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A STUDY OF ANIMAL FARM IN TED HUGHES

KUMAR CHANDRAHAS

Research Scholar, P. G. Department of English, Tilka Manjhi Bhagalpur
University, Bhagalpur, Bihar



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ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) began his career as a poet in 1957 with the publication of *The Hawk in the Rain*. He was labelled as “an animal poet”. Though the first anthology contains a few animal poems, yet it gains ground in enhancing the tradition of British poetry. It came just after one year of *New Lines* (1956), a movement anthology edited by Robert Conquest. On the whole Ted Hughes brought a new species of poetry. With the passage of time Ted Hughes soon began to discover exciting areas near the new home and at the weekends he regularly retreated to a nearby estate on his own. He often stalked animals as he did back in Mytholmroyd. He looked into the burrows to discover their occupants. At the age of eight, one day he climbed a mount to look into the hollows and confronted a fox. This close encounter with a fox must have contributed to the image of the animal in his poem, *The Thought Fox*. In a radio interview in 1961, Ted Hughes said that the move to Mexborough really sealed off his first seven years which were half of his life and were another subsidiary brain to him.

Keywords: animal, farm, images, philosophy.

Modern psychologists believe that childhood incubation is the chief factor for giving birth to power images. Childhood experiences about animals and a strong love for them contributed a great deal in making Hughes a perfect poet of animals. Roberts Lowell, the American poet comments that Ted Hughes animal images are “... like thunderbolt and indeed many of them seem to spring front the page with the energy of a force of nature.” (MacBeth, 317)

“Stalking animals” was a favourite pastime of Ted Hughes. He also developed much fondness for catching and rearing animals. All these constituted a potent influence on him. His interest in animals can also be noticed when he explains the reasons for the choice of animals as the subject matter of his poetry and the circumstances that led him to write about them:

An animal I never succeeded in keeping alive is the fox. I was always frustrated: twice by a farmer who killed cubs I had caught before I could get to them, once a poultry keeper who freed my cub while his dog waited... I had written nothing for a year or so but that night I got the idea I might write something and wrote in few minutes the first animal poem ‘*The Thought-Fox*’ which appears in the first anthology of poems *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). (Hughes, 19)

What strikes Hughes most about the animal world is its vitality, vehemence, arid vigilance. It touches perfection and equilibrium beyond common human thought. Hughes is not prejudiced concerning animals and their world. He is a meticulous observer who can penetrate into the very depth of reality and observe Life-Force in them. In this regard, Hughes shares D. H. Lawrence's conviction in animals:

Lawrence's perception that men were so much less men than lizards were lizards formed an integral part of an entire philosophic-religious conception of civilized man... The cages of jaguars and macaws are doubly ironical: man is so much more caged and imprisoned than the animals, and it is the virtue of his single vision that he confines instinctive vitality behind the bars. (Thorley, 180-181)

This shows that D. H. Lawrence is the predecessor of Ted Hughes in the conviction of animal world and its vitality.

For Hughes, an animal is the part of creative energy. His animal poems reverberate with violence and vitality, for they constitute the integral part of the animal world. This automatism and elemental energy are greatly lacking in man and this can only be achieved if he keeps in contact and has a deep relation with nature. But, Hughes has often been charged with nurturing an unhealthy and obsessive concern with the natural world for glorifying the violence of the animals and for projecting and accentuating their terrifying brutal traits. No wonder, some reviewers title their articles on Hughes' animals poems, such as, Ben Howard's *Terrors Ambassador*, Ian Hamilton's *A Mouthful of Blood*, Karl Miller's *Tear and Fang*, to manifest such brutal and feral traits. But these reviews do not justify Hughes' projection of these fierce animals in his poems. Hughes' own definition of violence is worth quoting to prevent the controversy raised by the reviewers:

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... If you realise the 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 methods of turning it too good of keeping it under control – rituals the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one. (Fass, 9-10)

The above statement clarifies that violence in the animal world is not a ravishing force but a 'vehement activity', a vital force that allows them to exist on earth. Behind animal vitality there is a universal force that vitalizes not only animals but also humans. Hughes' hawks, jaguars, pikes, wolves, thrushes, ghost crabs – all are ferocious and predatory animals and symbolise primeval human energies. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts write that Ted Hughes: "... is a poet who has developed – from an early reliance on external nature to a great metaphysical assurance and the creation of a distinctive imaginative world." (Gifford and Roberts, 11)

Such a terrifying glimpse of nature can be traced back to Tennyson's *In Memoriam* as a scene of primordial violence, an outlook famously summed up in 1651 by Thomas Hobbes when he asserted that the "natural" condition of humanity as "ware... of every man, against every man" and that life in a state of nature is 'solitary poor, nasty, brutish and short.' (Hobbes, 88-89) Later, the Hobbesian strain would resurface with singular vigor and trenchancy in the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, Tennyson's older contemporary. The similarity between the poet's fleeting visions of animal savagery and the philosopher's sustained ruminations on it is worth-noticing. Tennyson considers the awful possibility that mankind is linked, as an even more degenerate "monster", with "Dragons of the Prime/ That tare each other in their slim." (Tennyson, 22-23) And here is Schopenhauer on "the observable life of animals"

We see only momentary gratification, fleeting pleasure conditioned by wants, much and long suffering, constant struggle, bellum omnium, everything a hunter and everything hunted, pressure, want, need and anxiety, shrieking and howling, and this goes on in saecula saeculorum, or until once again the crust of the planet breaks. (Schopenhauer, 254)

The outlook so mercilessly articulated by Schopenhauer would become more compelling as modernist perspectives gradually impinged on the Victorian intellectual milieu. Both Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence,

the inheritors and the elaborators in their very different ways – of Tennyson’s primordial vision, would admit to basic similarities with the German philosopher’s thought.

This thought finds its fullest poetic realisation in the poetry of Ted Hughes. His menagerie – the hawk, the jaguar, the thrushes, the shark and their kinds – fits even better than Lawrence’s birds, beasts and flowers into Schopenhauer’s “bellum omnium” of predation. A paradigm case is the cannibalistic pike, driven by appetites and killer instincts so fierce that the poet is able to find two of them, ‘six pounds each, over two feet long, / High and dry and dead in the willow-herb- / One jammed past its gills down the others gullet’ (Pike’, *Lupercal*). Hughes himself gives warrant for the Schopenhauer connection in his interview (1970). When Ekbert Faas commented “Schopenhauer’s and Nietzsche’s thoughts bear a striking resemblance to yours”, Hughes replied:

The only philosophy I ever really read was Schopenhauer’s. He impressed me all right. You see very well where Nietzsche got his Dionysus. It was a genuine vision of something on its way back to the surface. The rough beast in Yeats’ poem, each nation sees it through different spectacles. (Faas, 205)

Conclusion

The affinity with Schopenhauer that Hughes affirms here is a visceral one, the sense of a shared assumption so instinctive and elemental that it almost defies articulation: a subterranean ‘something’ of many names, a demonic force, that periodically erupts to crack the rational, harmonious “surface” of civilization. But it is precisely because Schopenhauer so closely links the visceral with the basis of metaphysics that Hughes’ recognition here is so valuable in understanding his own poetic vision. According to Schopenhauer, this basis is the will – the blind, compulsive, irresistible striving that is the ground of all being. We can experience it through phenomena, which include ourselves and everything else in the world. And Hughes’ animal poems record these phenomenal striving and blind, compulsive will which live through powerful, masculine poetic imagery.

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