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Technique of Images of Self and Senses in the Poetry of Ted Hughes

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Hughes' work has drawn up the old battle lines of poetic engagement between those who trust fictions of the everyday world and those who have been visited by truths unavailable to ordinary, jaded senses. It is important to analyze the poet's own subjective relationship to his writing and the problems this presents to the reader. The dramatic relationship between two narrative voices¹ – self and senses, body and spirit- which is typical of Hughes' work, rests upon existential questions.

The sensuous world of 'facts', from Hughes's early childhood, is assimilated, from the very beginning, into a world of struggle between opposing forces. Let us go back to the cliff incident² in the Calder valley: the most striking thing about that passage is the attribution of a brooding eye with special powers to the landscape. The precipice arouses two types of reactions from the brooder: on the one hand 'suicide' and, on the other, conquest or a counter attack on that thought. This mental drama of two conflicting forces lurked under his consciousness until the poet redeemed himself through his poetic ingenuity years later.

Hughes is a master of imagery. There are innumerable images in his poems, some of them are used frequently to convey a particular meaning and some change in meaning from poem to poem. Images of animals, especially images relating to animal hunting, appear repeatedly in his poetry and prose. In "Poetry in the Making", he relates the act of writing poetry to the senses as:

Words that live are those which we hear, like "click" or "chuckle", or which we see, like "freckled" or "veined". Or which we taste, like "vinegar" or "sugar", or touch, like "prickle" or "oily", or smell, like "tar" or "onion". Words which belong directly to one of the five senses.³

One of the most popular of Hughes' 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's self and self that knows about the hawk's powers i.e. the sensual analysis.

J.E. Cirlot analyses this encounter of self and senses from different perspective. He observes:

All human faith and wisdom centre on the belief that the invisible or spiritual order is analogous to the material order.... 'what is perceptible to the senses is the reflection of what is untellable to the mind', and echoed in the 'Tabula Smaragdina'. 'what is below is like what is

above'; 'what is above is like what is below'; and also in the remark of Goethe: 'what is within is also without.'⁴

For Hughes, ordinary sensory perceptions are of small value compared, say, to the vision of the hawk as revealed in a roosting hawk's drowsy meditations:

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed...
There is no sophistry in my body;
My manners are tearing off heads
The allotment of death. (*Hawk Roosting*)

Likewise, the otter's superhuman greatness comes from the ability to move freely and his 'slippery power' which eludes the keenest of human stalkers. Like so many other animals, the other is invisible to ordinary man and unknowable to the senses.

So the self under the eye lies,
Attendant and withdrawn. (*An Otter*)

Hughes' work may be administered on various planes in terms of images of self and senses.

1. Visual images Vs self.
2. Sound image Vs self.
3. Sexual images Vs self
4. Images of lesser physical world Vs superior self.

When we trace these images in Ted Hughes' most selected works, we find out that Hughes strikes a note of perfect balance between images of self and senses, body and soul, lesser and superior self. Everywhere in his works, is found an encounter/conflict between two opposing selves striving to be balanced together.

1. Visual images vs. self:

Hughes's cliff differs from Poe's abyss and from Wordsworth's rocky steep by the nature of the evil eye that is attributed to it. This eye is felt as an inquiring and accusatory presence. What is distinctive about it is the pressure of division which weighs upon the human psyche. This is clearly more complicated than just an opposition between man and nature. The natural world is hostile or unnatural in terms of what the ordinary 'natural' human can understand. Its evil eye forces the witness to be either a slave or a rebel. In the account of scout rock, Hughes by implication assimilates the poet to the rebel, the mountaineer, who counterattacks the charm of the precipice, sending his thoughts or body over against the oppressive and aggressive limits of the staring natural world. Here poetry, a kind of mountaineering against the evil eye of the precipice, is seen as a combative and liberating force.

One of Hughes's earliest and best known poems, "The Hawk in the Rain", first called "The Hawk in the Storm" and written around the end of 1956, is based on a drama like the one we see in the scout rock incident. In the poem, this drama is interiorized as two opposing voices are speaking to one another. There is an uncomfortable encounter between a revealed force of the hawk's 'still eye', and a mere human eye, which recognizes and feels intimidated by the force that has been brought into a momentary focus. The stillness of the eye in both- the poem and the recollection of scout rock really relates to a quite complex feeling of fascination or mental captivity rather than to tranquility or natural equilibrium.

The poem, is apparently, narrated by the man who sees with the mere human eye, a rain-drenched person who finds himself in the great job of a man – handled field (‘ploughhead’) here, the eye of the hawk, like scout rock, seems to make the narrator himself feel ambivalent. And thus the reader may be confused. The speaker says that the eye’s ‘polestars’ the sea-drowner’s endurance, that is, it fixes at once the direction of his will, while establishing a polarity, an opposite pole to the flux below. The speaker is at once attracted and repelled (because threatened) by the eye and imagines himself as the terrified and mesmerized 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*)

But the reader senses that this ‘I’ belongs to a dramatic fiction and is only indirectly identified with the poet’s person. This ‘I’ acts out momentarily the victim’s role and commits a kind of suicide within the imagination. In any event the final lines of the poem present a quite different perspective on the hawk. The voice that speaks here is distant, almost like that of an omniscient narrator, stepping back from both the bloodily dazed ‘I’ and the intimidating hawk, which :

maybe in his own time meets the weather
 coming the wrong way, suffers the air,
 hurled upside down. (*The Hawk in the Rain*)

Until the bird is imagined being destroyed by the storm’s force as its extraordinary still eye crashes into the fields below. This omniscient voice seems to predict the future destruction of the hawk, and thus to align itself with the superior powers which became momentarily apparent to the ‘grabbed’ and ‘dazed’ ‘I’. In terms of scout Rock, what is happening here is a poetic equivalent of sending one’s thoughts into the precipice beneath the rock, against the evil eye. One can interpret this reaction as an attempt to reverse and usurp the threatening stare of the natural world by imaginative means. As such, the dramatic encounter of the dazed ‘I’ and the hawk’s ‘still eye’ includes a switch of voices. One senses this not only in the changing tone of the poem but also in the extreme ambiguity of the syntax and punctuation.

“The Hawk in the Rain” is thus 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 “The Jaguar” the stare of the crowd at the animal (‘the crowd stands, stares mesmerized’) is related to the drowning narrator’s role. The stare of the jaguar that hurries ‘enraged/Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes’ is the outer observer’s or the crowd’s perception of a great natural force with which they have no direct contact. The animal is, above all, an energetic being, exploding beyond the bars of his cage like visionary in his cell. His eyes are drills- blast drills- and his body chases them ‘on a short fierce fuse’, like a flame stalking dynamite. The animal’s stare is a refusal to acknowledge or to be fettered by the external, surface world at all. The eye is ‘satisfied to be blind in fire’. This energy exists already, beyond the bars in the awareness of the mesmerized crowd.

The last six lines of the poem celebrate the jaguar’s remarkable perspective by casting off all tokens of sensual imprisonment. From the speaking voice in the poem, which collides with the reader- or with the reader’s better self in rejecting the expected causality of the jaguar’s ‘hurrying enraged’ movement,

we learn the truth about the animal in the zoo, he does not move out of boredom as we might think, but he ‘spins from the bars’, ‘since there’s no cage to him’. In fact:

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

Thus the poem moves to a strangely anti-sensory point of view, towards the perspective of the jaguar’s otherness. His deafness and blindness to the trivial or low-grade events of the outer world, as well as his self-fuelled stare, all contribute to his remarkable intensity.

The reader of the poem is forced into a curious position by the internalization that takes place. The radical subjectivity of the jaguar’s experience (which lies beyond the senses and almost beyond the imagination) is used to dramatize his power. The metaphors challenge the reader to identify with a hyperbole which makes the role of the victim in the poem (the witness or the crowd that only half-consciously knows of the jaguar’s power) almost invisible. What we are left with is an ‘inner reality’⁵ and a set of external facts which we can no longer appeal to (the jaguar is not what the eye can see, not what the ear can hear etc.)

2. Sound images vs. self:

Hughes’s poems are as much enriched with the images of sound as with those of vision. “Crow on the Beach” owes its visual and sound effect to a range of poetic resource.

Hearing shingle explode, seeing it skip,
Crow sucked his tongue.
Seeing sea–grey mash a mountain of itself
Crow tightened his goose–pimples. (*Crow on the Beach*)

The crow follows his senses as ‘hearing shingle explode and seeing ‘sea-grey mash a mountain’ and is tempted to suck its tongue. The first half of the poem combines rhythm, metaphor assonance, and so on, to create a sensuous effect that is musical but not merely musical, that is not merely sound echoing the sense or the successful embodiment of ideas in language with suitable physical properties: the language here actually provokes in the reader the same physical reactions that it is attributing to the crow. Crow’s experience of the physical world produces a heightened sense of being physically himself- tongue, skin, crest, toes- and of being where he is.

In “Crow and the Birds”, we see Hughes throwing out the eagles and choosing the crow, both laterally and linguistically:

When the eagle soared clear through a dawn distilling of emerald
When the curlew trawled in seadust through a chime of wineglasses.
When the swallow swooped through a woman’s song in a tavern.
Crow spraddled head down in the beach garbage guzzling a dropped ice-
cream. (*Crow and the Birds*)

Comparing⁶ this with Eliot’s “Cape Ann” in which, after evoking the ‘delectable’ birds of the place, the poet tells us we must ‘resign’ it to ‘its true owner, the tough one, the sea-gull’. Hughes’ poem however has a more complex structure than Eliot’s: not a simple contrast between crow and the other birds. All the birds in the poem are trying to escape from the human world, either moral or physical, away from the world of senses.

In “Skylarks”, the Rhythmic auditory effect of imitating the birds’ struggle against gravity, the transformation of lead into muscle and then into ballast i.e., rising higher and higher, is based on the little rises and falls of the syntagm or the single word. There being a short or long pause after line and stanza endings, when we read ‘In the rocketing storm of the breath’ or other long lines, we have a real feel of coasting or diving or uninterrupted flight. This long line moreover seems to give the bird a few seconds to renew its energies and shoot off, hell for leather, as it gulps for air. There is a slight and pleasurable shock at the running on of ‘supplanted /Life from its centre, as though, after two lines of falling sound, one were pulled sonorously into the extraordinary notion and difficult visual image of life being supplanted from its centre.

The quest of “Wodwo” begins with “Thistles”, a poem about the hostility that man senses in the natural cycles ‘Everyone a revengeful burst / of resurrection’- and with ‘Sill Life’ that compares a moorland, which expects ‘to be in at the finish’ of the world, and the ephemeral harebell, which ‘any known name of blue would bruise’. The stillness of the poet’s moorland picture only becomes clear when one realizes that the apparent personifications of the rock, said to have ‘veins’, and of the sea, whose ‘womb’ will engulf both of them one day, are just inert concepts or stillness in his mind which separate him from the landscape he tries in vain to shock to recognize in this personification the voice of the silent narrator, prodding painfully his inert self with his active, mobile self. The stillness inside is what makes this voice resist the adequacy of ‘Nature’ as a mirror for the forming intelligence. This is where the quest of “Wodwo” ends, with the submission of gnat-language and the indiscriminate perspective of the Wodwo, both reflections of Nature’s ever-moving, un-still-life mirror.

3. Sexual Images vs. self

Hughes has presented the sexuality of modern man which he curbs and results in creating psychological repressions. He emphasizes the sensual form of nature through the images of serpents, asps, crow etc.

The presence of pre-existing myths in “Crow” is of a different kind from Eliot’s use of the grail legend or the exploitation of mythical and historical material for specifically cultural purposes by such poets as David Jones and Geoffrey Hill. It is impossible to understand the references to fishing in ‘The Wasteland’ without knowing the story of the fisher king. “Apple Tragedy” exemplifies eve’s sensual relationship with the serpent:

...the serpent had a good drink
And curled up into a question mark.
Adam drank and said: ‘Be my god’
Eve drank and opened her legs
And called to the cockeyed serpent
And gave him a wild time. (*Apple Tragedy*)

This poem has its roots not only in Genesis but also in the Pelasgian Creation myth which describes the coupling of Euronyme, the Goddess of All Things, with the great serpent Ophion, and her subsequent bruising of his head with her heels because he claims to be author of the universe.⁷

It is a common belief that women copulate with serpents as serpents are symbolic of sexuality, the baser form of nature.

“Lovesong” portrays a predatory, possessive and sadistic sexual love:

Her smiles were spider bites
So he would lie still till she felt hungry

* * * *

Her kisses were lawyers steadily writing

* * * *

Her love tricks were the grinding of locks. (*Lovesong*)

Hughes picks up the human elements as a major theme and love and sex emerge as his main concerns; there are more than 20 poems in “The Hawk in The Rain” which deal with the subject.

The “Dove Breeder” looks at sex as a force capable of unmanning mild-mannered man, making him all animal.

Love struck into his life

Like a hawk into a dovecote. (*The Dove Breeder*)

The images of dove, dovecote and hawk symbolically show a mild-mannered person, the life of the mild-mannered person and love respectively. Everything the dove breeder has carefully arranged is shattered.

4. Images of lesser physical world vs. superior self

Many poems in “The Hawk in the Rain” are concerned with presenting the special knowledge conveyed by intimidating eyes (“The Jaguar”, “The Thought-Fox”, “Law in the Country of Cats” etc.). One senses the problem of tension in the relationship between lesser self and the superior or visionary self, because the poet appears to align himself more with the superior self than with the inferior self. Instead of a psychodrama, the imbalance between two voices turns some poems into caricatures for the ordinary self.

In “Egg-Head”, for instance, Hughes’ goal is to show how this lesser self works. The Egg-Head swells with pride for having reduced all of sensual life into a mild-mannered, vicarious ‘Peeping through...fingers at the world’s ends,/or at an ant’s head’. But if we think of the heroic figures of energy-the jaguar, the black goat of ‘Meeting’- we sense here more an ironic and even ridiculing comparison than a credible exploration of the Egg-Head’s problems.

“Gaudete” published in 1979, is a long story in verse which outlines the last day of a changeling... “a creature substituted for an Anglican clergyman, as an all but perfect duplicate, by powers of the other world....At the destruction of the changeling, the man of flesh and blood reappears, and the poems are taken as his note book-his diary of coming to his senses.” Gaudete, because of its ritualistic structure and use of myth Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts have compared⁸ to Euripides’s *Bacchae*. But it can also be taken as a kind of reverie as presented in Edward Albee’s *Tiny Alice*. The two worlds, the spiritual and the sensual, have often been thought as separate, but this work emphasizes a combination of the two. The basic image of the whole work has been that of split, the split psyche, the split between man and woman, man and nature, the profane and sacred. The split is the wound to be healed. What is sought is an adjustment in consciousness and feeling which will enable us to recognize these ‘opposites’ as polar rather than dual, that is parts of phases of a single whole connected to each other (one flesh, one blood), dependent on each other, complimenting each other.

After having passed through a period of questioning in collection like “Wodwo”, “Prometheus On the Crag”, and the drama “Orghast”, in all of which he confronts God, Ted Hughes turned for the time being to write poems for children. The result is “Season Songs”. The plan was to write songs covering all the four seasons but on the whole the focus is on a life of senses in this world.

Through the discussion of Hughes' poems one can feel the presence of the conflict between nostalgic past and disintegrated present, inner world and outer world, sensuality and spiritualism, all of which is exhibited through the images of self and senses. The poet's purpose behind the use of such images is to identify and reconcile what is at war within and without us.

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