Artistic minds, especially poetic minds grow and develop in stages. For some, it is an inherent virtue, for others it is a necessity compulsive in nature, for yet others it can be an avoidable luxury, if not a bane by itself. Whether the poetic genius leaps or bounds, or steadily burns is of some importance to those who critically watch him. It is rewarding to explore the several stages through which a poet passes, his chequered career providing a tapestry of significance with a bearing upon the totality of his achievements, failures, and flat, insipid, uninspired poetic products.

A chronological perspective on Hughes's poems brings home to us a few significant revelations. Even as the first two collections separated by a short span of three years indicate the plateau stage in his poetic growth, the third one marks a break with the earlier compositions. An exploration of this, comprehensive as it is, can be of much help to all discerning readers. The long gap of seven years between *Lupercal* (1960) and *Wodwo* (1967) marks a decisive phase in the poetic growth of Hughes.

Hughes concentrated chiefly on the vigorous life of animals in his early major volumes, namely, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960). He employed these most compelling life forms and their violent world as an affirmation of life for men whose world is assailed by "yawning stares" and "head-scratchings". The external unity and coherence of *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal*, their sureness of voice are apparently missing in *Wodwo*.

To a casual reader, Hughes's third volume *Wodwo*, may look distinct, in that it lacks in unity and coherence noticed in the earlier volumes but on close scrutiny it is found that these two
qualities are maintained in this collection too. Thematically it is on the same footing as the first two collections. But the approach is evidently different. It is more oriented towards ritualistic primitivism in its search for depth and authenticity. His sureness of voice may not be as convincing as that of the two earlier works. This is an offshoot of the miscellaneous nature of the many ideas embodying the poems. The author himself is aware of the fact that the readers might mistake the book for a poetic miscellany or jumble. Being aware of it, he puts the record straight in the author's note:

The stories and the play in this book may be read as notes, appendix and unversified episodes of the events behind the poems, or as chapters of a single adventure to which the poems are commentary and amplification. Either way the verse and the prose are intended to be read together, as parts of a single work.¹

A host of critics have responded to this authorial declaration in a variety of ways. Thus it is pertinent to have a closer scrutiny of the validity of this assertion. Margaret Dickie Uroff says: "Wodwo is a volume more varied in technique and subject than either of Hughes's earlier collections; this variety marks it as an important transitional work in his career." ² Despite this acknowledgement, she disagrees with the claim of the author that the work forms a single adventure. "In fact Wodwo is not a unified work. Whatever the relationship between the stories, the play and the poems, the poems themselves do not form chapters of a single adventure;

rather, they encompass several visions, different purposes and disparate voice". The contention of Thomas West is a faint echo of Uroff. West says:

This sounds like desperate pleading, but this note by the author is fully consonant with the subjective quest in which the writing of each and every piece has participated. Indeed, adding together all the parts of Wodwo yields, objectively, nothing much of outward coherence, no recurring characters, no refrains and no single plot.  

Despite the claim of the author, both these critics point out that the work has no explicit unity or outward coherence. Uroff even says that the poems express "several visions" and different purposes. West opines that it has only a "sub-textual integument, the sort of intellectual and emotional unity, that distinguishes a sequence from an anthology". West is right in pointing out that the work lacks unity because it has no recurring characters, no refrains and no single plot. Above all it is a jumble of poems, stories and a play. Yet he says despite the absence of outward coherence it is consonant with the subjective quest of Hughes which has a unity of its own, though not fully open to the objective verification of the analytical kind. Moreover West has discovered the sub-textual integument which implies the internal integrity of the subject matter. His argument becomes more appealing when it is evaluated against the unity and coherence of the animal world explored in the earlier volumes. The violent universe of animals has not only an external unity

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3 Ibid., p.173.
5 Ibid., p.59.
but a great internal strength which stems from the poet's sustained interest in violence which is indestructible energy.

It is true that in *Wodwo*, we see no such external unity, but it has a very strong thread of internal unity which stems from the central motif of the book. This running thread or the connecting link which makes us accept the whole book as a "single adventure" is violence. Throughout the work violence is employed as ritualistic primitivism. Through it Hughes brings in and sustains the thread of unity and coherence, even in situations of compelling contradictions. The ensuing sections of this chapter are an amplification of this basic premise which in turn invalidate the observations of such critics as Uroff who emphatically deny unity and coherence to the work.

Awareness of the self and the external world prompts one to look into oneself and decipher the meaning of one's existence. *Wodwo* is in this sense, an attempt to explore the fundamental question of relationship. Man's identity and his status in this world are the chief concerns of the book. In other words, the eye of the "I" (i.e. the poet) searches for dreams and visions, like the shaman, but is confronted by darkness and silence. In the first two collections animals and elements of nature are used as chief images of violence but in *Wodwo*, the chief images are mostly drawn from primitive rituals and imaginary creatures which render violence a ritualistic primitivism. Obviously, two noticeable stages of growth are discerned here. The two stages, between themselves just do not indicate a difference of stance and posture. On analysis it is found that there is a substantial amount of distinction separating the two stages. The second stage of
growth marked by primitivism is an improvement upon the first for the simple reason that the author gains depth by going deep into the primeval causes of violence manifested in Nature.

Hughes thinks that to have a vision of life, based on an authentic first-hand perception of reality one must begin at the root. This results from a belief that the present day civilization is an evolutionary error, in so far as it does not accommodate the primordial traits in man. The superstructure that is imposed on his basic elements by civilization certainly prevents him from a penetrating vision of the reality. This compels Hughes to adopt a shamanic mode of truth-seeking prevalent among the primitive tribes of the world. Elaborating the significance of shamanism, Mircea Eliade observes: "Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed in illo tempore, in mythical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred." 6

Through this mode of poetic operation, Hughes wishes to have a direct access to supernatural powers, like the shamans of the primitives had. To gain such other worldly power one has to go through the ordeal of shamanic rituals. Wodwo, in effect is an exploration of the shamanic rituals that open the channels of a vision of life. Stuart Hirschberg highlights the importance of shamanism in the poetic context of Wodwo:

Hughes seeks, as did ancient shamans, an alignment with the unknown forces governing the Universe. His work is a journey beyond the rational to the primi

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tive depths of experience to liberate the self, in a way his emphasis on violence, death and brutality is a ritual submergence and submission to the inevitable death of the old self that must precede the liberation and emergence of an authentic self, to gain access to the power habitually held in check by society.

The title poem "Wodwo" embodies the essence and spirit of the whole book. Wodwos are primitive creatures better known as wildmen of woods. It is the creature "with whom Sir Gawain fought in his dangerous journey. For Hughes, the Wodwo is "some sort of satyr or half-man, half-animal, half all kinds of elemental little things, just a little larval being without shape or qualities who suddenly finds himself alive in this world at any time. It is this uncertainty of status -- man, or beast or monster or goblin -- which attracts Hughes". 8

This is because Hughes believes that if the enquiry is to be objective and impartial the inquisitive mind should be pristine, and untarnished by cultural configurations. As Wodwo is a creature devoid of such drawbacks yet sharing the basic human quality of inquisitiveness, it becomes a proper symbol of impartial enquiry. The existential questions of Wodwo announce the theme of the book.

----- What am I?
----- Do these weeds know me?
----- Do I fit in their world?

In fact Wodwo is an attempt to answer such existential queries of man. By posing questions regarding the nature of existence Hughes raises his poetry to the level of a philo-

sophical enquiry. It is rightly a continuation of the method of the rational philosopher Descartes which he made use of in his earlier volumes. After proving the reality of the "self", Descartes sets out to prove the truth about the world and man's relation to it. The philosophical nature of the poet's quest is the logical outcome of an on-going process. Once the certainty of the self is established one has to look for the cause of one's existence. In this sense, in *Wodwo* Hughes tries the voice of the quester. This quest evidently becomes more pronounced when the poet puts it explicitly through the central character *wodwo*. "Very queer but I'll go on looking". Hence *Wodwo* is distinctly different in style and treatment from Hughes's earlier major collections. It doesn't have the certainty of the actions of animals or the sureness of their voice. *Wodwo* is a creature that is uncertain about its status. It knows that it exists and tries to learn the secrets of life through experiments.

As the book is comprised of three different sections of poems, stories and a play, each section will be treated separately, even as endeavouring to establish the idea that it is a single adventure as the author claims it. This entails detailed examination of the work, establishing that there is a strong thread of unity in this apparent jumble of poems, stories and the play. This strong thread of unity is provided by the invariable presence of violence or vitality as ritualistic primitivism in this complex work. This is because "Ted Hughes regards shamanism as a force for equilibrium because it deals with the control and harnessing of energy expressed through ecstasy, energy which revitalize and empower or bring
to chaos and destruction". A similar view is also expressed by Margaret Dickie Uroff: "In these poems of Wodwo and later in the simplicity of Crow Hughes seems to return to his original subject, violence, with new attention. What interests him now is not killer animals, but an unkillable life that persists against all odds."

The new attention which the poet bestows on violence in Wodwo can be recognized as ritualistic primitivism. Hughes's search for a vision of life takes him to the vigorous world of primitives, rich in myths and rituals. His extensive use of shamanic myth and rituals in the poems, in the stories and in the play makes the whole book a single adventure in terms of imagery, thematic concern, the central feeling of fear, confusion of identity and the writer's own artistic motive.

Ritualistic Primitivism in the Poems

The opening poem of the volume "Thistle" bespeaks the poet's continued interest in violence. The vigour of the language is present in the form of sonorous words composed mostly of fricative sounds like the following words: rubber, summer, crackle, pressure, revengeful, resurrection, grasped, frost, thrust, hair, gutturals, underground, grow, grey, appear, over, and ground.

The poet's undiminished interest in plosive sounds further testifies his concept of violence as a tangible experience articulated through the linguistic event of the


10 Margaret Dickie Uroff, op.cit., p.176.
poem. In this short poem of 12 lines Hughes creates an atmosphere of violent energy by his skilful manipulation of words. Words are so managed and accommodated that the mellifluity is totally avoided and a rugged rhythm of rough words is created. It is worthwhile here to perceive a new dimension of violence as opposed to the concept of affirmation of life explored in the earlier volumes. In this context violence becomes a ritualistic primitivism by exploring the referral points of vikings, and the rhythmic exploitation of magical incantations.

Describing an insignificant plant like the thistle, the poet is able to carry us into the primitive world of vikings. The vikings are intrepid invaders marked by violence bordering on cannibalism. This throw back in time is natural to the genius of Hughes which takes its sustenance in the primitive and the primeval as though disgusted with the post-lapserian civilizational hazards of modern man. The poet succeeds in creating a ritualistic atmosphere by mentioning "blood" and the "gutturals of dialects" which appear like magical incantations:

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 gutturals of dialects.
Everyone manages a plume of blood.

The first poem in the collection, thus effectively indicates the new dimension which violence takes. From an affirmation of life it moves on to a zone of deep significance encoded in ritualistic primitivism. Hughes's primitivism is thus not a fashionable fancy but a necessary concomitant of

11 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p.17.
his poetic growth emanating from a perceptive imagination. It is a genuine antidote against the defects of civilization. His atavistic mode of exploring reality points to the dehumanizing process of present day civilization and aims at rectifying its ill effects.

This is further amplified in an entirely different type of poem like "Cadenza" which has a musical motif as the meaning implies. The poem is a literal appropriation of shamanic technique accentuating the new dimension of violence as Stuart Hirschberg observes: "Cadenza is a vividly realized account of shamanic ecstasy and a reaffirmation, through shamanic ritual, of Hughes's incorporation of shamanic technique". A shaman is a magical healer, a witch doctor, or a medicine man among the primitives. In order to become a shaman, one has to go through the shamanic rituals. It is believed that the individual is usually summoned by a spirit:

A spirit summons him... usually an animal or a woman. If he refuses he dies... or somebody near him dies. If he accepts then he 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.

The shamanic element in the poem highlights violence as a ritualistic primitivism. Stuart Hirschberg gives a detailed account of the shamanic implication of the poem:

For Hughes, the violinist is both the symbol of the artist and a shamanic figure as well. He launches into a series of free improvisations which 'separate him' from the orchestra until he rejoins it apocalyptically at the end of the poem. The relationship of the image of the "husk of the grasshopper" carried away works to extend the theme of the violinist's shadow separating from the performer.

12 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p.27.

13 Quoted in Michael Sweating, "Hughes and Shamanism", The Achievement of Ted Hughes, p.71
per" carried away works to extend the theme of the violinist's shadow separating from the performer, even as the shaman projects his soul outside his body in order to begin his journey to the other world.14

The poet's conscious endeavour is to arrive at the nature of reality and to have a vision of life. He believes that he can do this successfully only under the guise of a shaman. It is this awareness which makes the poem drift from realistic images. The poem begins with the description of the violinist. He has to perform the cadenza (a virtuoso solo performance at the end of a concerto movement) vanishes as soon as he appears and reappears only at the end of the poem: Blue with sweat, the violinist/Crashes into orchestra which explodes".

The abundance of surrealistic images in the poem such as "the grasshopper sucking a remote cyclone" and the "surgery and collision in the clouds" speak of the new dimension of violence in Wodwo. Yet the use of prominent plosive sounds and onomatopoeic words still betrays Hughes's sustained interest in violence as a tangible experience. The poet's choice of cadenza for the manifestation of his shamanic inclinations is not very simplistic or accidental. The fact that music transcends empyrean heights stands vindicated in this verbal creation. Being a primitive art music partakes of the essential instinct of man. Hence the relevance of the violinist in the poem. Hughes himself had unequivocally declared his preference for music thus: "My interest in poetry is really a musical interest"15 In Abelardian semiotics, music is considered to be pure language like that of the myth which

has a timeless significance. "Music is a language without significance, a pure form of language. The significance to the form of music is provided by the audience. The transformations in myths carry parameters of semantic structures without necessarily carrying with them the precise linguistic articulations." Hughes applies the shamanic mode of perception on music, with a view to decipher the contours of reality in sharp clarity as music is the purest form of language universally embedded in the human unconscious.

Like "Cadenza", "Ghost Crabs" too opens with realistic descriptions which crumble into surrealistic states of mind and imagery. It moves back again to the realm of reality. One may get the impression that Hughes is trying to capture his earlier pre-occupation with the animal world. It is the primitive nature of the crab that is of interest to Hughes. The Encyclopedia categorizes approximately 20 species of ghost crabs inhabiting various parts of the earth since ancient times.

The poem progresses from the realistic description of the nightmare invasion of giant ghost crabs that invoke surrealistic images of fear in man. These enormous primitive creatures, noted for their running speed, appear from the darkened depths of "submarine badlands". The ghost crabs invade not the earth, but the psychic territory of man, arousing in him the primitive instinct of fear. The acts of violence and destruction backed by fury are evidently ritualistic acts performed by the priests of Nemesis, namely, the ghost crabs. They wreak vengeance on man to shock him into the much needed conviction

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that he deserves punishment at the hands of mother Nature for his sins of commission and omission vis-a-vis the sustenance of life in all forms, all over the earth. The ecological echo of the poem is overrun by the ritualistic process of nemesis resorted to by the crabs who have been occupants of the earth since ancient times.

We cannot see them or turn our minds from them.
Their bubbling mouths, their eyes
In a slow mineral fury
Press through our nothingness where we sprawl on our beds,
Or sit in our rooms.  

Towards the end, the poem achieves a kind of incantatory charm raising it to the level of a ritual. The reference to blood, sea and "cycles of concurrence" together with other primitive images differentiates "ghost crabs" from the earlier animal poems. Even though the vigour of language and the tone of urgency betray his earlier style, violence transcends such tangible effects to explore its primitive dimension through a ritualistic mode of perception.

"Second Glance at a Jaguar" also performs this very function of transcending the physical manifestation of violence and an exploration of the primitive dimension of its origin and source. The earlier poem on jaguar is similar to the present one in many respects. Both the poems concentrate chiefly on the description of jaguar's physical details and emphatically stress that the creature is basically an embodiment of energy. They differ mainly in respect of the portrayal of violence. In the first poem, violence becomes an affirmation of life. In the present poem, Hughes bestows a new dimension on violence by treating it as ritualistic primitivism. Hughes's mental journey from the first jaguar to

17 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 21
the second is far from a light walk. In fact, it is light-years away from his basic stance. In the latter vision, the perception has undergone a radical change in that he is looking for meaning and finds the jaguar's activities redolent of primitive ritualism. Much more than the being of the jaguar, he is concerned about its performance as a shamanic figure. This is achieved by bringing into focus a number of primitive images and rituals prevalent among the ancient tribes:

Hughes's emphasis on aspects of the jaguar, its ability to kill, its fastidious lowslung movement, its odd disjointed powerful body and its too thick tail and too solid legs—are part of an invocation to bring the jaguar into focus. His reference to 'Aztec disemboweller' evokes the jaguar's method of killing its prey by disembowelling it with a flip of its powerful paws and relates it with the bloody sacrificial rites in Mexico, Central and South America.

As the poem progresses, the ferocity and violence of the jaguar achieves mythic dimensions of primitive rituals by bringing in images like "muttering of mantras", "drum-song of murder" and the "turning of the prayer wheel". Like the shaman, the animal is believed to have supernatural powers. Some tribes also believe that there is a spiritual bond and identity between the shaman and the jaguar. "Hughes not only widens the poem's field of vision by drawing on the tradition of jaguar worship among central and south American Indians, but is consciously exercising a shamanic technique of identifying himself with the animal that is charged with the whole mythology of the species". This example of temporal relapse is of value in two ways: one, this is a clear sign of nostalgic obsessions, two, it is a stark but oblique criticism of the present.

18 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 32.
19 Ibid., p. 33.
nostalgic obsessions, two, it is a stark but oblique criticism of the present.

Even in a poem like "Public Bar T.V", one can perceive violence as ritualistic primitivism. The diminished images that appear on the T.V screen achieve a mythical significance with the evocation of such primitive and universal images like water, wind, tree, river and desert. This is accentuated by calling into assistance such images that provide ritualistic atmosphere as "the grand mothers with ancestral bones/who left the last river at the pace of oxen".

In "Logos" and "Reveille" Hughes grapples with the creation myth itself, which finds its fullest expression in Crow. These two poems only indicate the direction in which the poet would move in future. "Logos" is a fine expression of violence as ritualistic primitivism. It deals directly with the ritual of the creation myth by employing primitive and universal images:

Creation convulses in nightmare. And waking
Suddenly finds the nightmare moving
Still in his mouth
And spits it kicking out, with a swinish cry, which is God's first cry. 20

The poem would be unintelligible without the aid of Robert Graves's White Goddess, where he dwells elaborately on the role and importance of White Goddess as the primary cause of the creation of this world. The concept of God as pure "Logos" ignoring the existence of a goddess (white goddess) who is older and more powerful by nature exposes the philosophical dualism or spiritual dichotomy inherent in Christian theology. If Logos is pure good, the puzzling question is

20 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 34.
whence came evil and error? Graves tries to establish the importance and primacy of the White Goddess by this query.

This philosophical enquiry takes Hughes to a nihilistic world where creation goes hand in hand with destruction. The poem's central concern is to offer an explanation about the primeval nightmare inherent in all created things. This primeval nightmare is the destructive element inherent in all created things as everything is subject to death and decay. The very purpose of creation is thus destruction:

As soon as ancient law and all truths of the well-meaning God of the Logos descend into matter, they are broken down by the still more ancient powers of nature which are inimical to all laws and truths and whose highest purpose is to streamline its killers so as to destroy the more efficiently everything it creates, apparently for the purpose of destroying. 21

This eternal cycle of creation and destruction is carried on by the indestructible agent of energy which is violence. Along with the alternative process of creation and destruction, there is another serial process which is the destruction of things and their re-cycling resulting in new construction. Thus, in this poem, violence becomes a ritualistic primitivism in the unending conflict between creation and destruction carried on by Logos and the white goddess.

Like "Logos", "Reveille" also amplifies the principle of corruption in all created things. It begins with the awakening of Adam and Eve to the reality of death. The Biblical account of creation providing Adam and Eve with paradise and permanent bliss is unsustainable, as it seeks to deny the existence of

the white goddess. In the Biblical account, the destructive nature of created things is attributed to the serpent, "the legless land-swimmer with a purpose". In the Orphic creation myth Graves mentions a benign serpent god who had coupled with the white goddess in the form of a female serpent. "This serpent was not one of God's ordinary creatures, but a manifestation of the Mother-Goddess that the male God of Christianity ousted". But the coil of this serpent can hold the whole creation in turmoil, crush and destroy it completely. This accounts for the never-ending process of creation and destruction in Nature.

"Green Wolf" and "The Bear" appearing at the end of part 1 are dense with symbolism and surrealism and rely heavily on myth and primitive rituals, transforming violence into ritualistic primitivism. Though both these poems do have animals for their title, their earlier role as embodiments of energy become insignificant in the light of the poet's changed perception of violence.

The poem "Green Wolf" opens with the realistic description of the death of a paralysed man. It then moves on to surrealistic descriptions of the sacrificial rituals practised in the midsummer fire festivals of Normandy. The poem would be unintelligible without the aid of James Fraser's book *The Golden Bough*, where he mentions the myth of the Green Wolf:

Thus it has been shown that the leading incidents of Balder myth have their counterparts in those fire-festivals of our peasantry which undoubtedly date from a long time prior to the introduction of Christianity. The pretence of throwing the victim chosen by lot into the Beltane fire, and the similar treatment of the man, the future Green Wolf at

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22 Margaret Dickie Uroff, op. cit., p. 192.
the midsummer bonfire in Normandy, may naturally, be interpreted as traces of an older custom of actually burning human beings on these occasions; and the green dress of the green wolf coupled with the leafy envelope of the young fellow who trod out the midsummer fire at Moosheism, seems to hint that the persons perished at the festivals did so in the character of tree-spirits or deities of vegetation. 23

The poem operates basically on a symbolic level. The colour symbolism in the poem becomes intelligible only in relation to this myth. While green is the symbol of vegetation and life, wolf is a symbol of savage destructive nature. The significance of the animal symbol operating in the poem emanates from a dialectic of the physical absence of the wolf in the poem, yet pervading the whole poem with its presence as a metaphor in all its mythic dimensions. "Green Wolf" is a strange title for a poem in which no wolf appears, and in which there is nothing to explain how a wolf can be green. 24

The death of the man clad in green (green wolf) ensures the return of vegetation and protects the community from danger. This ritual death enacted on behalf of the community in return for prosperity of life makes violence a ritualistic primitivism embodying deep visions of life.

"The Bear" too is a densely symbolic poem progressing through a number of metaphoric descriptions of the bear. Hughes says that the hibernating bear is a "gleam in the pupil" of the huge "sleeping eye of the mountain". According to Sagar "It is a re-working of the legend of St. George and the Dragon in modern psychological terms. The bear is perhaps

24 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p. 67.
an image of our animal nature, or more precisely the emotion of fear, which can only be controlled by the ruthless cruelty of the will. The bear is a great devourer "A well too deep / Where your shout is being digested". This devourer has built up vast layers of fat inside him that he is able to outlast the winter. The death of others is the source of its existence. So Hughes describes it as the ferry man to dead land.

The violence in the hibernating bear becomes a ritualistic primitivism by its relation to eskimo initiation rituals of the shaman. The image of the hibernating bear is a direct borrowing from the shamanic rituals of initiation practised by primitive eskimos. Its fascination for Hughes is explained in terms of its potential for violence which is the primary nature of the bear. The somnolent bear sleeping half his life off may not apparently impress us. But being a reservoir of energy lavished on an infinite number of activities the polar bear bears Hughes's case out. Alongside the concept of sustainable energy the poet hints at the bear's unusual stamina in bearing the cross of suffering for full six months in the absence of any act of metabolism:

The encounter with the bear is an integral part of the eskimo initiation rituals of the shaman who is instructed, the bear of the lake or the inland glacier will come out, he will devour your flesh and make you a skeleton and you will die but you will recover your flesh, you will awake and your clothes will come rushing to you.

This elaborate reference to the shamanic ritual of initiation renders the poem a meaning that penetrates beyond

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25 Ibid., p.66

26 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 36.
the normal reading of the text. The bear becomes not only a primitive symbol of violence, but transforms itself into a ritualistic metaphor by its shamanic implications. Thus, more than anything, the poem operates basically as a ritualistic primitivism with regard to violence that the bear embodies.

Through Stories and Play

The second part of *Wodwo* namely, the stories and the play gravitate towards one single axis-like thing which is the cult of primitivism. Yet what is surprising and at the same time intriguing is the shift in the format of presentation. The genre as such is totally shifted. This time plain prose is used with the least bit of poetic appurtenances. This sudden change of genre loyalty may have behind it many equally valid reasons. One, the poet aims at better clarity of communication with his audience. Two, he may be motivated by better selling spirit--the propaganda aspect of his career. Three, this may be the beginning of a series of experiments which augurs well for his successful poems of the immediate future. Four, this may be a shift in favour of greater impact on reader response. The prose medium can supply him a conversational ease, leading to a kind of rapport with the reader. This shift in medium also provides him with a testing ground to assess the validity of his basic concepts. Thus, the second part of the book is something more than a pack of variations on medium. The stories and the play do stand apart with their own self-sustained validations yet strengthening the unity of the book by their singular concern with violence as ritualistic primitivism.

This section of the book is comprised of five short stories and a play. As stated earlier, this doesn't affect
the unity of the work as the author himself claims it. In fact, it becomes a far more unified work by the presence of violence as a running thread of unity. In each of these stories, the protagonist confronts a violent external reality so overwhelming that it questions his identity and threatens his very existence. The protagonists faced with problems of such magnitude survive the ordeal by an act of will which command their energy to the fullest possible extent as seen in "Rain Horse", "Snow" and "Wound". Invariably, the central characters in all these stories do place great faith in energy as an integral condition of survival.

When the protagonist places his trust in energy or violence, he is able to survive the worst. But the after effect of such experience is like emerging from a ritual initiation. In most cases, the effect is always on the brain. It is as if some important part of the brain has been cut off or supplanted with something new. The protagonist in situations of extremities surmount the crisis by calling into command all his energies. The recapitulation of the events later, in succession, as if in a momentary trance makes him aware of the transformation that has taken place in him.

Hughes, in his eagerness to amplify his theories and ascertain their validity drifts into argumentative mode of narration based on syllogistic patterns of the logical progression of events. Though, it tarnishes the artistic value of the stories, it enhances the philosophic dimensions of the Hughesian concept of violence. In this sense, the events of the story become mere components or objective co-relatives designed only for producing certain responses in the psychic territory of the Protagonist. In some cases, the Protagonist
becomes a detached observer as the experience of the young man in "Rain Horse" reveals:

The ordeal with the horse had already sunk from reality. It hung under the surface of his mind, an obscure confusion of fright and shame, as after a narrowly-escaped street accident. There was a solid pain in his chest, like the spike of bone stabbing, that made him wonder if he had strained his heart on that last stupid burdened run. Piece by piece he began to take off his clothes, wringing the grey water out of them, but soon he stopped that and just sat staring at the ground, as if some important part had been cut off his brain. 27

This kind of logical analysis of events immediately following an encounter of such magnitude appears unrealistic. Evidently, it emanates from Hughes's earnestness to expose his philosophical ideas in the most effective manner. In "Harvesting", the protagonist Grooby also undergoes such an apocalyptic transformation. After shooting a rabbit at close quarters, his brain is supplanted by animal consciousness. What he hears then is only the "inane yapping" of the dogs. "None of his limbs belonged to him any more, and he wondered if he still lay in the wheat and whether the cutter blades had indeed gone over him. But the loudest of all he heard the dogs". 28

Most of the problems that man faces originate in his brain due to his excessive ratiocination. The cure is a shamanic flight into one's primitive animal consciousness and a ritualistic purgation. The effect of such a flight is always psychic and results in the protagonist's return to roots of primitive consciousness. The Hughesian concept of transformation resulting from confrontation with Nature is

27 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 55.
28 Ibid., p. 91.
strikingly original. Most Nature poets speak of human beings coalescing with Nature and drawing comfort, mere comfort out of it. Hughes exposes the other side of this precious coin. He explores the intricacies of Natural forces working on the human brain teasing it, challenging it, and changing it by its overwhelming energy which is let loose on man in a state of confrontation.

The characters that emerge from such confrontation get endowed with a surprisingly new awareness about Nature and its war-like powers. This process is highly significant in the context of the Hughesian philosophy of violence as energy. This may be considered a significant contribution of Hughes to the existing fund of ecological wisdom. This awareness of Nature leads the Protagonist into direct contact with the roots of his primitive consciousness via the ritualistic mode of shamanism. Hence the violence in the prose section becomes ritualistic primitivism as in the poems, rendering great unity to the work.

In the first story, "Rain Horse", we see a young man back in his once familiar landscape. Both the landscape and the man have undergone vast changes. The land appears to him strange and unfriendly, a brute force confronts him in the shape of "rain horse". The violence of this encounter becomes a ritualistic primitivism by the surrealist patterns of the events. This is testified by the man's strange encounter with the horse and his eventual return to the world of reality with a sense of having lost some important part of his brain.

The fashionable urban young man in the story has come with great expectation to be in direct contact with the primitive elements of the earth such as the heavy rain and the violent wind. His violent exposure to the primitive elements assumes a ritualistic intensity when he confronts the horse repeatedly. The whole episode of his struggle with the horse
is nothing but a struggle within himself which originates from a false sense of rational intellect. "He is running from and fighting against something he carries within him, which he can only escape by damaging his heart and cutting out an important part of his brain."²⁹

What Hughes wants to communicate through this episode is related directly to the central theme of his poetic quest. He demonstrates that the indestructible energy or violence cannot be suppressed for long in a man. It has to manifest itself in some form as an essential condition of existence. The horse, a symbol of power and energy, which keeps on appearing in revengeful fury is an inescapable psychic reality of modern man.

The central character in "Sunday" is a young boy called Michael. He, too feels unhappy in the familiar Sunday world of respectability. His imagination is filled with the image of a wolf which urges itself with all its strength through a land empty of everything but trees and snow. Michael's problem is the same as that of the young man in "Rain Horse". The wolf here is the suppressed and unacknowledged psychic reality of violence. The boy cannot run away from it. "The wolf in him which refuses to be constrained, tamed, disciplined, like those vikings, the 'snow stupefied anvils' who spend themselves in before hand revenge".³⁰ The violence in the story becomes ritualistic primitivism in the literal sense, when Billy Red, takes us to the primitive world of savagery by killing rats in his teeth like a terrier.

In the story "Snow", the protagonist is the lone survivor of an air crash. He tries to make some sense out of his

²⁹ Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p. 79.
³⁰ Ibid., p. 80.
predicament by calling for the assistance of his reason. He has been wandering aimlessly in the falling snow without food for five months. He survives by a mental strategy based on energy, as he himself declares:

To keep my mind firm, that is the essential, thing to fix it firmly in my reasonable hopes, and lull it there, encourage it. Measures it slightly with a sort of continuous prayer. Because when my mind is firm, my energy is firm. And that's the main thing here-energy. Where my energy ends, I end, and all circumspection and all lucidity end with me. As long as I have energy I can correct my mistakes, outlast them -- for instance, the unimaginable error that as far as I know I am making at this very moment. 31

These musings of the man who struggles in a hopelessly inescapable situation amply vindicate and illustrate Hughes's concern with violence as a manifestation of indestructible energy. Nowhere else in his work does he expose this basic idea so explicitly. It is to be viewed in the larger context of Hughes's poetic endeavour. In order to amplify this manifesto and underline its importance he experiments with the prose medium in Wodwo, which is basically a volume of poetry. All the stories and the play in the prose section invariably expose the importance of energy in the textual context, but in snow, the protagonist becomes the alter ego of the author through his philosophical musings. These musings add up to a kind of poetic manifesto of Hughes.

The violence of the protagonist's struggle becomes a ritualistic primitivism by his close proximity to the wodwo-like situation as "dropped out of nothing" and plagued by questions of identity: "It is certainly appropriate that the

31 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 72.
story Snow appears in the volume of poetry entitled *Wodwo*, since both this story and the poem "*Wodwo*" are symbolic parables centering on questions of identity".  The ritualistic intensity of violence is further affirmed by using the techniques of shamanism in the story. "This is the first time we see Hughes exploring the phenomenon of personality dissociation and estrangement from the ordinary world in an urgent manner, using the techniques of shamanism as a way of coming to terms with it".  

The central experience of Mr. Grooby in the story "Harvesting", by virtue of its direct relation to shamanism becomes a ritualistic primitivism. This is initiated by the intentional action of Grooby in hunting down the rabbits. Grooby knows well that when the last patch of harvest is cut down the hiding hares will leap out and he can gun them down easily. Grooby's encounter with the hare and the violent chargings of dogs at it in the last moments of harvesting all contribute towards the flight and exchange of souls between Grooby and the hare. So, when the story ends, Grooby undergoes total psychic transformation:

None of his limbs belonged to him any more, and he wondered if he still lay in the wheat and whether the cutter blades had indeed gone over him. But loudest of all he heard the dogs. The dogs were behind him with their inane yapping.

The presence of shamanic element in the story contributes to the ritual intensity of violence in it. The desire of the subconscious in bringing out the suppressed basic animal

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32 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 38
33 Ibid., p. 41
instincts in man, set in motion by external circumstances finally drags him into this vortex of primitivism.

The story "Suitor" can be read at one level, as a simple story based on a probable event. At another level, it has covert shamanic implications with Nature playing its due role in making the story what it is worth. The protagonist, disregarding the fury of the elements like the wind, and the rain, goes at night to the street of the girl he loves, just to have a glimpse of her. He then notices another man with the same intention. Both of them enter her garden stealthily but separately. Towards the end of the story, the fury of the elements assumes surrealistic overtones forcing the protagonist into a flight of ritual initiation:

the wind rummages among these bushes with such haphazard abandon, it will take all my attention to distinguish the human sounds from the elemental.... I express my amazement by pulling a slow, skin-stretching grimace, a contorting leopard-mask, in the pitch darkness. I hold it, as the flute notes play over my brains.  

Explicating the ritual implication of the story and its relation to shamanism Keith Sagar says: "To the Greeks the panther was a mystical beast, half leopard, half lion, sacred to Dionysus. Etymologically, a panther means in Greek "all beast". Its name also associates it with Pan, whose flutes here play over the brains of his leopard initiate". As the story ends, the reality of the external circumstances blurs into surrealistic fantasy for the leading character. The violence perceived by him earlier as tangible as the wind and the rain is supplanted by a surrealistic experience of ritualistic primitivism enacted in his psyche through


36 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p.81.
theriomorphic images, of mythic significance like the panther and the leopard.

The last of the prose section, "The Wound" is a play that becomes a virtual enactment of ritualistic primitivism at its most intense level by its symbolic representation of the shamanic rights of dismemberment and flight. The events of the play are enacted in the eerie atmosphere of a ruined chateau. A surrealistic world is effectively created by the presence of a Circe-like queen, the death dance and the strange notes of the squealing of pigs and the snarling of dogs.

Ripley and his commander Massey wander into a world of strange women and their queen living in a ruined chateau. They reach there after crossing a river that is black and deep with icy water in it. Throughout their journey, the sergeant prods on Ripley with his terse command "keep going". Ripley is able to endure and survive the worst of ordeals by his great trust in energy. Although fatally wounded, his elemental power of endurance and animal instinct of survival see him through the ordeal.

Ripley's entry into the chateau is made possible by the crossing of the icy river, which is a re-enactment of the shamanic rite of physical dismemberment. "Entering the icy water is like entering death and Ripley's expostulation 'it's icy, my feet are going dead' reproduces the physical sensation the body experiences as it nears death as noted in Bardo Thodol, The Tibetan Book of the Dead". 37

37 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 45
in the chateau, the queen welcomes Ripley and his commander and invites them to a banquet and a dance. Ripley refuses to eat, while Massey accepts all the food offered to him. As Massey acquires, he is quite literally devoured by an insatiable frenzied mob of women.

The saving grace of Ripley is his unwillingness to participate in the orgy. Yet the lure of the waltz music is so great that he invites one of the girls to accompany him for a walk. As the music becomes slower and heavier he senses danger. Fresh blood oozes from his body. This activates his imagination and he begins to perceive another reality beyond the perception of his normal self:

These women are dragging them all into the ground, it's a massacre. No, they're all sinking together in the black glass, it must have melted with their dancing or the floods have got their cellars, They're going under with their women round their necks, with their women panicking and choking their efforts. No, no, no, this isn't glass, it is mud and those aren't women and they aren't panicking.

This surrealistic flight of fantasy by virtue of its close affinity with shamanic rites of death, violence in the play becomes a ritualistic primitivism. "The most profound shaping force on a mythic level is undoubtedly the schema proved by The Tibetan Book Of The Dead, which portrays with graphic horror, the kinds of experiences the soul undergoes after death". 39

Hughes believes that shamanism is the most effective mode of ascertaining the reality of existence. Thus, Wodwo is a search for identity, accomplished effectively by getting out of the self like the shaman. This general direction seen in the poems reappears with greater clarity in these prose

38 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 145
39 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 51
pieces. Hence the violence of this experience is directly related to the primitive shamanic rituals, rendering unity to the whole book:

The 'single adventure' in these prose pieces is clear. In each case the protagonist, in a moment of crisis or state of extremity, loses his hold on habit, on the day to day 'reality' of work and play, peaceful Sundays, pin-stripe suite, suburban streets, loses his hold on the mind which insists on the reality of this world. Thus diminished and defenseless, another reality invades the vacuum of his brain.

Thus, like the shaman, the protagonists in all the prose pieces, undergo violent and ritualistic psychic dismemberment followed by an immersion into the vortex of his primitive instincts. Thus, going through this ritualistic primitivism they emerge with new selves and new awareness after their self shattering experiences.

Back to the Poems

After a brief excursion through the prose medium, Hughes once again falls back into his favourite poetic mode of exploration. His quest for valid and satisfying solutions to the existential questions of man regarding his position and identity in this world leads him to invert many of the long-held Biblical concepts of creation with sardonic humour. Hence the poems in part III mark a significant development in the quest of the poet. So far, the poems were chiefly concentrating on the self and the world. Now the scope of this quest is widened by bringing in the question of a creator behind it.

40 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p.85.
The first poem in the section, "Theology" is an explicit venture in this direction which finds its final culmination in his next major work, *Crow* by its chief pre-occupation with the creation myth. Placing great faith in Robert Graves's *White Goddess*, Hughes explains the Biblical account of creation and man's fall from grace as simply a corruption of facts. "The serpent didn't simply corrupt humanity but swallowed it". 41

Adam ate the Apple.
Eve ate Adam.
The serpent ate Eve.
This is the dark intestine. 42

The explicit reference to the account of the creation and fall of man renders the violence in the poem a ritualistic primitivism. Since Hughes has no faith in such simplistic belief systems such as the story of man's creation, he discounts them through outright mockery of the Biblical account. But Hughes contends that a moving force or energy is responsible for every conceivable action. Human endeavour to place this energy in the finite contexts of anthropocentric images causes the birth of religion and theology. As far as Hughes is concerned all that one can assume with certainty is the presence of a moving force or energy that may be translated into specific individuations in the order of existence.

The second poem "Gog", in three parts is a continued exploration of the creation myth and its implications. In "Gog I", Hughes challenges the supremacy of the Christian God of Logos or pure good. Taking his cue from Graves's *White*

41 Ibid., p. 73.
42 Ted Hughes, *Wodwo*, p. 149.
Goddess, Hughes traces an ancient principle, devoid of any holiness, truth and logic. He is a god with an insatiable mouth and a dark intestine like the dragon in the book of Revelations, ever hungry to devour everything, even the newborn babies:

I woke to a shout: 'I am Alpha and Omega'
Rocks and a few trees trembled.
Deep in their own country.
I ran and an absence bounded beside me.43

This destructive dragon would have slept on if God had not made the claim to be alpha and omega, denying its existence. "It is God's claim to be everything and yet to exclude the world, the flesh, and the devil, which provokes into wakefulness and destructive activity in the sleeping dragon, which is all that is not Logos".44

Gog's affinity and neness with the primitive elements of the earth and his ritualistic devouring of everything makes the violence in the poem a ritualistic primitivism. A ritual evocation of the destructive nature of this material world marks the second part of the poem. Though Gog is usually absent from the scene, it is essentially a world where he is in command because everywhere the dust is in power:

Sun and moon, death and death,
Grass and stones, their quick peoples, and the bright particles Death and death Her mirrors.45

As the poem ends, death and destruction transforms itself into an abiding principle in the world of created things. The repetition of the word "death" achieves an incantatory tone transforming violence into a ritualistic primitivism.

43 Ibid., p. 150
44 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p. 74.
45 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 151
Part III of the poem is a close parallel of the legend of the Holy Grail. The knight here shines with the light of reason, thus he struggles successfully with the forces of darkness. This knight in hooded iron identifies the enemy as a woman in alliance with Gog. He wants to 'come clear of her', but he realizes that he cannot destroy her without bringing damage to himself:

He follows his compass, the lance-blade, the gun sight, out
Against the fanged grail and tireless mouth
Whose cry breaks his sleep
Whose coil is under his ribs
Whose smile is in the belly of woman.  

Like the protagonists in the prose section, the knight too, cannot come out of the situation without bringing some damage to himself: "He finds, he cannot destroy the dragon without destroying life itself. Since the serpent's coil is 'under his ribs' the horseman is seeking to destroy an essential part of himself". 

Like the previous sections, this part of the poem too, by its direct relation with the mythical dragon in the book of Revelation and the Knight's obvious affinity with the 'grail' knight makes violence a ritualistic primitivism. The ritual intensity of violence achieves an incantatory charm at the end of the poem by its sheer Biblical echoes.

In poems such as "Warriors of the North" and "Karma", Hughes builds up images of violence drawn directly from the world of war. The warriors of the north are men who endured the worst. They are born fighters, their blood steaming with revenge, in their iron arteries make them men of action. In

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46 Ibid., p. 153
47 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, pp. 76-77
"Karma" this violence assumes a ritualistic intensity caught up in the never-ending cycles of birth and re-birth based on Karma. Connecting violence with this ancient Indian concept, Hughes invests it with an oriental significance of primitivism. It declares that destruction in this world is an undeniable fact of life. Human nature is such that man's history is a history of wars. His heart is a gulping mask, it demands appeasement and he can kill as easily as breathing. Thus violence in the poem becomes a ritualistic primitivism as the poet traces the history of human destruction and its nature.

The cycles of Nature or the concepts of death and re-birth vaguely hinted in Karma are fully explicated in the "Song of a Rat". By connecting the episodes with shamanic rites, the struggle of the rat becomes a metaphoric enactment of the shamanic rites of dismemberment, flight and transcendence, rendering violence into ritualistic primitivism. In fact, the poem is a literal reflection of the symbolic death and resurrection of a shaman. "The structure of the 'Song of a Rat' follows the stages of a typical shamanic mystical experience: purgation (The Rat's Dance), illumination (The Rat's vision), and transcendence (The Rat's flight). In "Song of a Rat" these three steps provide a basis for the poem's division into three sections".\textsuperscript{48}

In the first section, Hughes describes the physical death of the rat. The rat is unable to reconcile to its predicament and struggles to escape from the trap. The intensity of the rat's violent struggle for life assumes cosmic significance as it threatens even the constellations in the process. As the

\textsuperscript{48} Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 53
rat cannot invent any larger purpose in suffering, it "attacks
heaven and earth with a mouthful of screeches like torn tin". When confronted by such existential mystery as death, it can only react against it with all its might. Finally it understands death by dying: "It understands suddenly. It bows and is still,/ with a little beseeching of blood on its nose-end". 49

In the second section, when the rat dies, it understands what is happening to it. The vision of the rat is set in motion by the wind which is another form of energy and an agent of violence. The whole of Nature looks like a derelict desert of vast emptiness, with every inanimate object pleading to the rat, "do not go". "Although most of the objects in this scene are personified, the wind is the most active principle and it initiates the rat's vision. The images of breath and abyss that are here associated with the wind suggest that the wind is an emissary of some dark, primal force, capable of undermining time itself". 50

In the final section, the rat joins with the God-head. The intensity of violence in the rat's crossing over has cosmic dimension because it jolts the stars in their sockets and supplants hell:

It needs the whole weight of the universal law to force his head down. He puts up such resistance that when he does let go, his soul catapults from him across the gulf with such velocity that it jolts the stars in their sockets and consumes the flames of hell. The fires of hell are continually re-charged thus with the flames of Nature's bonfire. 51

49 Ted Hughes, Wodwo, p. 163
50 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 56.
51 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p. 86.
The "Song of a Rat" is thus a poem in which violence is depicted as a ritualistic primitivism in the most effective manner. The ritual intensity of violence is amplified by the poem's structural and thematic affinity with the shamanic mystical experience.

The poem "Skylarks" can be considered to be the finest expression of Hughesian poetics. The process of the skylark's flight is a symbolic enactment of the shamanic rites of purgation, flight and transcendence. The violence of the bird's flight becomes ritualistic primitivism by its mimetic recreation of the dynamics of shamanic technique of transference. The description of the lark's flight and the descriptive metaphors not only declare the poet's superior craftsmanship but more importantly, on a perceptive analysis, it turns out to be an adequate symbol of Hughesian poetics. In other words, it becomes a semiotic expression of Hughesian poetics.

The flight of the Skylark can be shown to be an explication of the "Chora", which is an important term in Julia Kristeva's theory of semiotics. Kristeva conceives of the "Chora" as pure energy that orders the basic drives of a living organism. The flight of the Skylark finally culminates in a kind of chora or pure energy. She defines the chora as "a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated." 52 This can be seen in sharper focus by an intertextual analysis of the poem. The poem has selective affinities with Shelley's "Skylark", Hopkins's "Windhover" and Keats's "Ode to the Nightingale". Providing a detailed

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description of these affinities, Stuart Hirschberg opines that "Hughes's reconstruction is not a mere continuation of poetic tradition but a reply". In the light of this remark, a semiotic analysis of the poem alongside with Shelley's popular version, would expose the radical nature of Hughesian poetics.

Semiotics, being the theory and analysis of signs and significations, it would be rewarding to examine what Shelley and Hughes mean by the term "Skylark". In Shelley's perception, the bird is essentially an "unbodied joy" or an "ethereal spirit". He sees the term skylark not as a physical object of signification but as a sign that gives rise to unlimited semiosis generating metaphorical images of transcendence conditioned by his cultural context. Hughes on the other hand pins down his vision on the physicality of the bird and considers its fight as a struggle against the gravitational pull of the earth. For Shelley, the sign skylark signifies the semiotics of transcendence, but for Hughes, the same sign becomes a condition of struggle ossified in his consciousness by his experience of contemporary life situations.

The mutually contradictory semiotic function of the sign "Skylark" in Shelley and Hughes verify the contention of Julia Kristeva that "any artistic work must exhibit indications of human control and order for it to be identified as such, there is no complete subject prior to the work of art". The diametrically opposed approach of Shelley and Hughes to the same subject can be further clarified in the light of Umberto

53 Stuart Hirschberg, op. cit., p. 61
Eco's observation. According to Eco, a sign is a pure product of the code. In other words the real meaning of a word or an image is independent of a supposedly real object. In this case the "skylark" is not equivalent to any particular skylark (real object) but is a pure sign encoded within a specific cultural context. This context is social and cultural life. Eco calls them cultural units and considers them as signs that social life has put at our disposal. So Eco says "What somebody does in response to a particular sign vehicle gives us information about the cultural units in question". In this sense the sign "Skylark" becomes a particular code that conveys a particular cultural reality. So it is quite natural for a sign to become a code with different functions in different contexts.

Umberto Eco's observation seems to invalidate the subjective personal experience of the poet and the independent status of the particular real object (Skylark) in question. In Eco's analysis, the specific externals of an object ultimately boil down to a single artistic event conceived and made possible within a specific cultural framework. Thus, in Shelley, the Skylark becomes a symbol of transcendence and in Hughes the same object is perceived as a condition of struggle sustained by its energetic existence. This mutually contradictory semiotic function of the same object or the sign-vehicle (Skylark) is sustainable in the light of Eco's theory that a particular sign vehicle is essentially a part of the cultural unit specific to that particular situation. Even early semioticians like Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland

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Barthes view language as a sign that forms the basis of understanding the structure of social and cultural life.

The sign vehicle "Skylark" assumes a number of metaphorical significations in Hughes's attempt to portray the bird. In stark contrast to Shelley's poem of the same title and Hopkins's "Windhover", Hughes's bird is an embodiment of energy struggling against the gravitational pull of the earth. The bird's condition of struggle is a semiotic expression of contemporary life which is a series of struggle against the inimical forces that threaten man's integrity. Even the earth doesn't spare him. Hughes had already presented the picture of such a man literally in his early volume, The Hawk in the Rain. The man caught in the rainy mud struggles to extricate himself but the earth pulls him down with greater force with its dodged habit of the grave. Thus, in Hughes, the skylark is a semiotic expression of the human condition of struggle. Whereas in Shelley it becomes a symbol of transcendence, the semiotics of pure delight or an unbodied joy. Keith Sagar brilliantly demarcates this difference:

Shelley assuming the skylark's song to be an expression of careless rapture and feeling that no creature of earth could know such pure delight and ignorance of pain is driven to call his skylark an 'unbodied joy', a 'blithe spirit'. Hughes on the contrary starts from the bird of muscle, blood and bone, feathers thrashing, lungs gasping, heart drumming like a motor, voice-box grinding like a concrete-mixer and cannot believe that such climbing can be done for joy.  

The skylark as a sign-vehicle gradually emerges into a semiotic expression ofHughesian poetics. The descriptive

metaphors with which the poem opens are all images of energy oriented towards the central idea of his poetry in the larger context. From his descriptions of predatory animals in his early volumes to the unkillable energy of the crow in his later volume Hughes has been carefully building up his poetic fabric on the concept of the dynamics of indestructible energy which Einstein has explained scientifically in the formula $E=mc^2$. So, in Hughes, the skylark is an embodiment of energy that becomes a symbol of resistance.

Hughes's choice of the bird skylark stems from his belief that larks are virtually indestructible because they existed before the origin of the earth. "The lark was not only the first of animals but it existed before the earth and before the gods Zeus and Kronos and the Titans. Hence when the lark's father died there was no earth to bury him in, then the lark buried its father in its own head". Hughes's description of the bird is firmly rooted in his basic concept of indestructible energy as the solid basis of this universe. Thus the bird sheds its specificity of details and emerges as a semiotic expression of energy. In the light of Umberto Eco's concept, the skylark here becomes a pure sign encoded within the cultural context of the poet's consciousness. This cultural unit becomes a semiotic expression of energy as Thomas West observes: "The energetic bird, Hughes would say, is ultimately the exact counter of the word skylark. Stated the other way round, skylark is the adequate figure of speech for the energetic animal, as long as that figure of speech is,

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as it were, experienced rather than understood". In this experience, the mind of the reader forgets the specific details pertaining to the bird but begins to experience the energy of the bird and its struggle against the gravitational pull as the only reality. A semiotic analysis of the poem will amplify this observation.

"Skylarks" as Semiotics of Energy

The opening lines of the poem instantly transport the reader into a realm of energy. The images of resistance such as barrel-chested, whippet-head and hunting arrow are more than metaphorical descriptions. They become semiotic expressions of energy in the subsequent lines where the poet repeats thrice the word "leaden" and twice the word "centre".

The lark begins to go up
Like a warning
As if the globe were uneasy
Barrel-Chested for heights
Like an Indian of the high Andes,
A whippet head, barbed like a hunting arrow,
But leaden
With muscle
For the struggle
Against
Earth's Centre
And leaden
For ballast
In the rocketing storms of the breath
Leaden
Like a bullet
To supplant
Life from its centre.

In the first section itself, the sign "Skylark" signifies the condition of a struggle. The struggle becomes a semiotic expression of energy as the bird tries to extricate itself from the earth's centre to be free of its gravitational pull.

58 Thomas West, Ted Hughes (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 44.
Towards the end of the section, the earth's centre is transformed into life's centre. Thus the lark achieves the status of a symbol, signifying human life as a condition of struggle. This struggle becomes the semiotics of energy by a spontaneous generation of descriptive metaphors such as leaden with muscle, leaden for ballast and leaden like a bullet. This repetitive imagery has the incantatory effect of creating violent impressions of pain and resistance to gravity as an inner need of the bird.

The second section describes the bird's need for flight as an irresistible biological necessity. The process of its flight is a mimetic experience of death. This process of supplanting life from its centre is a virtual annihilation of all that binds the bird to the gravitational centre of the earth. To break free from this pull, is to be "obedient as to death a dead thing". The semiotics of this struggle is materialized in the song of the lark. Hughes sees the lark's song as the condition of its struggle letting out through its voice box. The pitch of this struggle is so intense that the fine thread of distinction between joy and struggle is lost in the experience.

In the fourth section of the poem, the lark transforms itself into the dynamics of a struggle that human life embodies. Here, the sign lark assumes a number of significations culminating in a symbol of struggle and loses its individual specificity. The images in this section bespeak the cultural milieu of the poet's era, thereby confirming Eco's theory of semiotics. The violent consumeristic culture bordering on emptiness and desolation becomes emphatic in the following lines:
My idleness curdles
Seeing the lark labour near its cloud
Scrambling
In a nightmare difficulty
Up through the nothing.
Its feathers thrash, its heart must be drumming like a motor.
As if it were too late, too late. 60

The image of the heart drumming like a motor not only portrays the central idea of Hughesian poetry as a paradigm of energy but also depicts contemporary life situation as a struggle where the heart can only drum mechanically like a motor. Thus, this image becomes a semiotic expression, exposing the cultural unit of the poet's era which verifies Umberto Eco's claim regarding the semiotic function of a work of art. From this section onwards the skylark assumes the symbolic function of disseminating information about the cultural unit in question in which the poet operates. The emergence of the lark as a semiotic expression of the struggles of human life in an industrial environment of emptiness filled with the drumming sounds of machines is typified in the laborious flight of the lark with its heart drumming like a motor.

The flight of the skylark through airy nothingness with thrashing feathers and a heart drumming mechanically like a motor is a fine semiotic expression of the "self" in contemporary man in the process of his struggle for life. This struggle culminates in the total annihilation of his self. The whirling currents of a consumeristic society wiping out the identity of man is captured semiotically in the image of the lark dithering in ether and evaporating in the whirling sun.

60 Ibid, p. 169.
The speaking persona in the poem finally becomes indistinguishable from the lark and the process of its physical struggle for flight. The possibility of a flight from the earth that is a folded clod entails the annihilation of the self. When the larks achieve perfection by transcending their physical limitations through their struggle they become floating sacrifices, the missionaries of a mad earth. The transcendence of the lark through the process of their physical struggle makes them semiotics of energy realized in their mortal bodies. The larks exemplify the human condition through a process of struggle and their ultimate triumph.

The agonizing process of the lark's flight is a symbolic expression of the shamanic flight and purgation practised by the primitives. Modern man experiences this process daily by going through the excruciating experience of living in contemporary society. The poet perceives this struggle as the kernel of life. The process of the lark's flight entails superhuman endurance. In this process of purgation the larks appear like "flailing flames battering their last sparks out at the limit". When they are burned out and the sun has sucked them empty, they experience a cool breeze and give out a sigh of relief:

And they relax, drifting with changed notes
Dip and float, not quite sure if they may
Then they are sure and they stoop
And may be the whole agony was for this
The plummeting dead drop.
With long cutting screams buckling like razors
But before they plunge into the earth
They flare and glide off low over grass, then up
To land on a wall-top, crest up
Weightless
Paid-up
Alert.
Conscience perfect. 61

In this final stage also, the larks drift and float, not like sacrifices but with changed notes of re-charged energy. The speaking persona's intervention at this stage further amplifies the semiotic function of the skylark symbolising human life as a condition of struggle. The remark that the whole agony was for this plummeting dead drop reflects the vicarious identification of the poet with the lark. the re-charged energy of the bird typified in the "long cutting screams buckling like razors" make the poem a virtual exposition of Hughesian poetics. It highlights the role and importance of energy in his poetic structure. Firstly, he proves, energy as the ultimate and indestructible reality on this earth. Secondly, his philosophical quest for truth is realized through the dynamics of energy as employed in his shamanic mode of operation. "Skylarks" is thus a literal explication of the shamanic mode of realizing truth through a process of flight, purgation and transcendence. Thus the poem finally becomes a semiotic expression of Hughesian poetics.

"Gnat-Psalms" is another accomplished piece explicating the Hughesian poetics of transcendence. It also employs the shamanic mode of purgation and flight, rendering violence into a ritualistic primitivism. "Through out, Hughes's relation to the gnats is that of a shaman undertaking an ecstatic journey, replete with drumming, singing and dancing". 62 The opening proverb of the poem sets its tone and direction. The gnats's ancient lineage and their ritualistic death, dance transform violence into a literal reality of ritualistic

61 Ibid, p. 171.
primitivism through their own life. The ritual intensity of the poem is enhanced by the gnats's direct relation to the sun. The gnat's song is "of all the suns". The gnats appear like immense magnets fighting around a centre, producing strange music of a magical incantation:

Hughes's description of the movement of the gnats when they first appear at night, creates an impression of rapid and constant motion. As they constantly reshape themselves into what Hughes calls a 'crazy lexicon' or 'dumb cabala' their rapid motion make them seem to be scribbling on the air. What they write is not just mysteriously incomprehensible; Hughes's reference to the occult hebraic, the cabala, alerts us to the religious metaphor underlying the poem. 63

The poet addresses the gnats as "little Hasids", because they seek transcendence in their death. Like these mystics, the gnats's crazy lexicon is a mystical language of purely oral tradition. The significance of Kabala and its primacy as the text has a timeless aspect. Harold Bloom, in his book, A Map of Misreading shows the essential nature of Kabalistic texts. "All Kabalistic texts are interpretative, however wildly speculative, and what they interpret is a central text that perpetually possesses authority priority and strength, or that indeed can be regarded as the text itself." 64

Thus Kabala becomes the ultimate expression of the truth of language that surpasses human co-ordinates of time and space. The violence of the gnat's death is thus a ritualistic primitivism, rendering deep insights into the mysteries of life. "Gnat-Psalm produces the hypnotic effect of an incantation. The psalm not only celebrates energy but it

63 Ibid, p. 63
attempts to dissolve perception itself and exorcise away the body of the staring observer by carrying him (and us) into dance of atomic particles somewhere near the edge of troposphere.\textsuperscript{65}

"You Drive in a Circle" is a poem in which Hughes explores the circle of human reason and arrives at the truth that elemental forces of Nature like the rain, the wind, the moor and the rock are archetypal realities beyond the compass of human brain. The violence of these primitive images can be effectively explored only by a shamanic mode of ritualistic flight. The human brain may invent artifacts like science and philosophy to claim that man is the measure of everything as claimed in the poem: "Where are you heading? Everything is already here". \textsuperscript{66} These lines have an undeniable affinity to Harold Bloom's theory of poetic development comprising six distinct stages as outlined in his book \textit{The Anxiety of Influence}. Bloom says: "To search for where you already are is the most benighted of quests, and the most fated. Each strong poet's muse, his sophia leaps as far out and down as can be, in a solipsistic passion of quest." \textsuperscript{67}

The ineffectiveness of such wings of flight as invented by man is given an elaborate treatment in the poem "Wings". In his need to escape the weight of mortality and to extricate himself from the pull of the earth and its dogged habit of the grave, man tries to invent such wings in his self-consciousness and blind rationality:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Thomas West, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 24
  \item \textsuperscript{66} Ted Hughes, \textit{Wodwo}, p. 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Harold Bloom, \textit{The Anxiety of Influence} (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1973), p. 13
\end{itemize}
As Blake chose real men, Newton and Locke, as examplars of fallen man in his age, so Hughes chooses, in 'Wings', Sartre, Kafka and Einstein as examplars in ours. The Pre-Christian prototype of fallen man was Icarus, who strained the resources of intellect and science to reach the sun on artificial wings. Hughes is concerned with the spiritual wings the soul miserably flaps in its cage, and with the blindness of men who substitute knowledge for vision.

In "M. Sartre Considers Current Affairs", Hughes explains the ineffectiveness of rational logic which reduces the mysteries of this universe in terms of human intellect. Kafka is another victim who is trapped in the circle of human reason. He is an owl "a man tattooed in his armpit", whose eyes are blinded by the glare of rational logic:

> The tattoo can only be seen when the wing is lifted in flight, but the broken wing cannot be lifted. Similarly, the owl's large eyes are for peering into darkness, but Kafka is condemned by his flightlessness to live in the stunning glare under the arc-lamp of man's rational consciousness.

Among the men who strove to transcend the limitations of their cage, Einstein is the greatest. Einstein's flight aided by the objective rational intellect which has arithmetical precision also finally collapsed. His fall was great because he could never transcend the earthly reality to comprehend the mystical truth. In the grip of cold facts and stagnant knowledge he was blind to the miracles of this universe which had sustained his ancestors in the desert. "His prayer for motherly love is answered not by angels but by a rising cloud of files, not by the pillar of cloud by day, but by the mushroom cloud of nuclear explosion". Thus Hughes vindicates that when the mystical vision of this universe is

68 Keith Sagar, The Art of Ted Hughes, p. 94
69 Ibid, p. 96
70 Ibid., p. 97
sacrificed at the altar of rational consciousness, based on cold facts of material reality, life becomes a meaningless procession towards the ultimate destruction and the total annihilation of everything on which life is based.

The title poem with which the volume ends captures the poetic quest of Hughes in full measure. In his first two volumes, Hughes's endeavour was to affirm the existence of self or the 'I'. Thus in The Hawk in the Rain and Lupercal, violence is an affirmation of life. In Wodwo, his endeavour is to define the world outside himself and his relation to it. In this quest, Hughes follows the Cartesian logic in a consistent manner. "The poet and the physicist are concerned to explore the same gulf of unknowable laws and unknowable particles, but the poet must do it very differently. Hughes's metaphor for the poet's way is 'Wodwo'. Wodwo, being a primitive wild creature, untainted by human logic begins the enquiry from basic existential problems.

As human logic cannot yield any theologically satisfying answer to these basic existential questions, Hughes adopts the wodwo-like-manner of inquiry quite oblivious of the dichotomy of body and soul imposed on human consciousness by rational logic. This wild man, Wodwo, with his uncertainty of status, may be able to provide better insight into these problems. This is because Hughes believes that the primitive roots of consciousness in man may transcend the luminous regions of life which we call reason. Hughes's own poetic endeavour is a vindication of this belief, as Martin Booth says:

Poetry is visionary. When the receiver of the vision has had his mind stultified by academic disciplines though, he is unable to interpret the

71 Ibid., p. 97
visions adequately and must revert to the only means of interpretation at his command, that of the lecture hall and tutorial room. The poet whose vision is grand and universal is therefore hog-tied by his 'training' before he begins. He is left with only the resources of his education as a means with which to explain what he sees. 72

Wodwo is thus a critique of Hughes's vision of poetry as vindicated through his own life divorced of academic glossings. Since there is a limit for the exploration aided by reason, in Wodwo, Hughes experiments with the intuitive mystical mode of operation made possible by shamanism. In this process, violence achieves the new dimension of ritualistic primitivism in the work, providing deep insights into the nature of this world and man's relation to it.