

TED HUGHES'S SHAMANIC JOURNEY INTO THE HEART OF THE RIVER

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Abstract

Ted Hughes's shamanic exploration of aquatic landscapes is addressed from the perspective of man's hubristic crimes against nature that reflect the damage inside man's own nature. Hughes's poetic interest in the aquatic landscapes is an attempt to bridge the gap between man and nature, in the belief that nature is a divine spirit to which man belongs, and from which modern man has been estranged. He poetically examines destruction in the place and the means of regeneration, and consequently comprehends the oneness of God's creation. Hughes believes that the natural energy constitutes the essence of man's prehistoric, uncivilised self, which stands for his instincts and nourishes his emotions and imagination. Hughes is of the opinion that acknowledging this wild natural energy helps to balance against man's other, rational self, while suppressing it renders man weak, enslaved by his rational civilisation, and disconnected from the healing energy of the Nature Goddess. Therefore, the basic thread that runs throughout Hughes's *River* is the mythical quest of the wounded hero in search of the source of the purgative and restorative power of the natural world.

Keywords: river, shaman, nature goddess, salmon, regeneration.

Ted Hughes's *River*, which carries photographs by Peter Keen, reveals his concern with Western culture which continually strives to obtain material gains and blinds itself to the glory of nature and the human soul, a culture to which nothing is sacred. Hughes writes in this regard that "once, by ego consciousness i.e. free intelligence, the ability to manipulate abstract ideas & direct our behaviour *against* instinct, we had lost the divine world, and internal identity with the divine self, culture appeared . . . as a substitute for what we had lost - religion appeared as a technology to regain it" (*Letters of Ted Hughes*, p. 581). Keith Sager writes the following in regard to man's crimes against nature: "The Commonest of all heroes is the one Joseph Campbell called *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, who commits the archetypal hubristic crime against Nature and his own nature, is punished, virtually destroyed, but also corrected after a long quest in search of his victim which is also his true self" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 33). However, it is also true that "man may make mistakes, damage nature and thereby himself, but in the long run man learns and nature heals. Thus even when landscape seems to display some maladjustment, it is only a phase in man the domesticate working toward symbiosis, a process he has been engaged in for a million years" (Meinig, p. 36). The importance of the natural landscape in Hughes's poetry stems from its being a poetic means to explore the unconscious self, the domain of the imagination, by natural images. Hughes emphasises the role of imagination as a link between man's rational mind and his more real and instinctual self, the neglect of which produces ailing societies in a sort of godless and mechanical world (Schofield, p. 33). Hughes believes that the crisis of the Western

man is his mental banishment from nature as he seeks logical and mechanised protection in the place of faith in nature and instincts ("The Environmental Revolution", p. 129). Hughes is not opposed to reasonable thinking, as he is against romantic escapism into a world of subjective fantasy and dream. He rather seeks a kind of equilibrium between man's subjective and inner self and the objective reality of the world, and between man and nature (Kazzer, p. 101).

To revive man's sense of the holy, the poet embarks on a shaman-like spiritual quest. Hughes would describe it as an attempt "to get something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs. Now this flight to the spirit world he experiences as a dream . . . and that dream is the basis of the hero story" ("Ted Hughes and *Crow*", p. 206). In "Regenerations" Hughes mentions that "the result, when the shaman returns to the living, are some display of healing power, or clairvoyant piece of information" (p. 57), including that all of the living belong to the same chain of being, depend on one another for their survival.

The poems in *River* are primarily inspired by the River Calder in West Yorkshire, the River Don in South Yorkshire, and the River Taw in Devon. *River* reveals Celtic mythology's influence on the poet; it venerates water and regards the goddess of the rivers, Brigantia, as the source of life and fertility. The influence of this goddess extends throughout the West Riding of Yorkshire, the rivers of which, according to the Celts, are "physical personification[s] of the goddess, mirroring her own supernatural forces - strength, the powers for destruction, fertility" (Ross, p. 20). Brigantia develops in Hughes's poetry into the notion of Nature Goddess. Further, water is the medium that connects Hughes with the Goddess, and the connection is made through fishing. Hughes mentions to Ehor Boyanowsky that "any kind of fishing provides that connection with the whole living world. It gives you the opportunity of being totally immersed, turning back into yourself in a good way, a form of meditation, some form of communion with levels of yourself that are deeper than the ordinary self" (p. 188). By communicating with the deeper levels of his being, Hughes seeks the recognition of the immortal self, which he identifies with the supreme spirit of the universe.

Keith Sagar mentions that Hughes was also concerned with "the laws which preserve the delicate balance of relationships between species, and between species and their environment, on which the continued creation and maintenance of life on earth entirely depends" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 148). Hughes's interest in the natural world, dating to his childhood years in Mytholmroyd, initiated him into a broader range of preoccupations and perspectives. In "The Environmental Revolution", Hughes writes:

The time for Conservation has certainly come. But Conservation, our sudden alertness to the wholeness of nature, and the lateness of the hour, is only the crest of a deeper excitement and readiness. The idea of nature as a single organism is not new. It was man's first great thought, the basic intuition of most primitive theologies . . . Suddenly, within the last few years, it has re-emerged . . . this is what we are seeing: something that was unthinkable only ten years ago, except as a poetic dream: the re-emergence of Nature as the Great Goddess of mankind, and the Mother of all life. (pp. 132-33)

Hughes demands that humans should change the ways they approach nature, which are linked with their technological progress. However, "the poet-shaman is even more likely than the conservationist to be ignored. The enemy is now the very people for whom the shaman-poet writes" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 149). Significantly, however,

River marks a change in Hughes's conception of nature. This is because, in Hughes's earlier poetry, nature was "a marauding demonic power always threatening to invade the fragile human world of consciousness, culture, civilization" (*Terror and Exultation*, pp. 148-49). Hughes changed his vision of the relationship between man and nature in his later poetry. He came to realise that civilisation drains the natural energies – "destroying the rainforest and the wilderness, and possibly the global ecosystem itself" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 149) – consequently bringing about its own ruin.

Hughes presents the wholeness of the natural world in "A Cormorant". Hughes, the fisherman of the poem, though exposed to the river's water, is wearing "waders" and "Barbour jacket". He is "paddl[ing] / Precariously on slimed shale" (R 38). The fisherman is not in real contact with the Nature Goddess, and he is quite aware of this:

Pray
 With futuristic, archaic under-breath
 So that some fish, telepathically overpowered,
 Will attach its incomprehension
 To the bauble I offer to space in general. (R 38)

The fisherman is juxtaposed with a cormorant, which does not hesitate to become wet. The cormorant plunges completely into the river and absorbs its healing energy:

He dives.
 He sheds everything from his tail end
 Except fish-action, becomes fish,
 Disappears from bird,
 Dissolving himself
 Into fish, so dissolving fish naturally
 Into himself. Re-emerges, gorged,
 Himself as he was, and escapes me.
 Leaves me high and dry in my space-armor,
 A deep-sea diver in two inches of water. (R 38)

The fisherman thus recognises the shallowness of his connection with the river, which prevents the relationship between them from being rewarding or creative. It is also true, though, that to perceive and understand the bond between the cormorant and the river is in itself the Nature Goddess's bounty. This bounty is endowed to those who choose to be at least in physical contact with the natural world.

The superiority of the natural world is again addressed in "The Kingfisher". Hughes mentions that the kingfisher's swift flight leaves a defiant impact on the human observer:

Now he's vanished – into vibrations.
 A sudden electric wire, jarred rigid,
 Snaps – with a blue flare.
 He has left his needle buried in your ear.

 Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye. (R 70)

The kingfisher is the messenger of God, bestowing blessings upon the entire creation:

Through him, God, whizzing in the sun,
Glimpses the angler.
Through him, God
Marries a pit
Of fishy mire. (R 70)

The blessedness of the kingfisher has its origins in Yakut mythology. The Yakuts heal an ill person by fastening a dead kingfisher to a birch tree stripped of its branches. This, the Yakuts believe, helps the shaman in his "ecstatic journey to escort the soul of a sacrificed animal to the sky. . . . The shaman begins making motions imitating a bird flying. Little by little he rises to the sky" (Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 232). The kingfisher is the shaman of the poem, the excessive healing energy of which causes it to cut "the one straight line / Of the raggle-taggle tumbledown river / With a diamond" (R 70). The kingfisher vitalises its energy by diving in the river, which blesses, heals, and regenerates all living creatures that are subjected to its rushing stream:

And look! He's
gone again.
Spark, sapphire, refracted
From beyond water
Shivering the spine of the river. (R 70)

The poetic lines emphasise "the bondage there exists between the environment and its creatures, sacred nature and its equally sacred offspring" (Xerri, p. 243). The poem portrays the natural world's healing energy through the kingfisher and the river. Man can access this healing power once he attunes himself to the natural environment surrounding him.

Hughes experiences the kingfisher's divine bliss in "Go Fishing". In the poem, Hughes argues that the release of man's true self is attainable by being in contact with the river's water, allowing thus the universal energy to connect with the divine inside the human. Sagar writes that "to enter water is to be reunited with the source, washed clean of the stain of blood, readmitted to an unfallen world" (*The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 163). Hughes's proposal to wade through the river water is an invitation to surpass the limitations of the intellect and gain a deeper knowledge of life through sensual and spiritual experiences:

Join water, wade in underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away downstream
Gulp river and gravity . . . (R 42)

Hughes wades into the river and feels overwhelmed by its powerful spirit. He loses his words and sense of individuality; he becomes part of the river's healing spirit. In other words, Hughes's being expands and trespasses the limits imposed by the rational mind:

Lose words
Cease
Be assumed into the womb of lymph
As if creation were a wound

As if this flow were all plasm healing
 Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles . . . (R 42)

Words are invented by the rational mind, and Hughes's proposal to lose words means that he is opposed to the interference of reason, which may restrict man's recognition of the instinctive and spiritual aspects of life. Hughes realises that mortals can join the healing flux of eternity, albeit momentarily. This can be achieved by "loosening . . . our grip on the world and the self. . . it is precisely that loosening which constitutes the healing of all the wounds of the world, the world to which we cling with a madman's grip" (*The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 163). This transformative experience renders Hughes "new and nameless", yet he would inevitably return and adjust himself again to a disturbing world:

Search for a face, harden into limbs
 Let the world come back, like a white hospital
 Busy with urgency words
 Try to speak and nearly succeed
 Heal into time and other people . . . (R 42)

Hughes mentions the following to Boyanowsky regarding his fishing experience: "When I am fishing alone, as I come out of it, if I have to speak to somebody, I find I can't speak properly. I can't form words. The words sort of come out backwards, tumbled. It takes time to readjust, as if I'd been into some part of myself that predates language" (pp. 188-89). Finally, it is interesting to note that "this twenty-seven-line poem contains not a single full stop and only seven commas. It asks the reader to lose his ego and dissolve into nature's numinous dimension, one of whose portals is the river" (Xerri, p. 249). The river is the means for the revival of Hughes's real and spiritually enlightened being, which is capable of revealing the path of salvation to the world.

Hughes, the shaman, takes a more significant step towards the Nature Goddess, the source of regeneration, in "Riverwatcher". Hughes, the Riverwatcher, contemplates the river's shining stream and feels the pull of the goddess's gravity. He abandons his ego and transcends into a realm of truth and perfection. He feels captured in the whirl of an intense esoteric experience or the religious ecstasy that the dervish achieves through his whirling dance:

(the epileptic's strobe,
 The yell of the Muezzin
 Or the "Bismillah!"
 That spins the dancer in
 Her whole body liquefied
 Where a body loves to be
 Rapt in the river of its own music) . . . (R 108)

The Riverwatcher undergoes a mystical experience akin to the hallucination of an "epileptic's strobe". The Riverwatcher's spiritual ascent into more elevated levels of existence is preceded by "Bismillah", the Islamic divine phrase that means "in the name of God" and confers blessings for Muslims' good deeds. It also initiates them into higher levels of existence, where they can connect with the divine. The Riverwatcher stands in harmony with the universe, as in the case of the Meuzzin's harmonious chanting of the

adhan. Hughes, by "referring to different religious traditions" throughout his poetry, "wants to imply that the sacred ground of being is common to all religions and that the task of the mystic quester in a secular age is to recover that common sacred ground" (Gustavsson, p. 215). The sacred is only attainable through a destructed ego, thereby activating other, deeper levels of the self that can perceive the divine light through the darkness of a secular civilisation.

Hughes was able to perceive the divine presence of the Nature Goddess through the salmon's life cycle. This is evident in "An August Salmon", a poem on the fate of a salmon in a pool of a blocked-off river. Hughes writes that the salmon is "a holed-up gangster", submissively "waiting for time to run out on him" (R 64). The death of the salmon is associated with the act of spawning and engendering new life:

Alone, in a cellar of ashroofs,
The bridegroom, mortally wounded
By love and destiny,
Features deforming with deferment.
His beauty bleeding invisibly
From every lift of gills.
He gulps, awkward in his ponderous regalia . . . (R 64)

These brief lines are heavy with echoes of destruction and death that fatefully crawl into life. The dying salmon is the bridegroom of the goddess. The salmon,

Sinks to the bed
Of his wedding cell, the coma waiting
For execution and death
In the skirts of his bride. (R 64)

"The spent salmon is the defeated, torn and sacrificed hero whose acquiescence is a form of worship. The salmon poems are all hymns to the goddess, tributes to the mythic heroism of the salmon, dying in the cause of the goddess. Their sacrifice is also a sacrament, the consummation of being reborn from their own eggs and sperms" (*The Laughter of Foxes*, p. 156). The salmon's life cycle signifies Hughes's model for mankind's relationship with nature. Hughes believes that man's life should demonstrate intense religious devotion to the Nature Goddess, as the source of life and regeneration.

The theme of resolute submissiveness to fate, to the process of engendering new life through death, continues in "September Salmon". The salmon of the poem is heedless of obstacles and diversions on its return to its breeding place where it can spawn and die:

Famously home from sea,
Nobly preoccupied with his marriage licence,
He ignores the weir's wrangle. Ignores
The parochial downdrag
Of the pool's long diphthong. Ignores
Festivals of insect fluorescence.
He serves his descendants. And his homage
Is to be patient, performing, slowly, the palsy
Of concerted autumn
In the upside-down cage of a tree. (R 98)

"The salmon's patient endurance is highlighted by the implied allusion to Odin's upside-down sacrifice of himself to himself in *The Poetic Edda*, to gain prophetic inspiration and an enlarged inner life" (Scigaj, p. 311). The salmon does not regard death as an aspect opposed to life, but it rather considers death the portal to a wider consciousness, which is godlike and pervasive: "Does he envy the perennial eels and the mongrel minnows? / He is becoming a god, / A tree of sexual death, sacred with lichens" (R 98). Hughes depicts a final image of the salmon at the very moment when it dissolves into the greater texture of the universe:

Over his sky the skeeters traffic, godlike and double-jointed.
He lifts
To the molten palate of the mercurial light
And adds his daub. (R 98)

The salmon's death, "a 'daub' on the river's surface, is a part of an unfinished and continually evolving painting that is the natural world" (Hadley, p. 94). The salmon's death becomes an affirmation of life, a rebirth that defies mortality.

While Yorkshire's landscape is Hughes's primary source of inspiration, the scenery in "Gulkana" is that of Alaska. Neil Roberts writes, "the sub-Arctic wilderness is unique among foreign environments in having inspired some of Hughes's greatest poetry. Hughes visited Alaska with his son Nicholas in 1980. He wrote to his brother, 'I never liked any place as much. I just can't tell you what paradise it is'" (p. 144). Hughes's first encounter with the Alaskan landscape made him powerless in the face of its vast wilderness and exotic sounds:

Gulkana
Biblical, a deranging cry
From the wilderness, burst past us -
A stone voice that dragged at us. (R 78)

Hughes continued confronting the overwhelming energy of the place, despite that it gave him feelings of unease and a slight sense of fear. He writes the following describing his feelings: "nearly a fear, / Something I kept trying to deny / With deliberate steps" (R 80). The poet's fear is akin to that of a pious man visiting a holy shrine; it implies a genial respect for the divine presence in the place: "Pilgrim for a fish! / Prospector for the lode in a fish's eye" (R 80). Alaska's primitive landscape corresponds to man's primitive self, which was formerly part of the wilderness:

My fear of one inside me,
A bodiless twin, some disinherited being
And doppelganger other, unliving,
Everliving, a larva from prehistory
Whose journey this was,
Whose gaze I could feel, who now exulted
Recognizing his home, and who watched me
Fiddling with my gear - the interloper,
The fool he had always hated. (R 80)

The poetic lines refer to man's inner and truer self, which is capable of communicating with the Nature Goddess and relating creatively to all creation. However, "in fact this other rarely speaks or stirs at all, in the sort of lives we now lead. We have so totally lost touch, that we hardly realize he is absent. All we know is that somehow or other the great, precious thing is missing. And the real distress of our world begins there" (Hughes, "Orghast: Talking without Words", p. 124). Hughes believes that humans' attempts to inhibit their primitive selves are matched by the way their civilisation has ruined the cultural and spiritual significance of the Indian settlements. Hughes notes with pain the "supermarket refuse" and "wrecked pick-ups" of the Indian village, which "was comatose - on the stagnation toxins / Of cultural vasectomy" (R 78). Hughes mentions, "it's so perversely painful and horrible when one of these wild places is polluted and spoiled. When that pure source is poisoned, to me that is the ultimate kind of atrocity - a vandalism against the most essential thing in us, an act of violence against mankind" (Boyanowsky, p. 189).

The poem continues disclosing Hughes's journey into the raw heart of place, life, and the human soul. The river's salmon, Hughes observes, are hypnotised by the river's sounds and dragged to the place where they will spawn and die:

They were possessed
By that voice in the river,
By the drums and flutes of its volume. We watched them
Move like drugged victims as they melted
Toward their sacrament - a consummation
Where only one thing was certain:
The actual, sundering death. The rebirth
Unknown, uncertain. Only that death
In the mercy of water, at the star of the source . . . (R 84)

However, as the salmon's death occurred "at the star of the source", rebirth is inevitable and strongly implied at the end of the poem.

The mighty energy of the Alaskan water landscape is again addressed in "That Morning". The poem describes Hughes's thrilling experience of universal unity and harmony once he "came where the salmon were so many, / So steady, so spaced, so far aimed" (R 72). Hughes mentions that he was metamorphosed into a divine being after wading in the river's water, among the salmon, and he had experienced the oneness of the universe:

Solemn to stand there in the pollen light
Waist-deep in wild salmon swaying massed
As from the hand of God. There the body
Separated, golden and imperishable,
From its doubting thought - a spirit-beacon
Lit by the power of salmon . . . (R 72)

Hughes feels that contacting the salmon resembles contacting God and he has been readmitted to Paradise. "The sheer profusion of salmon was a sign and a blessing, the body a 'spirit beacon lit by the power of the salmon'. This vision of the 'body of light' expresses the divine harmony of matter and spirit, as if this were no longer a fallen

world" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 269). However, Hughes mentions that in this paradise-like existence, where salmon are an abundant and available blessing,

Two gold bears came down and swam like men
Beside us. And dived like children.
And stood in deep water as on a throne
Eating pierced salmon off their talons. (R 72)

The sense of the divine in the place is not undermined by depicting the salmon as food for bears and human beings. Joseph Campbell writes:

The effect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world. The miracle of this flow may be represented in physical terms as a circulation of food substance, dynamically as a streaming of energy, or spiritually as a manifestation of grace. Such varieties of image alternate easily, represent three degrees of condensation of the one life force. An abundant harvest is the sign of God's grace; God's grace is the food of the soul; the lightning bolt is the harbinger of fertilizing rain, and at the same time the manifestation of the released energy of God. Grace, food substance, energy: these pour into the living world, and wherever they fail, life decomposes into death (p. 40).

However, eating the salmon also implies the death present at the heart of life. It coheres with Hughes's memories of South Yorkshire's sky during the Second World War, "hung with the drumming drift of Lancasters", which were en route to bomb Germany (R 72). Nevertheless, the poem concludes with the poet asserting that he has reached the end of his poetic quest; he has found the source of eternal light and regeneration: "So we found the end of our journey. / So we stood, alive in the river of light / Among the creatures of light, creatures of light" (R 72). In this respect, Hughes writes: "The idea is that my protagonist, on his journey, is finally approaching the crucible of the source, and now comes under its pull and begins to brighten with its power, into which he is about to fall and be dissolved" (*Letters of Ted Hughes*, p.397). Yet the light that Hughes captures is marred by the dark shadows of destruction and annihilation that are implicit in the poem and temporarily shunned by the poet.

In the final poem of the *River* sequence, "Salmon Eggs", the poet again succeeds in capturing the essence of the divine in the place through the salmon's life cycle. Hughes observes that within the stillness of the wintry season, a hectic creativity takes place at the heart of the river:

The salmon were just down there -
Shuddering together, touching each other,
Emptying themselves for each other -
Now beneath flood-murmur
They curve away deathwards. (R 120)

Salmon spawn on the river's bedrock, the "time-riven altar" (R 122), which is also the salmon's place of death: "The sunk foundations / Of burst crypts" (R 122). However, "only birth matters / Says the river's whorls" (R 124). This moment of revelation enables Hughes to perceive nature's joy and celebration of the precious life of its tiny creatures. Sagar writes, "joy, as Blake or Hughes understood it, has little to do with happiness - a

relatively trivial uncreative state, a distraction, temptation, backwater from the true way through tragic experience. It is the grace of atonement, the exaltation of being used by the goddess for her sacred purposes 'her insatiable quest'" (*Terror and Exultation*, p. 273). Further, and through the endless flow of the river's water, symbolising the creator and his creation, the poet is able to comprehend the vastness of the divine presence that surpasses both life and death:

Catkins
Wriggle at their mother's abundance. The spider clings to his craft.
Something else is going on in the river
More vital than death - death here seems a superficiality
Of some scaly limbs, parasitical. More grave than life
Whose reflex jaws and famished crystals
Seem incidental
To this telling - these toilings of plasm -
The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
Dumb with immensity. (R 120-22)

Hughes celebrates the divine presence at the end of the poem, and he chooses to do so through the Christian mass, the Sanctus of the Eucharistic prayer, which implies an ultimate union with God and a continuous spiritual regeneration:

Sanctus Sanctus
Swathes the blessed issue.
Perpetual mass
Of the waters
Wells from the cleft.
It is the swollen vent
Of the nameless
Teeming inside atoms - and inside the haze
And inside the sun and inside the earth.
It is the font, brimming with touch and whisper
Swaddling the egg. (R 122-24)

"Hughes, no orthodox believer in any particular religion, understands the spiritual truth behind the hymn, and the holy communion of life, in the final embrace of 'salmon egg'" (Scigaj, p. 314). The poem concludes with the "mind condensed on the haws" (R 124), as Keen's photo depicts the intimacy between the hawthorn berry and a drop of illuminated water. In this regard, Mircea Eliade writes: "Life, that is, *reality*, is somewhere concentrated in one cosmic substance from which all living forms proceed, either by direct descent or by symbolic participation. Water animals, particularly fish (which also serve as erotic symbols) and sea monsters, become emblems, of the sacred because they stand for *absolute reality*, concentrated in water" (*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, pp. 192-93). Therefore, Hughes believes that being in contact with the river's water is to experience the intoxicating oneness of the universe. He believes that the river's current is a realm of endless blessings and graceful origins.

The vision of the divine that concludes the *River* sequence makes Hughes's poetic quest for regeneration in the natural world complete. Hughes, the shaman, discerns the divine through the salmon's life cycle, in which death is merely a harbinger of a

new life. He experiences the healing connection with the ever-evolving life reflected in the salmon, the biorhythm of which is a metaphor for the soul's journey to the creator. This underpinned Hughes's awareness of his deepest nature and his place in the fabric of a vibrant life. Therefore, of all Hughes's poetry, the *River* sequence is the poet's successful adventure to the source, the world's power circuit, which results in regeneration through an intense reawakening of the self.

Note

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