

Ted Hughes: Visionary

Ted Hughes was born in 1930 in Mytholmroyd, deep in the Calder Valley of West Yorkshire. Though he later described the area as ‘the cradle of the industrial revolution in textiles’, it was not difficult to escape into woods or onto the high moors. He claimed that for him in childhood the word ‘horizon’ was the most magical in the language. His much older brother initiated him into the natural world by taking him as retriever on his hunting excursions. The split between the world of men and industry and the world of wild nature was particularly stark here, and imprinted itself on Hughes’ psyche. Poetry came to seem for him the voice of wild nature trying to make itself heard above the cacophony of mills, schools and churches. It seemed to him an extension of fishing, which (especially in a deep forbidden pond at midnight) is the projection of an antenna from the familiar world and the known self into the frightening primeval darkness. All animals seemed to him messengers from that darkness, which was also his own unconscious, bellowing the evidence that we seek to hide. Some animals, such as wolf and fox, became his familiars, guiding him, like a shaman, into the world Blake called ‘the Energies’.

Nevertheless he found himself ‘in the cooker’ of grammar school and university, the intellectual, academic life, and soon after married to another poet, Sylvia Plath, whose work was dedicated, at first, to fame and success. The responsibility of providing for wife and children tied Hughes securely to that world. Otherwise, he wrote, he would have been fishing in a boat off Western Australia.

From his school days Hughes was greatly attracted to myth and folklore. His English master’s leaving present from Mexborough Grammar School was a copy of Robert Graves’ *The White Goddess*, which replaced Henry Williamson’s *Tarka the Otter* as his sacred book (to be replaced in its turn by *The Bacchae* of Euripides). At Cambridge he changed from reading English to Archaeology and Anthropology. A view of nature which derived from the struggle for survival on the bleak moors, and was mediated by myth and folklore, was very far from the Wordsworthian pieties.

Hughes described his early poems as bulletins from the constant battle between vitality and death. From the first poem in his first book *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), he was aware how tenuously and briefly life maintains its foothold against death. Unlike Tennyson, who was prepared to ‘let the tiger die’ rather than accept nature red in tooth and claw, Hughes was determined to find a way to accept nature and live within her laws. But before he could accomplish this, the suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 plunged him into despair, and the world appeared to him to be made of blood.

Hughes felt that after the death of Sylvia, the rest of his life would be posthumous. But he found a great healing resource in fishing, which became almost a religion. To enter water and become continuous through his rod and line with the holy life of that magical element was a form of atonement, of receiving the blessings of an unfallen, Dionysian world. All fish which were not eaten were returned unharmed to their element. And writing poems was a parallel activity, projecting the imagination into darkness and otherness, which is simultaneously the Great Outer Darkness (GOD) and the small inner darkness of his own unconscious. ‘What we capture in the outer world is what has escaped from our inner world’.

In *The Life and Songs of the Crow* Hughes tried to work his way through error and suffering towards rebirth. But a second tragedy in his life forced him to abort that

epic project, and thrust him into a period of fatalistic world-denial. For years he struggled, through mythic means, to transform pain into illumination.

Though he did not change his views on the possibility of pain becoming bliss, Hughes fortunately found a less painful way of reintegrating himself with the given world. In 1970 he had married a farmer's daughter, Carol Orchard, and in 1972 he bought Moortown Farm in Devon, and ran it with Carol and her father until Jack Orchard's death in 1976. Farming literally brought Hughes down to earth after his rather too Blake-like excursions into prophetic books. It proved, for all the frustrations and losses, extremely therapeutic. From a world of blood he found himself baptized into a world of mud, of life at its most grounded in the land, animal life and the seasons. It bred in him the conviction that 'only birth matters'. Without that experience I believe it unlikely that Hughes would have come through to write his finest poems, *Moortown Diaries*, *Remains of Elmet* and *River*. These are poems of raw, unmediated experience, of being reborn into a radiant world, a world of light.

Hughes believed that the free intelligence which has directed Western civilization is uninformed by our genetic survival gear of senses and instincts, and cut off from spirit. It has fostered dualistic thought and the dominance of the hubristic, violent male, and has led us inevitably into our present crisis, despite the clearest warnings from imaginative writers, especially poets, ever since the ancient Greeks. They are still ignored, or damned with faint praise and consigned to a sideshow of 'poetry for pleasure'. How can a poet, Hughes wrote, 'become a medicine man and fly to the source and come back and heal or pronounce oracles? Everything among us is against it'.

Yet he inspired many readers, including children, budding writers and teachers, fertilized the work of other poets, artists and composers, and surely contributed more than any other poet of his time to our rapidly growing awareness of the interdependence of all life. No longer are poetic visionaries voices in the wilderness. Their holistic and biocentric vision, formerly seen as romantic or eccentric, is coming to be seen as the essential vision of a nascent world age.