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## Ted Hughes' Poetry of Manichaeian Paradoxes

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Modern human life is a life of rushing through tasks, trying to get them done, and finish each day as much as we can, speeding to our next destination. At the end of the day, we are left exhausted and stressed out from the 'fever' and 'fret' in the mad pursuit of survival. Man's struggle for existence leads to his quest for identity in the world of conflicting polarities. This conflict has led many philosophers, religious leaders and writers of past and present to offer varied solutions to this problem.

All religions and ancient mythologies have interpreted this state of human mind as a state of war between two paradoxical forces of good and evil. One such ancient mythology was Manichaeism, the religion of Mani, which originated in Mesopotamia in the third century A.D, posited a state of war between spirit and matter, good and evil, light and darkness, , creation and destruction, and so on. It was a synthetic religion which had drawn materials from all major religions of the world. Its mythology explained the present mixed state of things as the result of a partially successful assault by the darkness on the light, and the whole duty of man is to fight the forces of Darkness and bring about the final triumph of Light over Darkness. Mani holds matter to be the root of evil. Mortification of body, therefore, becomes a virtue in his system. All bodily desires are evil and they should be stifled and killed, largely by ascetic practices. It gave the theory of the 'Three moments': (1) The Former Time (2) The Present Time (3) The Future Time.

In The Former Time, there existed only Light and Darkness. The nature of Light was wisdom, and that of Darkness was folly.

In The Present Time, Darkness invades Light and Light, in turn, enters Darkness .This results in the present mixed state of confusion.

In The Future Time, Light once more belongs to the 'Great Light', and Darkness returns to the 'Ultimate Darkness'. 'The two principles return to their normal state and give up and return to each other (what they have received from each other).

This separation of Light and Darkness is brought about by a major figure in Manichaeian mythology: the Primeval Man, a warrior of the forces of light, who "*Clad himself in his armour and set forth to do battle with the cohorts of matter, of Darkness, of evil. The armour is his own being, his proper 'self', his 'soul'*"<sup>1</sup>.

The famous modern British poet Ted Hughes has interestingly drawn a pattern of these Manichaeian paradoxes in his poems. Through all his poems he inspires us to live in harmony with nature, to make a constructive use of our energies and to lead a purposeful life. Hughes was always interested in receiving the primitive Manichaeian balance of man and nature. A closer study of Manichaeism in Ted Hughes will illumine the presence of creative-destructive elements as the major thematic paradoxical concepts in his poetry. Hughes's poetry is a drama of two voices -- one voice expresses the ordinary man, at once unknowing and intimidated, yet conscious of the larger forces, the other expresses a superior and

preternatural vision. The dramatic relationship between these two narrative voices i.e., self and senses, body and spirit, which is typical of Hughes's work, rests on precisely the co-existence of paradoxical elements. Behind these two conflicting voices is the moving force of the poet himself, who, through the tragedy of his advocate's drama, is always seeking to forge a new, single self, a re-organ-ization which will bridge the eons of time that, according to Hughes, separate the natural animal and the human animal. Through the tragedy of his protagonists' drama, Hughes is always seeking to forge a new, single self, a re-organization. According to Hughes this will bridge the eons of time that brought about a gap between the natural animal and the human animal.

One of most popular Hughes's Poems 'The Hawk in the Rain' presents a transaction between perspectives and voices which are in tension. Sensual nature in this poem serves mainly as a set of counters for an inner drama which is the poet's real concern. In same storms, that is 'rain may hack one's head to bone' and banging wind' may kill stubborn hedges' but the images need to be seen in the context of the dramatic encounter between the victim self and the self that knows about the hawk's powers. Hughes realized the cause of man's fascination for animal in the terms of a hidden feeling that man has pushed into the unconscious what the animal world still possessed: vast, untrapped energies. In Hughes's treatment of the crucial characteristic of this indivisible reality on which all life is founded, the interdependence of creation and destruction, the paradoxical oneness, is of paramount importance.

The sensuous world of 'facts' in Hughes' poetry is assimilated, from the very beginning, into a world of struggle between opposing forces. The first 'facts' – the poetic 'first principles' – which set in motion a creative response in the young Hughes – is seen to be associated both symbolically and literally with the paradoxical qualities. Writing about a cliff in the Calder Valley, West of Halifax, Hughes remarks:

I have heard that the valley is notable for its suicides, which I can believe and I could also believe that rock is partly to blame for them....It had an evil eye, I have no doubt. For one thing you cannot look at a precipice without thinking instantly what it would be like to fall down it, or jump down it. Mountaineers are simple men who need to Counter-attack on that thought....Every thought I tried to send beyond the confines of the valley had to step over that high, definite hurdle.<sup>2</sup>

What is striking about this passage is not just the attribution of a brooding 'eye' with special powers to the landscape, but the manichaeistic way in which the sinister, charmed summit is felt to demand a human response. The result of this challenge, as Hughes' account makes clear, is a Manichaeian division of the reactions which are available to the imprisoned and oppressed human subject: on the one hand 'suicide' and on the other, 'conquest' or 'counter-attack' on that thought. It is a variation on Mani's doctrine of dual reality with 'suicide' implying all that is Evil and dark and the 'conquest' pointing towards Good and Light. Justifying the Manichaeian synthesis of polarities in Hughes's work, Thomas West remarks:

At some stage in life the young Hughes felt vividly the conflicting roles of this mental drama....The simple 'fact' of the Scout Rock reveals a quite complex reaction, in the form of mental repression or censure, which one recognizes in a number of staring or intimidating things in real writings.<sup>3</sup>

Here one might be tempted to see an echo of Wordsworth's 'eye that hath kept watch o'er man's morality', for example, or the famous boating incident in *The Prelude* (BK.II.), when the 'huge cliff' rears up in front of the boy in the stolen boat, the very emblem of his guilt and the agent of nature's tutoring spirit.

Hughes' poems, therefore, are attempts at meditation or reconciliation. One of his earliest and best known poems, "The Hawk in the Rain", is based on a drama of opposing forces. In the poem, however, this drama has been considerably interiorized—to a point where it is perhaps not obvious that two opposing forces are speaking to one another. Here the eye of the hawk, like the Scout Rock, seems to make the narrator himself feel ambivalent. The speaker is at once attracted and repelled by the hawk's eye, and imagines himself as the terrified and mesmerised victim of the hawk.

And I,  
Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting  
Morsel in the earth's mouth, strain towards the master—  
Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still. (*The Hawk in the Rain*)

This 'I' acts out momentarily the victim's role and commits a kind of suicide within the imagination.

In "The Jaguar", the stare of the jaguar that hurries 'enraged/Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes', is the other observer's or the crowd's perception of a great natural force with which they have no direct contact. This is indicated in the analogy between the child following his dream and a mesmerised crowd following the jaguar. Manichaeism points out that by the mere fact of being incarnate, man suffers; he is prey to evil, forgetful of his luminous nature as long as he remains asleep and dimmed by ignorance in the prison of matter. The animal in "The Jaguar" is an energetic being, exploding beyond the bars of his cage like a visionary in his cell

The world rolls under the long thrust of his heels.  
Over the cage floor the horizons come. (*The Jaguar*)

There is a Manichaeism synthesis of 'inner reality' and set of external facts which can no longer be appealed to. Hence the final lines of "The Jaguar" present a Manichaeism interplay of subjectivity and objectivity, of activity and passivity. We can understand the encounter between these paradoxical elements as taking place within civilized man, in reality a fallen natural creature, looking at his own superior self, which continues to exist outside him in the jaguar.

A similar Manichaeism duality is to be found in "The Horses" where the violent nature—'red erupted', 'splitting to its core', 'tore and flung', 'shook open'—is paradoxically juxtaposed with still and inactive horses as a calm as the pre-dawn sky, 'megalith-still', 'grey silent fragments of a grey silent world', 'a horse sheltering from the rain', 'with draped manes and tilted hind-hooves'. The narrator hopes that the memory of these patient all-suffering horses will sustain him, teach him patience, as he finds himself again caught up in the busy time-conscious world of man. Manichaeism principle of duality exists in Hughes' effort to gain access to and give expression to a level of being at which the continuity between the processes of nature experienced within and observed without is unobstructed by consciousness. Individual consciousness insists all the time on its separation which causes pain and destructive alienation from this inner life.

Anthony Thwaite finds in *Crow*, a Manichaeism duality<sup>4</sup> which is substantiated in the poem "Examination at the Womb-door" included in *Crow*. Here Hughes indulges in the rhetoric of numerous questions as to who is stronger. Obviously death is stronger than all. 'But who is stronger than death? / *Me*, evidently. It is only the self, the soul that is stronger than death. Hughes puts 'Me' in italics to emphasize the power and eternity of the soul. So the poem

presents the theme of duality between matter (which is subject to death) and the spirit (which is eternal and beyond death).

In fact almost all of Ted Hughes' poems can be attributed to the psyche of man as the impulse of his poetry. Even the violence and energy of the animals presented in his poems are limited to a purely psychological event. In the form of poems, he creates words to symbolize his perception of reality. In *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes said that the inner life that the poet attempts to discover and make public is the world of 'final reality'. He calls it:

The thinking process by which we break into the inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it...the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish<sup>5</sup>.

The animals that Hughes has adopted for his poems have much to do with the theme of the poems of their names in a way that their nature and disposition seem to be symbolic to the psychic background of a poem. In "The Thought Fox", the fox serves as a metaphor for something else. His interest in fox, and what one can only call the foxiness of the fox, is there to serve a deeper interest in individual feeling and experience. In "Crow Alights", the crow alights from the deep spaces and arrives on the earth. The darkness of the crow is in contrast with the darkness of the human world. Mountains no longer seem to be mountains; rather, they appear like cows herded together and steaming in the early heat of the morning. Similarly, the sea is no longer the traditional actual sea. Instead, it appears to be a snake that coils the continents of the earth. The cockiness of crow is seen in the way in which he comments upon God's creation and its corruption. In other words, the present day universe is such that whatever was beautiful now appears ugly and diseased the Manichaeic way. Even the crow, a traditional symbol of the chaos and nightmare in many mythologies, is horrified at the present nightmarish world in which the light of God has become diseased and appears faint and dim. Using the crow's bird-eye view, Hughes presents the picture of modern man, proud of his achievements but totally alienated from communion with his race from the world he seems to dominate. The crow describes the horrible condition of the modern man:

He saw the shoe, with no soul rain-sodden,  
Lying on a moor.  
And there was his garbage can, bottom rusted away,  
A playing place for the wind in a waste of puddles. (*Crow Alights*)

This is a total picture not only of desolation but of de-humanization. It speaks of a crippled humanity which has lost its spiritual and cultural props and finds itself out of harmony not only with the universe but even with itself.

Several poems in *Wodwo* present expressionistic portraits of weapons, recurring feuds and destructiveness in the blood of species. The whole collection reveals an agitated, tormented psyche locked in the dark night of the soul. The title poem of the collection, "Wodwo", itself refers to the wilderness in man and beast. Ted Hughes describes Wodwo as some 'sort of goblin creature...a sort of half-man, half-beast, a spirit of the forests'<sup>6</sup>. According to Thomas West:

As an inner quest, Wodwo is the mental process of disencumberment that leads to wodwohood, life as a wild man amongst wolves and serpents, bulls and bears, wild boars and giants in the rocky fells past which rides the slayer of the dragon Nature<sup>7</sup>.

Wodwo is neither a thing nor a person, but a state of mind, a state of being, a rudimentary being within us.

The presence of violence in the poetry of Ted Hughes can be regarded as a prolonged confrontation with Manichaeism. Talking about violence in his poems, Hughes spoke in an interview with Egbert Faas:

Any form of violence-any form of vehement activity- invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the universe. Once the contact has been made - it becomes difficult to control. Something beyond human activity enters.... It is a form of 'Hubris' and we are paying a traditional price. If you refuse energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, keeping it under control. Here lies the Manichaeian synthesis of two capabilities- animal and human-inside man. And both acts-the giving way to our energy (which is destructive) as well as to control it (which is constructive) need intensity<sup>8</sup>.

Through his poems, Hughes recognizes the power of the irrational and the animal in man and believes that it is possible to harness them to a creative use. The tendency of Hughes gives another dimension to the Manichaeian myth that realm of Darkness should either be separated from the realm of Light or be put on a right path, which may lead man to the high road to self-realization.

Every great modern poet finds his own direction and his own metaphor for the lot of human in this world. With Hughes, this lot is tragic and hopeless and the age inexpressibly cruel and it is the duty of man to reconstruct his connection with the 'elemental power circuit of the universe'. The animal being (which lives in him as his instinctual psyche) may become dangerous if it is not recognized and integrated in life. Man is the only creature with the power to control instinct by his own will, but he is also able to suppress, distort and wound it. Suppressed instincts can gain control of a man; they can even destroy him. They are conducive to the alienation and disintegration of man.

Thus, Hughes is primarily concerned with material reality not simply the reality of a superficial urbanity but the one that governs larger questions of life and death, Nature and the animal world, and above all, the inner world of man. Instead of shutting his eyes to the metaphysical and spiritual questions about life, Hughes tries to go to their bottom in his quest for identity in the civilized world. Hughes' poems are therefore, an attempt at meditation, or reconciliation of the paradoxical forces lurking in human psyche. In short, the reading of his poems would substantiate the Manichaeian quest for identity in the temporal world.

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