

Ted Hughes' "The Horses": expanding poetic canvas through the prism of shamanism

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Abstract

"The Horses" was one of the poems of Ted Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain* collection. From a cursory reading its Hughesian traits like a picturesque description of nature, prominence of animal and reticence of the human figure were clearly apparent. But certain tricky words, images and twists of the situation had made the poem complex and multi-layered. Shamanism with its universal philosophy, sublime spirituality and ethnic resonances had enriched this poem. Shamanism had magically heightened the presence of the horses, the specific moment of experience and the role of the poet. A detail analysis of the poem had tried to explore the shamanic journey from this materialistic, disintegrated outer world to that inner world of enlightenment and holistic existence.

Keywords: poetry of violence, nature poem, shamanism, dawn, horses, spiritual voyage

Introduction

Ted Hughes's fascination with animal, putting them in a landscape or a situation best meant for it and portraying the animal with its peculiar and conspicuous traits are awe-inspiring. His first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) makes us acquainted with a set of predatory animals whose raw energy ("His stride is wildernesses of freedom:/The World rolls under the long thrust of his heel/Over the cage floor the horizons come", -"The Jaguar"), uninhibited arrogance and narcissism ("I sit in the top of the Wood, my eyes closed.", "No arguments assert my right: / The sun is behind me."-"Hawk Roosting"), ferocity ("Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin" -"Pike"), omnipotence ("They are the powers of this world. / We are their bacteria, / dying their lives and living their deaths. /they are God's only toys"- "Ghost Crabs") startle us. The way the poet has engaged his animal characters in early animal poems has made many critics to term his poetry as "poetry of violence" albeit a crude generalization as such a terminology restricts us to appreciate the art of dramatization, Ted Hughes's search for "universal cosmic force" that is "most clearly expressed in the world of Nature, which is "what we have to live in, what we are part of, what we are grow out of". (M.E.1, 69) Ann Skea has observed that for Hughes, "poetry itself is a shamanic journey. In his prose writing, in introductions to poetry readings, and in interviews, he constantly connects poetry and myth with shamanism, emphasizing the healing, regenerative, magical power of each. Poetry is a vehicle for our inner life, an expression of our inner energies, records the shamanic journey to the underworld which is 'one of the main regenerative dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event'. (Skea,10) His poetry is also culmination of his belief in philosophy and spirituality of the East, Buddhism, Sufism, Upanishads, Cabalism alongwith Blake, Yeats, Jung, Robert Grave's "The White Goddess" each of which has shaped his ideas and outlook and has given an unfathomable depth to his work. Thus, while reading Ted Hughes it is always a temptation to go beyond what is obvious, to unfold the ideas enriched with influence of various beliefs, cultures and rituals upon Ted Hughes. His poetic world imposes challenge upon the readers because we are suddenly thrown

from a world filled with raw energy, self-consuming passions into a world of apparent passivity. The world that belongs to "The Horses" is unlike of its counterparts but is essentially engaging. There is a famous quote of Alice Walker: "Horses make a landscape beautiful" (horsejourneys.com). In this paper, I have tried to traverse the beautiful poetic landscape riddled with rich shamanic traces.

Ann Skea in her book "Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest" has observed Ted Hughes' fascination and obsession with animals and their inherent connection with spiritual energies "that buried deep in all living things"(10) and which in Hughes's own words is "The luminous spirit" that "takes account of everything and gives everything its meaning.(10)" According to Ann Skea "Hughes' own vivid dreams and the animals which he regards as his shamanic guides, and some of the most profound and widespread religious beliefs in the world, amongst which Alchemy and the oriental philosophies have been particularly influential in shaping his work." (11). From time immemorial, horse-a symbol of freedom and driving force of life-has been given a very prominent role in different cultural backgrounds starting from Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity to pagan cultures. However, in Shamanism, horse has the most important role rather a special place as a "power animal" and as "spiritual beings." According to Michael Harner, the author of "The Way of the Shaman", the word "Shaman" means a woman or man "who enters an altered state of consciousness-at will-to contact and utilize an ordinary hidden reality in order to acquire knowledge, power and to help others"(horsejourneys.com). In this sojourn to the spirit world, the shaman or shamanic practitioner sets an intention and is then guided by their spirit helpers or a power animal to special places or other helping spirits to gather information or collecting power such as a healing remedy, a song, a dance or a lost soul essence. According to Shamanic practitioners, only horse, an animal symbolizing a perfect balance between instinctive and tamed personality, has complete access to the natural forces and cosmic energy. It is believed that a horse actually lives in both worlds and is connected to pool of higher consciousness. In the words of Cindy Jarret horses "far surpass the humans in their sensory awareness, emotional maturity and social skills of self-

responsibility, supporting the greater good of the whole community and honouring the environment.” Even their wilderness and unrestrained freedom are not threat to world. “They communicate through telepathy among the herd, subtle movements only the heightened observer can detect, along with their expansive intuitive abilities that enable them to conduct a balanced social order, we humans pray to achieve.”(horsejourneys.com)

In this backdrop, Ted Hughes’ “The Horses” undoubtedly arouses a keenness to revisit the poem beyond a nature poem. The graphic description of the journey of the poet persona in a chilling wintry pre-dawn moment in a valley filled with an eerie silence (“A world cast in frost.”), darkness and intense coldness (“Evil air, a frost making silence”) to a slow and sudden day-breaking (“Slowly detail leafed from the darkness. Then the sun/Orange, red, red erupted.”); his sheer discomfort, restlessness and inability to withstand the inclement weather of winter (“Where my breath left tortuous statues in the iron light.”) against the uninhibited acceptance of the same by a herd of horses with elegance and equanimity (“Huge in the dense grey-ten together-/Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,”) is not only literal but also marks a journey of a shaman. The journey from pre-dawn moment marked with deadening darkness, frigidity and absence of any living entity towards a slow unfolding of the day from “brightening grey” to eruption of red sun reminds us of a shaman’s venture to an altered state of consciousness. References of frost “Evil Air, a frost-making stillness”, “A world cast in frost” or of valley that was “draining the darkness” and depiction of a smothering effect of the nature’s frigidity upon the traveller are no references to any underworld but that of the darkness of mind which instils fear in human psyche, poses as threat to the manifestation of divinity lies within and prove to be a biggest obstacle in synergising with the cosmic energy of the universe. Ten horses become visible to the poet at the auspicious “hour-before dawn’. As dawn is a transitional moment of two halves of the entire day-night and morning, horses also connect two worlds of transience and permanence. “I climbed through woods.” also attains a great significance in this context. The references to forest, valleys which are very much shamanic symbols suggest our effort to come over the labyrinth of the existential crisis that we always crave to surmount. The journey through these various natural wonders is an age old practice of shamanism to reinvigorate and reawaken the innermost energy of human and in this shamanic practice the curlew is the spirit helpers and the Horse, the power animal, is the shamanic guide. The “grey silent world” suddenly becomes vibrant with colour and erupting sun as soon as the curlew’s sound tears the all pervading silence of darkness and with it a new consciousness dawn upon the poet :

And the big planets hanging-
I turned
Stumbling in the fever of a dream, down towards
The dark woods, from the kindling tops
And came to the horses. (The Horses, 23)

Expressions such as “kindling tops”, “steaming and glistening flow of light”, the “.frost showed its fires” are not only the depiction of nature but also of an enlightened and ignited mind free from fear and myriad of worldly limitations.

However, at this stage it is difficult to resist the temptation not

to share Ted Hughes’ ideas on invoking of animal in his poetry in search of “bigger energy” which the poet himself elucidated beautifully in his interview with Dr. Amzed Hossein:

No, it isn’t that I want to invoke anything. It’s that in writing about certain things, in invoking certain images, certain symbols, you automatically invoke the energies that come with them. So in the whole register of levels or degrees of intensity of energy that can be invoked, corresponding to your whole register of symbols that will invoke them, you have to be very selective, you have to be very careful, you have to know that you are playing with fire, and that some energies, the one pole of the whole range of energies, that one extreme of the range of the energies, is- can be unmanageable, can invoke energies that are unmanageable. And, as I remember it, my point was that having concentrated on a symbol of this kind, in a particular animal, in order then to control whatever I might be summoning into my life with that symbol, I then wrote another poem with it to control it.

So it was as though I felt that in focussing on that particular symbol, just of that animal, trying to create that animal in that way, I might have summoned things into my life that’d be difficult to control. So I then made in the same poem a controlling poem which confined and controlled its energies as if you’d summoned the spirit into a magic circle which would control it. That was my meaning. (Hossein, 151)

It is thus obvious that Hughes has used the symbol of the horse quite purposefully to weave the magic of shamanism. Unlike human being, the horses are accepting the vicissitudes of life with poise. It may be puzzling that the poet while in his first encounter with the horses has portrayed them as “Grey silent fragments/ of a grey silent world”, he has portrayed the same horses strikingly different during his revisit to them (“Their hung heads patient as the horizons/High over valleys, in the red levelling rays-“). But going beyond the superficiality, we find that it is not the horses that have changed with passage of time and scenario but the perception of the onlooker. The horses, like Ted Hughes’ other animals, are soaked with the spirit and energy of the world and integral part of the Nature. As the poet transcended to a level of higher consciousness alongwith the horses, the contradiction and conflict fade away and the horses become identical with horizon itself. The horses, unperturbed by the changes of Nature, represent the meditative state of mind that tries to make a fine balance between two extremities of life and that can travel an altered state of consciousness at will. Repeated references to “draped manes”, “draped stone manes” of the horses also remind us of Toli, a round ritual mirror used in shamanism in some parts of Mongolia, as part of a shaman’s attire around shaman’s neck or in quantity on the shaman’s Kaftan or apron, to help ward off evil spirits and to signify the shaman’s authority. Ted Hughes deep fascination with raw energy of animals has thus raised the horses to the level of shamanic priest from usual concept of a power animal. But the poem not only celebrates the glory of the animal but also ends with celebration of the shamanic journey of the poet himself who wants his memory of his journey with horses and curlews in “so lonely place” to transcend the decay of time and cacophony of life.

Ted Hughes’ yearning to reinvigorate his poetic Self through a journey down the memory lane is actually a shaman’s voyage in quest for self-realization and a meditative process to experience divinity sitting on the thick of life. Ann Skea has very aptly observed “Through the imaginative and the musical

power of his poetry, Hughes makes a repeated attempts to fly to the Source and return with healing energies: which are the essence of shamanic journey and of the world of Nature, are fundamental in his work.”(18) “The Horses”-an integral part of this “Bigger energy”- is actually a driving force in Ted Hughes’ shamanic journey towards that healing energy.

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