem "Japanese River Tales", Hughes identifies the river as a timeless principle of life. The symbolic function of the river becomes a living reality when Hughes invests it with sensuous details of feminine beauty:

Her light robe, jewels
In her hair, in her ears, at her bare throat
Dark eye flash twigs and brambles
Catch at her as she lifts
The tattered curtains.

The river embodies not only the vital feminine beauty but also the reality of death. This harmonious combination of life and death makes the hydraulic energy of the river a timeless myth.

In the undying reality of the river, death is a cosmic truth. So, in the next poem "New Year" Hughes speaks of the death of salmons due to snowfalls. Though the poetic persona thinks only of caesarian and anaesthetics, seeing their death, he later learns that "the salmons are loyal to a cosmic principle described in feminine terms as a nourishing, tireless river, a super human force that has not once tasted death." The poem "Whiteness" also explicates the idea that the river is a timeless myth, a cosmic principle beyond anthropocentric interpretations.

In "Four March Water Colours" river is captured in its various moods. In the third section, it is presented as an animating force replenishing the whole universe of flora and fauna:


An eve,
Sleep-spined is lowering herself.
To the power-coils
Of the river's bulge, to replenish her udder.

The image of the churning wheel in the poem is symbolic of the timelessness and immanence of the river. It is a reservoir of endless energy which sustains life on earth. In "Dee", the river becomes a timeless moving force. When Nature herself is locked up in winter snow, the river moves on with inexhaustible energy:

Nothing else dare or can
Pilfer from the shriveled procession
Nevertheless the lit queenliness of snow hills,
The high frozen bosom, wears this river
Like a peculiarly fine jewel.

Thus, in winter, when the whole of Nature is frozen into inactivity and hibernation, the river appears to be a fine jewel, and its moving energy achieves the grandeur of a timeless myth.

The earlier animal poems of Hughes are significantly noted for their depiction of the individual traits of animals. In River, on the other hand, the individuation of particular animals gives way to collective consciousness. Further, the specificity of individual details merge with the timeless principle of cosmic energy. "Salmon-Taking Times" examines river in its two diametrically opposite moods. After a heavy rain, the flooding river is like a muddy pig flushed out of the hillside. The narrow bends appear with diabolical muscles of destruction. The same river under a warm shower glistens in gossamer bridal veils. So the poetic persona says:

20 Ibid., p. 30.
The river thus becomes a timeless principle of harmonious wholeness by embodying in itself both the holy and the diabolic aspects of life.

In the poem "Under the Hill of Centurions" river achieves a divine grandeur. The river which is an endless reservoir of Nature's energy, becomes a divine principle of light. So the creatures of Nature find fulfilment in the river which is in a "resurrection fever". So the cock minnows have abandoned contemplation and prayer in the pool's crypt. They become radiant with divine ecstasy in the waters of the river:

In the letter of the light loon of water
All singing and
Toiling together
Wreathing their metals
Into the warp and weft of the lit water. 22

Similarly, the kingfishers too find such divine ecstasy in the radiating energy of the river:

A wrestling tress, of kingfisher colour,
Steely jostlings, a washed mass of brilliants
Labouring at earth
In the wheel of light--
Ghostly rinsings.
A struggle of spirits. 23

"Cormorant" is a fine poem which explicates the need for unity of being and singleness of purpose. Seeing the cormorant's integrity, the fishing persona learns the truth of

21 Ibid., p. 34.
22 Ibid., p. 36.
23 Ibid., p. 36.
Nature with self-effaced humility. There is no awe or aggressiveness of ego in the onlooker as in the earlier animal poems, instead there is a deep realization of the law of Nature. Even the act of fishing in the poem is not seen as an act of aggression but only as a participation in the process of Nature. There is no exultation of ego or the sadistic pleasure of victimization in the act of fishing:

The provisional persona within the poem readily deserts the old Self and its machinery and effects its own 'dissolution' into the cormorant self, the more efficient hunter. It happily sheds the stolid, earth-bound personality in its 'space armour' for the duration of its 'flight' comically reducing its self-importance.  

The poetic persona, in his newly acquired wisdom, views the whole process in a different manner. In his integrated vision, the victim-victimizer demarcation fades into a natural life process:

With futuristic archaic under-breath
so that some fish, telepathically over-powered
Will attach its incomprehension
To the bauble I offer to space in general.  

The poem, "Stump Pool in April" presents the river as a timeless myth of life energy. The organic energy in water is presented here as a timeless life force animating every thing within it:

The river is trying
To rise out of the river April
Has set its light workings. Its broad wings
Creased and humped in their folds, convulse
To lift out over the daffodils.  

The newly formed limbs of the river, animated by the oxygen in its throat, represent the symbolic fusion of instinctive

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25 Ted Hughes, River p. 38.
26 Ibid., p. 40.
energy with an organizing intellect which makes the river a timeless and indestructible myth.

"Go Fishing" enacts the psychological process of healing effected by the cleansing action of the river. The psychological division of instinct and intellect or the body and soul is the wound to be healed. The victimizing ego, instead of imposing itself on Nature, gracefully merges with the river to become a flow of psalm healing:

Join water, wade in under being
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away down stream
Gulp river and gravity
Lose words
Cease
Be assured into the womb of Lymph
As if creation were a wound
As if this flow were all psalm healing. 27

The cleansing action of the river is a baptismal rebirth for the ego. When brain mists into moist earth and flows with the living length of the river, it re-emerges as the healed self. "Temporarily divesting oneself of the mean ego and opening the self to the river's cleansing action one can let the mud and river-water dissolve and then heal the self". 28 "Go Fishing" thus becomes the manifesto of River poems.

The symbolic presence of salmon in most of the River poems testifies the unity of life forces as a timeless myth. The salmon in the "Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan" progressively disembodies the poetic persona into the salmon truth. The perception of the frightened ego thus becomes absorbed in the beauty of the salmon and merges into the timeless currents of the river. This solipsistic ego of man gradually dissolves in the flowing currents of the river.

27 Ibid., p. 42.
28 Leonard M. Scigaj, op. cit., p. 175.
Thus, the self-projected ego vanishes gradually in the unending vintage of the river making men really happy. When the invisible hands of the river grip the ego of man, he emerges as a timeless unified principle like the river itself and exults in the energy of Nature:

The whole river
Listen to me, and blind.
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper
With its invisible hands.  

The creatures that live in the river, by their close proximity to the timeless energy of the river gradually become an inseparable part of this energy. The appearance of the sea-trout at night is thus seen as the stirring of a universal and timeless principle of energy. In its leap, one can see the harmonious reflection of the vast currents of the energy in river:

Then a shattering
Of the river's hole, where something leaps out
An upside-down, buried heaven.
Snarls, moon-mouthed, and shivers.
Summer dripping stars, biting at the nape.  

In the poem "That Morning" the salmon appears again as a symbol of the meaningful fusion and co-existence of matter and spirit. The reality of the body overpowers the doubting ego, and transforms itself into a radiant principle of energy that transcends time and space in the timeless flow of the river. These salmons are not deathless fish but each living out its time in complete integrity. This is shown in the poem by the appearance of the bears that eat the fish. This aspect of Nature opens up a new awareness in the poetic persona who

29 Ted Hughes, River, p. 62.
30 Ibid., p. 68.
learns that the truth of life gets testified by the salmon's life and death:

So we found the end of our journey.
So we stood, alive in the river of light
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.\textsuperscript{31}

The title poem "River" explicates that the river is a timeless myth and an inexhaustible source of energy. It is not of the earthly origin, but an immortal principle fallen from heaven and broken by the world. The poem is a symbolic representation of the timelessness and indestructibility of the river. The water of the river is immortal because it issues from heaven, from the broken mouth of the rainy clouds. Even when it is scattered into million pieces it gathers itself and passes through transformation after transformation to find itself clear simple water still:

\begin{quote}
After swallowing death and the pit
It will return stainless
For the delivery of this world.
So the river is a god
\ldots{} It is a god and inviolable
Immortal, And will wash itself of all deaths.\textsuperscript{32}
\end{quote}

Since the river encompasses the ultimate reality of death, it becomes a timeless principle which can deliver the world like a god. After establishing the river as an immortal principle, Hughes explores the 'self' from his newly acquired perception. In the poem "Gulkana", the poet recounts his fishing expedition in Gulkana river in the Artic region. The poem also describes a village pitched on the banks of Gulkana whose culture is now almost extinct except for the primitive

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 72.

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., p. 74.
undeveloped 'glyph' of isolated pre-columbian vocables. In this sense, the river Gulkana becomes a hieroglyphic symbol which opens up the timeless truth of life. "Gulkana is something else, a mysterious 'glyph' which turns his fishing trip magically into a gesture which fleshes out the enigmatic word." 33 The integrated landscape becomes inseparable from the poetic persona. But the intrusion of the thinking self then becomes an interloper, creating a tremor of division between the self and the world. The pre-historic double of the interloper, urges the cerebral man to discover the truth of life Gulkana embodies as a fusion of inner and outer levels of landscape. It teaches him the lesson of the salmons which obey the eternal call of eros and thanatos:

in the fusion of outer and inner levels, the natural landscape goes on willingly to draw Hughes's characteristic psychological scenario. ...A seismic terror in the terrain of the psyche is also induced, in which the 'I'-fiction finds itself clinging, as in 'pike' and 'wind', to an unstable world description; menaced by the deranging cry from the wilderness. 34

Thus, "Gulkana" is a fine expostulation of Hughes's poetics of integrated self as contrasted with the imposing ego of the divided psyche explored in the earlier collections of The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal. In River, "the core of memory is a sort of biological self-lessness, where fish and man, male and female, homeland and prodigal son, move away from opposition to unity. Revelation in this sort of verse is simply diaphanous experience, less a special kind of knowledge

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33 Thomas West, op. cit., p. 119.

34 Nicholas Bishop, op. cit., p. 244.
than a state of being." 35 This principle of unity is extended into a universal self by employing the symbolic image of salmons.

The integral and harmonious fusion of the self and the world explored in the poems of the collection draw their strength from the recurring image of the salmon. These poems which appear in the final section of the volume regarding salmons such as "September Salmon", "October Salmon" and the final poem of the volume "Salmon Eggs" become symbolic of a mystical consciousness declaring the oneness and unity of creation. "September Salmon" manifests the fullness of creative energy. His creative energy makes him 'n nobly pre-occupied with his marriage license' making him a God. In his pre-occupation with creative energy he lifts himself "to the molten palate of the mercurial light". From this molten light of creative energy, the salmon obeys the call of nature gracefully as depicted in "October Salmon":

What a change! from that covenant of polar light To this shroud in a gutter! What death-in-life to be his own spectre? His living body becomes death's puppet. 36

The death of the salmon is seen not as a tragic event but as a natural process of transferring the specific energy which the particular individual body embodies into the shapeless current of Nature's indestructible energy:

On the surge-ride of energy, weightless, Body simply the armature of energy In that earliest sea-freedom, the savage amazement of life,

35 Thomas West, op. cit., p. 120.
36 Ted Hughes' River, p. 112
The salt mouthful of actual existence
With strength like light.\textsuperscript{37}

Thus, the salmon embodies in itself the truth of energy as a timeless principle. The final poem in the volume "Salmon Eggs" expounds a mystical sense of unity in the universe. "The individualized poetic exploration appropriates its ideal religious context and terminology. Where birth appears to be nothing less than the principle of transformation existing above the dualism 'raptures and rendings', within the self and in the external Nature." \textsuperscript{38} This all-pervading unity achieved through a dissolution of the ego erases all distinctions and divisions into a collective imagination centred in the "swaddling egg" which announces only "birth matters". Thus, throughout the collection, poem after poem Hughes advocates that the river is a timeless myth of inexhaustible energy embodying the unity of the self and the world.

2 Wolfwatching: An Archetype

In \textit{Wolfwatching} (1989), violence becomes an archetype against the individualized energy which appears in particular beasts and birds described in his earlier volumes. In his essay "The Archetypes of Literature", Northrop Frye categorises the wolf as an animal archetype. He says: "One essential principle of archetypal criticism is that the individual and the universal forms of an image are identical."\textsuperscript{39} The two archetypal images that Hughes employs

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., p. 112.
\item\textsuperscript{38} Nicholas Bishop, op. cit., p. 249.
\end{itemize}
consistently are the Wolf and the Hawk. In the earlier collections they are portrayed as individual animals capable of activating human imagination as embodiments of energy, but in Wolfwatching they enter human consciousness not by their compelling external presence but as an internal reality already existing in man's collective unconscious. In this sense, they are permanent and undying realities in the human psyche. In Jungian terminology, they become archetypes. "The contents of the collective unconscious, on the other hand, are known as archetypes." 40

The wolf which appears in Wolfwatching is different from the one which appears in his early collection Lupercal. Though the wolf in Lupercal shows faint symptoms of an archetype, it achieves its full stature as an archetypal primal energy in Wolfwatching. In Lupercal, the wolf attempts to invade human consciousness as it faces extinction by human ruthlessness. Though "the hairless knuckled feet/of the last wolf killed in Britain" makes the attempt it ends up like a dream cry. In Wolfwatching, on the other hand, the significance of the individual wolf is absorbed by the archetypal energy of the collective unconscious. Thus the wolf becomes a "tarot-card" in it. Hughes uses the image of the tarot-card to show the archetypal significance of the wolf. "It also seems as if the set of pictures in the Tarot cards were distantly descended from the archetypes of transformation." 41 Thus the wolf is not just an individual principle of energy but results directly from an indestructible primal energy.

40 C.G. Jung, op. cit., p. 206.
41 Ibid., p. 230.
Similarly, all the particular animals which appear in Wolfwatching transcend their individuality and become archetypes. Just as the wolf becomes "a tarot-card", the hawk "overtakes our first thought" and the rhino blunders into our consciousness. Thus, the repercussions of their archetypal transformation are directly felt by the human aggressor.

Wolfwatching (1989) marks the culmination of a significant poetic phase in Hughes's life. The 32 year - cycle which began with the publication of The Hawk in the Rain (1957) gives us a complete vision of life. Hughes draws his inspiration continually from the Bible in exploring the truth of existence. The consistent endeavour of the poet has been to offer a viable alternative to prevent the disintegration of life ushered in by an excessive anthropocentric vision of it. In this endeavour, Hughes has been, from the beginning, inspired by the integrated lives of the animals. They live according to biological laws of necessity enhancing harmony in ecology and in themselves. Man exploits Nature ruthlessly causing danger to ecology simultaneously causing disintegration in himself.

The energy of Nature, manifested fully in animals makes them out to be metaphoric symbols of perfection. Hughes, from his earlier anthropocentric perception of this energy, through stages, develops a biocentric vision. This is fully explicated in his later volumes River and Wolfwatching. Thus in River it becomes a timeless myth and in Wolfwatching it appears as an archetype. The individualized versions of energy in specific animals which appear as imposing male ego finally merges with the archetypal female energy in Nature. Throughout the collection one notices that the specificity of animals
loses its significance and is directed towards its source—the archetypal female energy in Nature symbolised by the White Goddess.

*Wolfwatching* (1989) is the most ecologically conscious book that Hughes has published so far. In it he views Nature from an ecological point of view and indicts man for his ruthless destruction of the environment. Hughes employs biological parameters to show the inevitability of the doom, if man doesn't desist from his crimes against Nature. In this sense, the ecological perspectives in *Wolfwatching* render a semiotic reading of contemporary life.

**A Biocentric Vision**

The opening poem of the volume "A sparrow Hawk" and the title poem "Wolfwatching" are the finest examples of Hughes's biocentric vision of life. The opening poem represents male energy, yet one doesn't find the self-glorification of power which the hawk in the earlier poem "Hawk Roosting" indulges in. The hawk here is a part of the larger system. Its energy is derived from the nuclear core of the sun. The anthropocentric cerebral activity of the earlier hawk obliterates the biological reality of the bird into a series of concepts emanating from an imposing ego. It even challenges the sun and imagines that the whole creation is under its control. But the hawk in *Wolfwatching* has none of such false sense of power and pretentious self-esteem but knows well that it is part of Nature and draws its power from the eternal source of sun's energy:

> Those eyes in their helmet
> Still wired direct.
> To the nuclear core--they alone
Laser the lark-shaped hole
in the Lark's song.42

In "Two Astrological Conundrums", the individualized female energy in a tigress, through shamanic flight and ecstasy, dissolves itself in the archetypal primal energy in Nature. Thus, it transcends its temporal dimensions of existence:

She wanted to play so we gambolled
She promised to show me her cave
Which was the route from death
And which came out into a timeless land.
To find this cave, she said, we lie down
And you hold me, so and we fly.
So it was I came to be folded
in the fur of a tiger.43

This glowing beast shows man the escape route from death into a timeless land. The unlimited ecstasy offered by her becomes the conundrum which makes the bright spirit weep and go away. The unlimited possibilities of the female energy in Nature here accepts and accommodates the principle of individuation embodying the thinking self together with its organizing function of the intellect.

The archetypal primal energy in Nature becomes a pervading presence in almost all the poems. In "Slump Sundays" this biocentric vision of life is articulated by dissolving the principle of individuation and distinctness perceived in the empirical order. Thus, the individuals gradually get absorbed into the realm of Nature's energy. This harmonious

43 Ibid., p. 2.
coalescence is extended into the animal kingdom with ease and grace. Hence the sheep at the edge of the moor is perceived as "a boulder tipped from the quarry" in no man's land. "Climbing to Hepton Stall" captures the archetypal energy in the hill which is now only a remnant of the once throbbing energy. Industrialization has undone the valley, so the poetic persona laments:

This is what made the wild harebell
So beautifully witless.
The trout under the stone so light-hearted!
Then his voice hardened--to a wail
And he lurched off, bird-faced, stiff-kneed down-hill.  

The conceptualization of individual energy for human purpose leads to the violation of Nature. The damage caused to individuality by denying integrity to man is further elaborated in "Dust As We Are". The poet's father lives in a perpetual life-in-death condition haunted by his memory of the machine gun effects of the trenches and the hospital wards crowded with "shock-eyed pals". He is the living victim of an anthropocentric vision of universe. The biocentric principle of integrity is progressively damaged by man through his indiscreet application of technology. The ill-effects of this violation are elongated into future, affecting the species in general.

I had to use up a lot of spirit
Getting over it. I was helping him.
I was his supplementary convalescent.  

Hughes's attitude to war finds explicit utterance in other poems too. In "Source" the poet's mother is depicted as a

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44 Ibid., pp. 6-7.
victim of the war. She is seen weeping always. As a boy, the poet used to wonder about it, finally he came to the strange conclusion:

You could rest, could relax utterly  
into a luxury of pure weeping  
Could dissolve yourself, me, everything  
into this relief of your strange music.  

The war experience is further recounted in the poem "For the Duration", where the poet's uncle is portrayed as a man in coma, a living emblem of the unnatural expression of violence. The individualized male energy in war directed against the archetypal female energy in Nature has its repercussions in real life too. "Again and again, the aftermath of war is triangulated through women: sisters, daughters, wives, mothers of the next generation, where the repercussions echo."  

The poet's mother appears again in "Leaf Mould" as the weeping and suffering female figure, strangely enough bearing the spectre-double of the individualized male energy. Thus, in the human world also, the male energy finally merges with the archetypal female energy symbolized in the mother.  

The title poem of the collection further elaborates Hughes's concern for a biocentric vision of the universe. The primal and archetypal energy symbolised in the wolf is undone by man's anthropocentric dreams of caging them for his amusement. Hughes warns man for violating Nature by denying integrity to animals. Unlike the animals that one meets in the earlier poems of The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal, where

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46 Ibid., p. 18.

caged animals appear like visionaries having no cage, the wolf in Wolfwatching is undone by constant human machinations:

All his power is a tangle of old ends,
A jumble of left over scraps and bits of energy.
And bitten-off impulses and dismantled intuitions.
.... The day won't pass
The night will be worse. He's waiting
For the anaesthetic to work. 48

The young wolf on the other hand tries to transcend the imprisonment of his individualized energy by trying to merge with the archetypal energy in Nature:

And here
is a young wolf, still intact.
He knows how to be, with his head,
The Asiatic eyes, the gunsights
Aligned effortless in the beam of his power. 49

The reality of his imprisoned wolfishness gradually gives way to a new unified self by releasing his energy in "frolic hopelessness". He burns himself up in his sleep and emerges like a tarot card to become one with the archetypal energy in Nature. When the individualized energy of the wolf is violated by man, the young wolf tries to overcome the trap engineered by man and emerges as a tarot-card to outstrip human logic. As he employs human mode of operation to escape the trap, the cerebral activity of the young wolf not only deprives him of his essential wolfishness but forces on him the emptiness of human logic:

He's hanging
Upside down on the wire
Of non-participation.
He's a tarot-card and he knows it.
He can howl all night
And dawn will pack up the same card
And see him painted on it, with eyes

48 Ibid., p. 12.
49 Ibid., p. 13.
Like door frames in a desert,
Between nothing and nothing.\textsuperscript{50}

The metaphoric description of the young wolf as a "tarot-card" together with the simile "eyes like door frames in a desert" are instances of pure semiotics. They not only present the biocentric vision of Hughes but show the magnitude of the human crime that deprives the wolf of its phylogenetic characteristics.

\textbf{Semiotics of Contemporary Life}

In Ted Hughes, human exploitation of ecology becomes an effective semiotics of contemporary life in poems such as the "Black Rhino" and "On the Reservations". The rhino faces extinction on account of the crazy ideas of contemporary society. The rhino becomes an "ornament for the lady's lap" and is subsumed in the macho virility rites of Yemenite males. It thus "blunders into human phatasmagoria and cannot get out" but transforms itself into a "soft human laugh", the most deceiving semiotic expression of contemporary man.

The rhino is victimized by man to near--extinction for his personal gains but it refuses to be dominated and becomes an invulnerable reality in the psyche of the aggressor. "The rhinoceros is at first explicitly male; then ambiguously 'you' 'I' 'it', then finally in the poem's third section explicitly female."\textsuperscript{51} Hughes thus makes the specific energy of the rhino transcend the figurations of time and space. The rhino,

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., p.15.

through stages, transcends the human co-ordinates of gender and identity.

In the first section of the poem, the rhino appears as an individualized male energy "the boulder with a molten core". It embodies the primitive and elemental energy in Nature. His instinctive drives are intact and his energy erupts from the lap of the earth itself:

... as if a buried thing burst from beneath 
You, as if he resurrected beneath you, 
Erupting from dust and thorns, 
At a horn-down gallop, the hieroglyph of amaze-
ment.52

The second section of the poem portrays the rhino as a unicorn invested with healing power. The effective semiotic function of unicorn as a bringer of good luck together with human superstition that the rhino is a universal remedy for all his ills causes the destruction rather than the preservation of the species:

Hooked on his faith
Or senile hope
Your relics will heal
and restore all.53

In the third section of the poem, the poet explicates the permanence of the rhino as an archetypal image. It has become an imperishable reality in the psyche of the human aggressor by becoming one with Nature. Thus, in this section, the rhino is spoken of as she, the archetypal feminine Nature. When the poem ends, the figurations of gender disappear completely in the currents of pure energy, that is, the "soft laugh" of the

52 Ted Hughes, op. cit., p. 27

53 Ibid., p. 28.
aggressor. By bringing in modern consumeristic economics such as the "strobe-glare and rumble of air-ports" and "uttering grunts of hard currency", the poem becomes a literal reflection of the semiotics of contemporary life:

The Black Rhino
Is vanishing
Into a soft
Human laugh.54

When the poem ends the victim-victimizer margin fades completely and the victim imposes itself as a permanent reality in the psyche of the aggressor. Hughes, thus warns man of the dire consequences of his crime against ecology.

"On the Reservations" is an elaborate testament of Hughes's vision of contemporary world. It exposes the socio-political forces that threaten the integrity of the biosphere itself. "We have become God's rival in our ability to influence climate and genetic development and in our capacity to destroy creation". 55 The ecological concern voiced in the poem finds expression in a conflation of native American life with modern British history. The archetypal energy in Nature and the efficacy of the shamanic rituals of the primitives are threatened by the socio-economic forces of modern imperialism. The shaman who operates in his mythic world outside space and time seems helpless in front of human technology which is capable of altering the spatio-temporal dimensions of the universe by nuclear explosions. The shamanic mode of transcending the spatio-temporal reality becomes futile when ecology itself is endangered by technology.

54 Ibid., p. 32.
The first section of the poem depicts the life of a British coal miner. He has "inherited the products of a junk culture and the emptiness of a secular age." The sweeping currents of this junk culture are so overwhelming that Sitting Bull, the chieftain of Teton Sioux, who practised magic and participated in the Ghost Dance Religious Movement that believed in the birth of a messiah to deliver them could not save his tribe from the imperialistic forces of aggression. "The forces that ended Sitting Bull's world made the Calder valley and the post-industrial society we live in. Still, the spiritual continuity between Sitting Bull and the coal miner is qualified by cultural difference, the distance between tepees and TV's."

Instead of a shamanic flight and ecstasy, the modern coal miner has inherited an empty heritage resulting in a cramped neurotic existence of a "life-time night shift". He is the modern version of a shaman metaphorically reduced to a "stitch-tatoo of coal-dust".

The second section "Night Voice" is introduced by a quotation which has shamanic implications. The woman who appears in this section, obviously is the wife of the coal miner. She is a neurotic somnambulist like Lady Macbeth. The forces that destroyed Sitting Bull have ushered in a culture that destroys the integrity of not only human beings but Nature itself. The invading technology alters and overpowers human life so totally that the significance of Nature is altogether obscured. Human life itself gravitates towards

57 Ibid., p. 154.
this artificial reality. The degradation of human beings into walking shadows in a technological environment has dried up their natural springs of human love and domestic affection:

... Her hands
Soapy with milk blossom anointed him in their hearth
fingers of the original sun opened
the black
bright book of the stone
he'd brought from beneath dreams
or did she dream it.  

In such a condition life becomes a delusion of perpetual nightmare and sleep turns to phantasmagoric somnambulism. Thus the shamanic ecstasy which the primitives experience becomes neurotic outbursts of surrealistic horror for the modern post-industrial population.

The third section "Ghost Dance" also opens with a quotation from tribal Indians signifying the relevance of their shamanic practices. The boy who appears in this section is the child of the coal miner and his neurotic wife. The alchemical union of their neurotic personalities produces the modern messiah:

A sulky boy. And he stuns your ear with song
Swastika Limbs, his whole physique--a dance,
The fool of prophecy, nightlong, day long
Out of a waste lot brings deliverance.  

The metaphor of "Swastika Limbs" attributed to the boy is a brilliant and exhaustive application of semiotics. It focuses the entire idea in a single image. The boy seems to bring deliverance out of waste but his deliverance bespeaks his origins. His deliverance is destruction, the "result of

59 Ibid., p. 52
capitalism's 'dark-work' that converts defeat into invulnerability by rejecting society's terms." The ghost dance which Sitting Bull practised predicted the arrival of a messiah to save the tribe. The unconscious imitation of Sitting Bull's ritual dance or the "danse macabre" enacted by the desperate generation of post-industrial culture underlines the efficacy and relevance of the shamanic mode of regeneration.

The continual reference to shamanism in the poem stems from Hughes's belief that this mythic mode of regeneration is universally inscribed in the collective unconscious of the race. "In the poem, the spasmodic dancing, mohawk haircuts and industrial jewellery recall the customs and ceremonies of the Sioux.... The historical conflation when charged with a brief revival of the Beat poets, or perhaps echoing the jumping beat of hip-hop, turns the punk rocker into a post-industrial shaman." This is attested to and affirmed by the unconscious imitation of the tribal dance by the post-industrial modern dancer whose imitation turns out to be an empty semiotics devoid of any cultural significance:

This mega watt berserker medium
With his storbe-drenched battle-cry delivers
The nineteenth century from his mother's womb.
The work-house dread that brooded, through her term,
Over the despair of the salvaged sperm.
Mau-Mau Messiah's showbiz lightning stroke
Puffs the stump of empire up in smoke.

Hughes's conflation of contemporary urban life with native American history affirms his faith in a biocentric vision of the world held in esteem by the tribal population as

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60 Nathalie Anderson, op. cit., p. 113.
61 Rand Brandes, op. cit., p. 155.
62 Ted Hughes, Wolfwatching, p. 53.
opposed to the anthropocentric mode of operation of the post-industrial population and their institutionalized solutions. So, the child becomes a post-industrial shaman, the inheritor of an empty culture, who rejects society and its terms. Thus, the poem is basically a semiotic rendering of contemporary life elaborating the Hughesian concept of ecology. It aims at renewing the complacent life of contemporary man who destroys the environment in a mood of indifference. Hughes, thus drives home the truth that when we violate ecology we bring down doom on ourselves and our children.

The poem "Little Whale Song" also becomes a semiotic rendering of contemporary life by its technological imagery drawn elaborately from contemporary life situations. The whales are depicted as power houses of energy, amplifying their currents like perfectly tuned receivers. The spontaneous generation of surrealistic images lifts the whales from their spatio-temporal dimension and makes them symbols of archetypal energy in Nature:

The tide-power voltage illumination.
Of those brains? Their X-ray all-dimension
Grasp of world's structure, their brains budded
Clone replicas of the electron world,
Lit and re-imagining the world,
Perfectly tuned receivers and perceivers. 63

The whales too, like the rhino, face extinction from the human aggressor. Though the whales represent exquisite pleasure of creation, they become victims of human whim. These noblest and god-like creatures experience "the most terrible fall" in a world which gives scant regard for life.

63 Ted Hughes, *Wolfwatching*, p. 47.
The concluding poem of the volume, "Dove", portrays the dove as an embodiment of archetypal energy. It shows the complex nature of the Hughesian concept of violence. The poetic persona perceives the bird as an indestructible current of pure energy defying gender distinctions. The complex symbolic significance associated with the dove makes it a bird of unique distinction. In his description, Hughes brings in all the symbolic associations of dove, rendering the bird into a timeless archetype, a genderless love-weight which is animated by the currents of pure energy:

They career through tree-mazes
Or now
Temple dancers, possessed, and steered
By solemn power
Through insane, stately convulsions  

The energy of the dove, materialized in its individual essence, transmits the vivacity and splendour of life in its suggestive motion. The dove’s plunging and slow-explosions are like love whips for other creatures. They usher in hopes of unified and wholesome existence for the creatures of this polluted planet:

Now staying
Coiled on a bough
Bubbling molten, wobbling top heavy
Into one and many.  

The archetypal significance of the dove and its aptness as an image of indestructibility operating beyond this empirical order is testified by its uniqueness. It is the only bird that feeds its young on milk. Its breeding is not

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64 Ibid., p. 54.
65 Ibid., p. 54.
controlled by seasonal cycles. Its warmth and softness signify all that is feminine, maternal and protective. Besides these secular aspects, it embodies complex Judaic and Christian symbolism. In the Bible, the Holy Ghost is pictured as descending in the shape of a dove. It is also depicted as the image of God's renewed covenant with man. As the dove has such extensive symbolic significance of a mythico-religious nature, it is an apt image that can act as a harbinger of hope. Keith Sagar outlines the significance of the dove thus:

In both Christian and alchemical iconography, the soul itself is frequently pictured as a Dove. Proverbially, the dove symbolises meekness and faithfulness. Nineteenth century sentimental Christianity gave its qualities to Christ himself—'gentle Jesus meek and mild'.

Hence, the concluding poem with its elaborate symbolic significance operates as an effective semiotic expression of contemporary life. Yet it expounds the possibilities of regeneration through an awareness of the primacy of Nature over man-made structures. The nurturing power of Nature, damaged by anthropocentric delusions, would ultimately compel human beings to acknowledge the intrinsic worth of Nature and the integrity of creatures in it.

The mythic significance of timelessness becomes a permanent reality in River and Wolfwatching. This observation becomes valid even when these works are measured against empirical yardsticks and concepts. Claude Levi-Strauss, who undertakes a structural study of myth in terms of linguistic units arrives at the timeless aspect of myths. "What gives the myth an operational value is that the specific pattern..."
described is timeless. It explains the present and the past as well the future." 67 The significance of Hughes's poetry was captured in the right perspective decades ago by Sylvia Plath. Sylvia's partnership with Hughes had given her an intimate knowledge of his works. In her Letters Home she says: "I am constantly amazed at his vast fund of knowledge and understanding: not facts or quotes of second-hand knowledge, but an organic digested comprehension which enriches every word." 68 The present status of Hughes's work reinforces this statement to be a prophecy emanating from the visionary imagination of an equally great poet.

It is true that certain individual poems in River and Wolfwatching appear to be arcane and occlude multiple interpretations. Yet, the timeless and mythical aspect of violence unifies them with the general content of the text. As Sylvia Plath declared long ago, what distinguishes the poetic talent of Hughes is his organic, digested comprehension which enriches his poetic creations. It has an inner spiritual unity of the Organic Nature. Thus, it is right to conclude that Hughes's contribution becomes vital in an age that disregards the primacy of Nature and Ecology in human life.
