

BOOK REVIEW

Ted Hughes's *WOLFWATCHING*: Changes Of Perspective

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Keith Sagar, in a discussion of Hughes's early work, pointed out that:

From the beginning Hughes is searching for a way of reconciling human vision with the energies, powers, presences of the non-human cosmos. At first his main concern is to identify these energies and describe them, not only in human terms but in their own, that is in Nature's terms. And the discrepancy between these two descriptions gives the most powerful of his early poems, for example the hawk and the jaguar poems, their characteristic tension. Hughes is also concerned to discover whether negotiations are possible between man and nature, that is between man and his creator and if so, why they have so completely collapsed in our time and what the consequences of this collapse have been and may be.¹

Sagar thus summarises what has come to be accepted as one of the most frequent preoccupations in Hughes's work: his concern with the relationship between Man and Nature and with a redressing of the intricate chemistry and equilibrium of Nature upset by human error, together with a reforging of man's identity as inclusive within the natural world. Hughes's early work, of which the titles of *Wolfwatching* seem reminiscent, is populated by a whole series of creatures which come to life beyond the poet's pen as their spirits penetrate and correspond with the darker, hidden areas of Man's own nature, while the poet as individual becomes both observer and the observed. These early poems, too, are imbued with what Hughes once called "vehement activity" as the poet develops his role as shamaan of the spirit in his exploration of the repressed areas of the self which have lain taboo to Man for so many generations. Thus, these first volumes come alive with the forceful physical and spiritual power of, among others, the hawk, the jaguar, the macaw and the fox, alerting the reader to the deeper powers, ambiguities and potential of his own subconscious.

To the assiduous reader of Ted Hughes's work the title of his latest volume *Wolfwatching*, will almost certainly recall titles and thematic preoccupations present in the poet's earlier production such as *The Hawk In The Rain*, *Lupercal*,

1.- Sagar, K., *The Art of Ted Hughes*, CUP, 1980. p.4.

Moortown, or *Under The North Star*. A further glance at the list of contents would seem to confirm this as the reader's eye is caught by such titles as "A Sparrow Hawk", "Macaw", "Sacrifice", "A Dove", among others.

However, as the reader immerses himself in Hughes's new work such presumptions regarding the icons found in earlier works begin to open themselves to question. While the voice is distinctly Hughesean, perspectives and focus seem to have shifted. "A Sparrow Hawk" offers a reassessment of its earlier counterpart which proclaimed:

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.²

This sparrow hawk, its eyes albeit "Still wired direct/To the nuclear core", finally becomes:

The warrior
—
Blue shoulder-cloak wrapped about him
Leaning, hunched,
Among the oaks of the harp.³

The closing image in the new poem reveals that a certain change has taken place in the core of the poet's perspective of the bird which is now no longer seen in terms of kingship, and in the colours of absolutes. The bird seems to be only a distant relative of that powerful creature of Hughes's earlier work which ruled the world with iron claw, arrogance and pride, its instincts intact, in perfect harmony with its habitat. Hughes's new volume is inhabited by creatures which lack the spiritual energy and power the reader associates with the Hughesean world. Man's modern technological world, his egocentricism and ambition seem to have sunk the poet into a bleak recognition of contemporary Man's unwillingness to seek a regeneration of the spirit, rather the individual seems bent on divorcing himself further and further from his roots and place in the natural world and from any firm spiritual identity. The "collapse" of the relationship between Man and Nature now seems apparently absolute and the poet's voice sadly bitter in the recognition that "negotiations between man and Nature" are proving impossible in the context of man's materialism and egocentricism. The creatures that roam his verse now lack the power and energy that drove his

2.- Hughes, T., "Hawk Roosting", *Lupercal*, Faber, London, 1977, p. 26.

3. - Hughes, T., "Wolfwatching", *Wolfwatching*, Faber, London, 1989, pp. 12-15.

earlier icons, and are reduced here to the total frustration and emptiness revealed in the wolves of "Wolfwatching" the title poem of the volume.

The title of this piece invites the reader to remember the wolf of *Lupercal*, and the jaguar of *The Hawk In The Rain*, and *Wodwo*, but here we are confronted not by the wild integrity of the earlier creatures, but by a broken-spirited, aged wolf which:

... Subsides
In a trembling of wolf-pelt he no longer
Knows how to live up to.⁴

Not even its companion, the young wolf, emerges intact like its earlier model, but is reduced to the same frustrated condition as his elder:

He's hanging
Upside down on the wire
Of non-participation,
He's a tarot-card, and he knows it.
He can howl all night
And dawn will pick up the same card
And see him painted on it, with eyes
Like doorframes in a desert
Between nothing and nothing.⁵

The voice of the poet has changed substantially. The fierce protagonists of his earlier works have now themselves become the subdued victims of the human world. Nothing has changed, nothing will change and the poet himself has assumed the voice of the aged wolf:

All his power is a tangle of old ends,
A jumble of leftover scraps and bits of energy
And bitten-off impulses and dismantled intuitions.⁶

The poet finds himself powerless to recreate his previous poetic domain for, like the young wolf, he finds that:

(...) the prodigious journeys
Are thrown down again in his
Loose heaps of rope.

4.- Hughes, T., "Wolfwatching", *Wolfwatching*, Faber, London, 1989, pp. 12-15.

5.- Ibid. pp. 12-15.

6.- Ibid. pp. 12-15.

The future's snapped and coiled back
Into a tangled lump, a whacking blow
That's damaged his brain. ⁷

Wolfwatching is, thus, the revisiting of known territory in the light of bitter experience. As with the earlier volumes, the poet affords the reader several pieces of autobiographical content relating to his youth and adolescence, and, inevitably, to the First World War which loomed so large on the horizon of his youth. However, here the new, the unexpected, must surely be a new tenderness of tone coupled with profound grief and, though the treatment of the subject matter is similar to the earlier in its iconography, these poems become a lament not only for the dead and the survivors of the war but, by extension for the spiritual breakdown sustained by Man in the modern world. A consequence of this breakdown and of the irreconcilability of Man and Nature has meant that Man's incursions into the natural world are increasingly ferocious and heartless, causing the poet to grieve for the dying species of rhino and whale, victims of human ambition and greed as a result of which:

The Black Rhino
Is vanishing
.....
Into a soft
Human laugh ⁸

In *Wolfwatching*, the poet's fourteenth volume, Hughes's power as a poet remains intact in verse which reveals not only the beautifully modulated, flexible voice to which the reader has become accustomed, the perfect balancing of tensions and the skilled articulation of language, but in which the past voice of the poet has resolved itself into the bitter recognition of both the total rupture in the symbiosis Man/Nature and of the dire consequences of this rupture for human kind: a world "(...) infected/With the delusions of man".

7.- Ibid. pp. 12-15.

8.- Op.Cit. p. 55.