

The Rival Religion of Ted Hughes

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In this paper I will analyse the reasons behind Hughes's loss of faith in Christianity as is reflected by his unique treatment of the myth of the Genesis. I will also argue with the help of internal evidence that Hughes's apostasy led him to explore Hindu mythology on which to base his substitute religion that could hold the western man's breaking personality together.

Ted Hughes has described the Christian concept of God as "man-created, broken down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion."¹ His disenchantment with Christianity becomes apparent in his poems where he parodies God and the myth of the Genesis. Having lost faith in Christianity, Hughes turned to the east in search of an alternative faith and explored oriental mythologies. His interest in the powers of the self gave a direction to this quest and provided the basis for his personal religion. Having a mythopoeic imagination Hughes makes his own myths and founds his religion on these, as his major poetical works bear out.

Hughes's disillusionment with Christianity must have been brought about by the obvious reason that with its inherent contradictions—Puritanism and "sexual repression of Protestantism,"² says Leonard M. Scigaj in "The Ophiolatory of Ted Hughes", it wasn't possible for this faith to enable the contemporary Western man to prevent the disintegration of his personality. On the one hand Christianity emphasizes egalitarianism, while on the other the powerful Church is indulgent towards priests, who feel self-important to a high degree. The priest in 'The Conversion of Reverend Skinner' (*The Hawk in the Rain*) is so conscious of his ecclesiastical status that he rebukes a poor girl in a language suggestive of bourgeoisie pride: "Dare you reach so high, girl, from the gutter of the street?"

Crag Jack, another character from Hughes, becomes an apostate because he cannot cope with the overbearing attitude of the Church. Both the characters see the Church as "dark" in view of its stifling effect on the life of the spirit. Hughes's avid interest in nature and animals, irrespective of their nature, has been well documented. He accepts nature as it, comprising preys as well as predators. Being an ardent lover of animals, Hughes, like his persona Crag Jack, cannot accept a religion which has excluded animals from his philosophy. Hughes had written a review of Clifford H. Pope's book *The Giant Snakes* in which he writes:

The absence of concern for animals in the teachings of Christ is puzzling, to say the least, and accounts for the feeling among Christian peoples that animal worship is an oddity.³

Hughes's loss of faith in Christianity becomes conspicuous in *Wodwo*, *Crow* and *Gaudete* : in such poems as 'Logos,' 'Reveille,' and 'Theology' in *Wodwo*, 'A Childish Prank,' 'Crow's First Lesson,' 'Crow's Theology,' 'A Horrible Religious Error,' and "Apple Tragedy' in *Crow* and the main text of *Gaudete*, excepting the 'Prologue ' and the 'Epilogue.' In these works of his, Hughes parodies certain episodes in the myth of the Genesis and recreates the myth to suit his own purpose.

In 'Logos'

Creation convulses in nightmare, and awaking
Suddenly tastes the nightmare moving
Still in its mouth

and spits it kicking out, with a swinish cry—which is God's First cry. Here Hughes qualifies "God's first cry" as a "swinish cry" and by implication calls God a swine, the most repellant of epithets—a highly heretical poetic statement. Hughes writes in 'Reveille':

No, the serpent was not
One of God's ordinary creatures.
Where did he creep from,
This legless land-swimmer with a purpose?

It was a "legless land-swimmer with a purpose" and its "purpose" was to wake Adam and Eve to the impulse of sex. It accomplished its purpose and they woke with cries of pain.

Each clutched a throbbing wound –
A sudden cruel bite.

The implication of the two stanzas is that God is helpless and the "serpent" works independent of Him and also against Him by subverting His wish of keeping Adam and Eve ignorant of Knowledge. God, he seems to suggest, is so impotent and helpless that He cannot contain the "serpent", although it was He who created it.

Hughes begins 'Theology' with a new and original insight with the assurance of a historian who has unearthed a historical fact. He refutes the temptation theory of the Genesis by saying:

No, the serpent did not
Seduce Eve to the apple

All that's simply
Corruption of facts.

This runs counter to the Genesis account of the Serpent having lured Eve to the apple. Then comes the revelation:

Adam ate the apple.
Eve ate Adam.
The serpent ate Eve.

According to the poet it was not the serpent that tempted Eve to taste the forbidden fruit first. In Hughes it is Adam who eats the fruit first which goes contrary to what the Genesis says:

And when the woman saw
that the tree was good for
food., and that it was pleasant
to the eyes, and a tree
to be desired to make one wise,
she took of the fruit
thereof, and did eat, and gave also
unto her husband with her;
and he did eat.

Hughes reverses the events of the Genesis to voice his disbelief in Christianity and to show that the Christian God is impotent. For, in the last stanza of the poem we are told:

The serpent meanwhile
Sleeps his meal off in Paradise—
Smiling to hear
God's querulous calling.

In Hughes's version the omnipotent God is reduced to a helpless brat who on seeing someone stronger than himself protests half-heartedly, not plucky enough to fight it out, knowing his own limitations. Thus God is reduced to a peevish complaining child or woman who weeps when helpless; God actually weeps in 'Crow's First Lesson' when He fails to loosen the stronghold of woman's genitals on man's neck.

The ineffectiveness of the Christian God is drawn out more sharply and with vehement savagery in *Crow*. The eponymous protagonist of this book does what God fails to do. He even manipulates the serpent who had emerged all-powerful in *Wodwo*. The poems in *Crow* that overtly deal with Hughes's disillusion with the Christian God are: 'A

Childish Prank,' 'Crow's First Lesson,' 'Crow's Theology,' 'A Horrible Religious Error' and 'Apple Tragedy.'

In 'A Childish Prank' the bodies of Adam and Eve lie in Paradise without souls. The problem of investing the two inert bodies with action is too much for God. Pondering over it He falls asleep. But for Crow it is just a "childish prank." We are told that he

. . . bit the Worm, God's only son,
Into two writhing halves.

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out.
He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman

And it crept in deeper and up
To peer out through her eyes
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful.

Crow's childish prank results in a cosmic event; by activating the bodies of Adam and Eve he makes this world become a possibility. The powerfulness of the sexual impulse from which God wanted to keep Adam and Eve ignorant is what activates their inert bodies. In this poem Hughes makes a highly heretical statement: he calls the "Worm"—the "serpent" of 'Reveille' and 'Theology'—"God's only son. According to the New Testament Jesus Christ is the only son of God. But Hughes's mythopoeic imagination sees a chance here to make an alternative myth by stating that the "Worm" or the "serpent" is God's only son because he is capable of investing the lifeless bodies of Adam and Eve with the life principle. He gives vitality to them. Christ, on the other hand, is a "naked bleeding worm/ who had given up the ghost" representing "a pernicious sublimation of sex."⁴

'In Crow's First Lesson' we come across a further emasculated God who attempts to teach Crow to say "love" but fails. Everytime He makes a try, different kinds of unwelcome animals and insects fall out of his mouth. God makes a final try

And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and tightened
The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept.

God's weakness becomes obvious with his inability to loosen the grip of woman's genitals on man's neck; it achieves pathetic proportions when God weeps and curses like a helpless woman or a child.

The serpent reemerges in 'A Horrible Religious Error,' as stronger and more resourceful than God. Man and woman pay obeisance to him and not to God. They surrender to him unconditionally, saying "Your will is our peace." Having depicted God as impotent in this poem Hughes dethrones him in 'Apple Tragedy,' installing the serpent in His place. The poem begins thus:

So on the seventh day
The serpent rested.
God came up to him.
'I've invented a new game,' he said.

According to the Genesis it was God who created the universe in six days and rested on the seventh. In Hughes's remake of the Genesis, the work of creation is entrusted to the "serpent," who seems better equipped for the task, having demonstrated his powerfulness in 'Reveille' and 'Theology' in *Wodwo* and 'A Childish Prank' and 'A Horrible Religious Error' in *Crow*. While the serpent is wearing off his fatigue, God comes to him with the proposal of playing a "new game" that he has "invented." God shows him an apple, squeezes it and offers him a drink. Here Hughes launches his final assault on God: he makes Him swap places with the serpent, thereby raising the serpent to God's status and lowering God's status to that of the serpent. Thus, in Hughes's scheme God and the serpent play roles which are opposite of the roles they perform according to Christian Dogma.

As a vitalist Hughes rejects the idea of mortifying the flesh advocated by Christianity. The dichotomy between the body and the soul upheld and preached by the Orthodox Church is not acceptable to Hughes who is all for the life of the spirit as gained through the body. This sets him on a journey to search for an alternative faith that can sustain his spirit and body. As Neil Roberts aptly observes in "Ted Hughes and the Laureateship", he is not "merely a non-believer but is positively committed to a rival religion."⁵

Hughes's quest for a "rival religion" takes him over what he has called a "completely Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse."⁶ A close study of his poems reveals Hughes's familiarity with and serious interest in Hindu mythological and philosophical concept. His "rival religion" seems to be very close to Hinduism and its offshoots. Hughes seems to have been influenced by the yoga cult of Mahesh Yogi, the guru of the Beatles.

We find a lot of allusions to Hindu mythology and philosophy in Hughes's works. Most of these have their origin in the transcendental meditation Mahesh Yogi taught to the West and is known as *dhyana yoga* in the language of the *Upanishads*. Hughes

told Ekbert Faas in an interview that he was familiar with the teachings of *Upanishads*.⁷ Meditation has its origins in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*. In many of Hughes's poems we get the echo of concepts peculiar to Hinduism. In 'Mayday on Holderness' Hughes writes: "Dead and unborn are in God comfortable." This poetic line has a direct echo in the concept of the Vishwarupa of the *Mahabharata*. When Arjun refuses to fight against his cousins and relations, Lord Krishna then reasons with him but to no avail. Finally Krishna asks Arjun to peer into his mouth. Arjuna does the bidding and "There in the body of God of Gods, Pandava then saw the whole universe with its many divisions drawn together in one." Arjun overawed by what he sees says in sloka 26 and 27 of the Bhagavad Gita "All sons of Dhritrashtra with hosts of kings of the earth, Bhishma, Drona and Sutputra, with the warrior chiefs of ours. . . , enter hurrying into your mouth, terrible with tusks and fearful to look at. Some are found sticking in the gaps between the teeth with their heads crushed to powder." In the Vishwarupa Arjuna sees all his foes already dead and residing in the body of the Lord and also the unborn waiting to be born. Those who are yet to be born are residing in the Parmatman (the Absolute Self or God).

In 'An Otter' Hughes alludes to a yogi in the following words:
 So the self under the eyes lies.
 Attendant and withdrawn.

This has a close parallel in Sloka III of the Gita: "Therefore, constantly perform your obligatory duty without attachment; for, by doing duty without attachment man verily obtains the Supreme." A yogi is satisfied in performing duties without thinking about their outcome. He does not escape from the world but stays in it and performs all his worldly duties, but at the same time keeps himself detached from expectation. Thus, he is at once "Attendant and withdrawn," reconciling the two contrary states of worldliness and unworldliness. The quality of being at once "Attendant and withdrawn" is essential to yogihood. Hughes's interest in Hinduism becomes more pronounced in *Wodwo*. Here he uses theological concepts and archetypal symbols from Hinduism extensively. In the short story 'Snow' we come across a language which reflects Hughes's interest in meditation as a tool to unlock the powers of the self. There are passages in the story which closely reflect the tenets of the *Yoga Sutras*.

The story of 'Snow' is woven around the indomitable faith of the protagonist in the powers of yoga to hold one intact during adverse circumstances. He has survived a plane-crash on a vast tract of snow. Around him there is snow on all sides and no sign of life. In such hostile conditions he does not lose heart but is very optimistic about his chances of survival. There is evidence in the story of Hughes's awareness of the human mind or the atman as a reservoir of energy and how this energy can be controlled

through meditation and turned to advantage. The protagonist is aware that his survival in these inhospitable conditions depends on the one-pointedness of his mind. The reader can infer Hughes's familiarity with what Patanjali says in Book III, sloka 1 of the *Yoga Sutras* (the similarity of thought is very suggestive and significant):

Binding the mind-stuff to a place is fixed-attention.

Binding of the mind-stuff, only in s far as it is a fluctuation , to the navel or to
To the heart-lotus or to the light within the head or to the tip of the nose or
To the tip of the tongue or to other places of the same kind or
To an external object,—this is fixed attention.

The protagonist is also fully aware of the insidious and vacillating nature of the human mind. In Sutra 2, Book I, Patanjali refers to this state of mind as follows:

Yoga is the restriction of the fluctuations of mind-stuff.

The protagonist of the story believes that in order to achieve the state of “fixed – attention” he must overcome the insidiousness of his own mind by arresting the flow of the stream of consciousness. This way he can stop the mind from drifting away and slipping out of his control. In a poem called ‘Skylarks’ Hughes uses a bird as an archetypal symbol for the soul or the atman In this poem we find Hughes exploring the theme of *moksha*. The upward flight of the skylark is a sustained metaphor for the atman's aspiration and struggle for the attainment of *moksha*. The atman in order to achieve the state of dispassion has to free itself from all mundane attachments. It is overburdened with “ballast” that keeps it earthbound and rooted in day-to-day life. ‘Skylarks’ demonstrates the development in Hughes's exploration of Hinduism from the limited interest in *yoga* for physical survival in ‘Snow’ to the profound interest in spiritual salvation in the present poem. Here the individual is not interested in remaining attached to his body but works for his spiritual uplift by freeing himself from the “ballast” of *moha* or the desires.

In *Cave Birds* Hughes continues with his exploration of yoga and the supernormal powers that its perfect practice bestow on a *yogi*. In a poem called ‘The Summoner’ we find Hughes incorporating the idea of a yogi's power to leave his body and enter another's. This idea seems to have been drawn directly from sutra 38, Book III of the *Yoga Sutras*:

As a result of slackening the cause of bondage and as a result of the
consciousness of the procedure of the mind-stuff-, the mind-stuff penetrates
into the body of another.

The atman of a yogi can leave his body, enter another and return to its own body at will. A yogi disciplines his atman and develops spiritual powers through disciplining

his body. It is believed that by rousing the kundalini a yogi can perform wonders. It is interesting to note here that Hughes's interest in Yeats was not stimulated as much by his poetry as by his being interested in magic.

The protagonist in 'A Flayed Crow in the hall of judgment' has perfectly understood the secret of overthrowing the "yoke of after life". He has attained knowledge, known as *gyan* in the yogic parlance, which has convinced him of the absurdity of not accepting "whatever is allotted" to him. He has understood that the way to moksha is through karma yoga. Therefore, he will resign himself to the will of the Parmatman and perform his worldly duties and work for his salvation. In another poem 'Guide' Hughes's description of how the Parmatman guides the atman in its quest parallels that given in Hindu scriptures.

When the body dies the atman leaves the body through what A. Barth says in the *Religion of India* "an invisible opening at the top of the skull affording a passage for it."⁸ The Parmatman lifts it up through the cosmos while the worlds go tumbling by. The atman clings to the Parmatman and both go "Into the wind—. The flame-wind—a red wind/ And a black. Wind." The "wind" in these lines corresponds closely to the Vayu or Vata as described by W.K. Wilkins in *Hindu Mythology*:

Touching the sky, he moves onward, making
All things ruddy; and he comes propelling the dust of the earth.⁹

Moving onward Vayu makes "all things ruddy" and as such it is the same as the "red wind" in the poem and coming "propelling the dust of the earth " it is the "black wind."

Cave Birds ends on a note of affirmation—the atman's ascent towards the abode of the Parmatman. In the last poem of this collection, 'the Risen' the protagonist is again a birdlike figure symbolizing the atman. Like the lark of 'Skylark' it is also engaged in soaring: it succeeds in 'rising' above every material interest and merges with the Parmatman. As such "The dirt becomes God", the individual undergoes an alchemical transformation, as it were, and realises oneness with God.

In 'River' Hughes uses the myth of the Ganga's birth and uses a word of the yogic terminology 'samadhi' directly. He also talks about the yogic concept of levitation in this book. In the poem 'Strangers' Hughes gives us direct proof that he is familiar with the yogic concept and its terminology and assimilates these in his poems. Hughes has devoted a whole book to the poetic description of a river in *River*. It serves for him as a symbol of life. As the title-poem of the collections shows, the work reflects the poet's concern for the deliverance of mankind. The river is characterized as having

“Fallen from heaven.” This is an allusion to the descent of the Ganga which is believed to be purity itself. Therefore, “death and the pit” do not sully it. People cast their “sins’ into its waves, even then

It will return stainless
For the delivery of this world..

Wilkins describes the Ganga as “the chief of the sacred streams of India, whose power of cleansing from all past, present and future sins, is believed to be divine.”¹⁰ The Ganga is believed to have descended on the earth from the heaven for the deliverance of mankind. According to the myth, the Ganga was brought to the earth from the heaven by King Sagar to deliver his sixty thousand sons who “all scorched to heaps of ashes lay.”¹¹ Becoming thus a symbol for the deliverer of mankind, the river

. . . is a god, and inviolable.
Immortal. And will wash itself of all deaths

Leonard M. Scigaj has written about the elements of oriental mythology in *Wodwo*. In his painstaking analysis he comes to the conclusion that *Wodwo* incorporates mythological elements largely from Buddhism and Zen. But these two religions cannot be the foundations of Hughes’s “rival religion” because both look upon life as “pain”. The First Truth enunciated by Buddha, which is at the core of the two faiths, as given in *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts, is as follows:

Birth is dukkha, decays is dukkha, sickness is dukkha, death is dukkha, so are sorrow and grief. . . . To be bound with things which we dislike , and to be parted from things which we like , these also are dukkhas. Not to get what one desires, this also is dukkha. In a word. This body, this fivefold aggregation based on clutching , this is dukkha.¹²

Watts translates “dukkha” as “suffering.” Thus Buddhism and Zen consider life a burden, which can be escaped from by taking shelter under Buddha’s dharma. Both, Buddhism and Zen are nihilistic philosophies which cannot be palatable to a vitalist poet like Hughes: the vitalist philosophy is incompatible with a doctrine which preaches escape from life and duties.

Yet another reason behind Hughes’s substitute religion having its basis in Hinduism is the special place animals are given in the Hindu pantheon—the bull is associated with Shiva, the mouse with Ganesh, the tiger with Durga, the peacock with Kartikeya, the elephant with Indra. Different animals are associated with the Mother Goddess (who could be seen as an equivalent of Robert Grave’s White Goddess)—the bull with Mahagauri, the tiger with Durga, the donkey with Kaalratri and the Lion with Katayani. Even snakes enjoy a pride of place in the Hindu pantheon, such as Sheshnaag and

Vasuki. There is a particular day in the Hindu calendar called Naagpanchami, when milk is offered to snakes.

From the foregone analysis it can be inferred that Ted Hughes reworked the myth of the Genesis to suit his purpose of expressing dissatisfaction with Christianity. He set out on a poetic quest for a substitute religion which can strengthen the self and the powers it possesses. Like his wife Sylvia Plath Hughes was interested in the occult and it was the yoga cult which showed him how to realise what he called in 'Bull Moses' "the locked black of powers.

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