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NAZISM, WAR AND A READING OF *THE HAWK IN THE RAIN* BY TED HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes's poetry is very often analyzed and explained in terms of atrocity, brutality and ferocity inherent in Nature, from times immemorial as well as war, violence and mindless massacre inflicted on humanity by man throughout centuries. For presenting this gruesome, dark and sinister panorama of Nature, human psyche and history, Hughes explores the cultural, religious and social history from ancient past to his contemporary Nazi Germany of Adolf Hitler. The article tries to explore how he visualizes past and experienced the violent world of contemporary geopolitics and how his observation and realization is distinctly reflected in his maiden book of verse *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). The study also attempts to uphold the past state of history and contemporary world perspective as well as reality and truth of Nature by citing references from scholars, critics, commentators and historians. The study tries to uphold the raw truth of murderousness inherent in Nature which is hitherto untold as well as the operation of Nazi totalitarianism and its effect of holocaust, barbarity, cruelty, genocide and mass extermination. The study unmistakably tries to represent the chaos and violence that overtook the whole world with its demonic dance of death and inhumanity created by the World Wars.

Keywords: Nature, War, Totalitarianism, Genocide, Extermination

Introduction

A reading of the major poems of *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), the first anthology of poems by Ted Hughes (1930-1998) shows how war obsession as well as Nazi totalitarianism remains one of the cardinal components in his poetry. The poet started writing immediate after the chaos of the World War-II. He experienced the devilish dance of death and disaster caused by the Great Wars that virtually demolished the very basis of human civilization and culture. The immensity and vastness of the Great Wars- its horror and devastation; its fire and ferocity; its wounds and agonies were so profound and powerful that no soul on earth could escape the touch of its flame and fire. As human being Hughes was deeply moved by its cruelty and brutality of the holocaust; its mindless massacre and butchery; its atomic fire and organized mass-murder. M. L. Rosenthal, citing three stanzas from 'View of a Pig' tries to justify Hughes's war-obsession as well as Nazi barbarity:

“Once I ran at a fair in the noise
To catch a greased piglet
That was faster and nimbler than a cat,
Its squeal was the rending of metal.

Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.
Their bite is worse than a horse’s –
They chop a half-moon clean out.
They eat cinders, dead cats.

Distinctions and admirations such
As this one was long finished with.
I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,
Scald it and scour it like a doorstep’

A passage like the one just quoted would have been less likely to appear before the last war. Its bloody-mindedness is a reflex of recent history, the experience of the Blitz, the Bomb, and Auschwitz – an expression of them, a recoiling from them, and an approach to experience by way of their implications. Hughes resembles Sylvia Plath closely in such a passage. His nature is Nazi, not Wordsworthian.”ⁱ

The great historian Martin Broszat in *Hitler and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic* points out the essential features of Nazism thus,

“[A]lmost all essential elements of ... Nazi ideology were to be found in the radical positions of ideological protest movements [in pre-1914 Germany]. These were: a virulent anti-Semitism, a blood-and-soil ideology, the notion of a master race, [and] the idea of territorial acquisition and settlement in the East. These ideas were embedded in a popular nationalism which was vigorously anti-modernist, anti-humanist and pseudo-religious.”ⁱⁱ

Discussion and Justification:

Hughes’s view of Nature and God is dark, sinister, destructive and devilish. Hughes himself comments about the use of violence in his poems and clearly alludes to Hitler and obliquely indicates the whole history of the World War II and the demonic tyrannical rule of genocide and mass extermination of the Jews, Communists, Gypsies, Slavs and even the physically challenged so-called German Christian Aryans:

“...The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about the ‘Hawk Roosting’, this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually, what I had in mind, was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. Its not so simple may be because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some creature like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature....and Nature became the devil. He does not sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit...”ⁱⁱⁱ

Hughes journeys from micro to macro and tries to explore the dark and deeper recesses of human psyche. Nature to Hughes is not only fierce and violent but dark, desolate, obscure and terrifying. The universe becomes a meaningless void, a mass of disintegrated, disjointed, demonic and destructive forces which war against each other. There is no cohesiveness, no decisive meaning, no finality and no conclusion. The nature of Hughes is more violent, shivering, terrifying than that of Tennyson’s nature, ‘*Nature, red in tooth and claw*’.^{iv} Both external

ⁱ Rosenthal, M. L. *The New Poets: American and British Poetry since World War II*. London: O. U. P, 1967. p. 226.

ⁱⁱ Broszat Martin (1987) [1984]. *Hitler and the Collapse of Weimar Germany*. Translated by V. R. Berghahn. Providence, Rhode Island: Berg Publishers, p.38.

ⁱⁱⁱ Faas, Ekbert. *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*. Santa Barbara, California: Black Arrow Press, 1980. p. 199.

^{iv} Tennyson, Alfred Lord. *In Memoriam A.H.H.* Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1895. p. 62.

as well as inner spiritual world of man are chaotic, cruel and horrifying. Eric Hobsbawm mentions the main characteristics of Fascism which are clearly reflected in the poems of Hughes through the means of rhetoric:

“The Fascists were nationalists and xenophobic, idealizing war and violence, intolerant and given to strong-arm coercion, passionately anti-liberal, anti-democratic, anti-proletarian, anti-socialist and anti-rationalist dreaming of blood and soil and a return to the values which modernity was disrupting.”^v

The hate philosophy of Hitler’s anti-semitism led to mass extermination of the Jews. His repulsion for the Jews can be understood from his own statement:

“The life which the Jew lives as a parasite thriving on the substance of other nations and states has resulted in developing that specific character which Schopenhaur once described when he spoke of the Jew as ‘The Great Master of Lies’. The kind of existence which he leads forces the Jew to the systematic use of falsehood...”^{vi}

A number of poems in the maiden anthology echoes this spirit if Nazism and the authoritarian philosophy of ruling other races by brute forces.

A Reading of Ted Hughes’s *The Hawk in the Rain*:

The poems in his maiden anthology *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) bear multifarious meanings and suggestions. They grope in the deep recesses of human psyche to discover the horror and lawlessness of existence. At the same time, external violence of the world encompasses time, from primitive to the present. Hughes’s is the robust world of birds and animals; his myth-making power; his eccentric use of obscure and unfamiliar phrases and jargon; his grotesque use of rhetoric, particularly symbols and images make him a unique figure in English literature.

He has neither any predecessors nor any followers. His anthropological allegory and impalpable symbolic suggestiveness help to bring home the essence of reality, the truth. It reveals his concern for culture. Hughes is intellectual, cerebral and anti-romantic in his approach. Surprisingly enough, in many poems of this phase the poet is acutely concerned with the political violence and numerous psycho-social maladies. Hughes shows his genre in the very first anthology. The book is a landmark in the history of English verse. In this book Hughes explored the hitherto unknown possibilities of English verse. In many poems of this volume war and totalitarian madness is shown as distinguishing feature of his poetry. The title poem ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ may be cited as strong example. Here the poet speaks of the power and the glory of the hawk; its strength and will power as well its fierceness and ferocity; its steady progress as well as its arbitrariness. The hawk is a majestic bird. It perches upon the topmost branch of the tree. It flies upward, the topmost height of the sky. It’s searching, penetrating eyes, its strong huge wings, its sinews, its strong claws and sharp beak - all are suggestive of its power. Its steadfastness is beyond doubt. The speaker lauds the hawk’s power which

Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air.

The speaker is inspired by the bird and strives towards the ‘master-Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still’. The line reminds Tennyson’s famous dictum-like statement in the poem ‘*Ulysses*’ which declares ‘To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield’. It also enunciates human endeavour and will-power which very often crumbles and fails to turn up to its goal. But the hawk’s will power is unshakable and steady. Amidst all adverse circumstances and foul weather, the hawk struggles and never surrenders. Its invincible spirit and its stubborn nature have the desire to conquer and never to yield. Of course, the speaker announces the final fate of the hawk that is the death. But here too, the speaker glorifies the hawk as a tragic hero. He may die, but his majestic nature remains unblemished even in his death. All through the poem Hughes speaks of the power and authority

^v Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Extremes*. London: Abacus, 1995. p. 126.

^{vi} Hitler, Adolf. *Mein Kampf*. Delhi: English Edition Publishers and Distributors (India), 2004. p. 125.

as well as the killing, murderous instinct of the bird which immediately relates to Hitler's hunger for power and authority to establish the Aryans empire in the world.

'The Jaguar' is another forceful poem of Hughes's early days. The hawk is the best among the birds of prey. Similarly, the jaguar is one of the mightiest carnivorous animals. The poet is all to adore and praise the controlled energy of the animal, its agility and will power. The caged animal even after its imprisonment does not lose its dignity and basic instinct. His movement inside the cage reveals his indomitable and untamable spirit. Here the beast of prey is compared to some great patriot imprisoned in a dark cell. Its majestic movement is expressed thus 'a jaguar hurrying enraged/ Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes. / On a short fierce fuse.' Through these two poems of bird and beast the poet tries to explore the ferocity of Nature as well as inherent human nature. The eater-eaten relationship is one natural phenomenon. The stark, bare, naked truth is rarely unveiled and very often remains suppressed by the sophisticated, false pseudo-culture. Hughes unveils the underlying truth of basic ferocity of nature. Symbolically, both the 'hawk' and the 'jaguar' belong to the higher strata of power. The poems remind us of the predatory ferocity, rage, blindness and deafness of our own human nature. On the other hand, the Jaguar represents energy, agility and freedom. Somehow both the poems reflect the murderous spirit of the time that prevailed upon the war-torn World.

Other great poems of war and violence in the anthology are 'The Casualty', 'Bayonet Charge', 'Griefs for Dead Soldiers', 'Six Young Men', 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot'. Commenting about the probable origin of the poem 'Griefs for the Dead Soldiers' A. E. Dyson says:

"Perhaps it is no surprise that he should write of the first rather than the second world war, and be obsessed by such warfare (bayonet charges, trench fighting) as belong to the pre-hydrogen age...The quality of violence he writes of, however, is sufficiently up-to-date; one cannot write off his achievement as mere nostalgia for good old days of meaningful slaughter."^{vii}

In the poem Hughes succinctly presents three distinctly different types of grieves; all of which come out from the death of the young soldiers who have died in action. Three grieves are the 'secretest' grief of the widow, 'truest' grief of the calm grave diggers and 'mightiest' public grief at the cenotaph. Here both pity and heroism for the death of the soldiers are expressed with utmost sincerity and heart-felt sorrow. These grieves are caused by brutal, violent action in war that kills young soldiers. The violence in war and death depicted in all the war poems of Hughes bear the absolute truth of the meaningless massacre in the name of heroism, patriotism and courage. Like Wilfred Owen, Hughes echoes the 'pity of war'; its pain, agony and pathos. He presents the bare, stark, naked truth of foolish, meaningless wastages of human lives and human property in action.

In 'The Casualty' the violent death of the doomed air force fighter is described in details:

Farmers in the fields, housewives behind steamed windows,
Watch the burning aircraft across the blue sky float,
As if a firefly and a spider fought,
Far above the trees, between the washing hung out.
They wait with interest for the evening news.

(The Casualty, *The Hawk in the Rain*)

The whole nature, along with the human beings who watch the burning aircraft falling from the sky are utterly indifferent to the death of the soldier. The last line of the quoted stanza reveals the futile death of the airman. The onlookers- farmers, housewives who watch the event, watch it with curiosity and keen interest. Their waiting for the evening news shows the death of the airman as a casual event. It is neither glorious nor frivolous but only a casual event and nothing more. At the same time, it shows how human emotion is dried up that even the death of a soldier does not touch the heart of the countrymen. Birds and the animals are bewildered by the sudden fiery fall from the sky. The corpse of the charred pilot is terribly twisted. The spine of the airman is broken and his heart is like any other man's heart with complete contentment and absence of any fear or agitation. The

^{vii} Dyson A. E. "Power Thought of Absolutely", *Critical Quarterly*. Vol.1, no. 3, (Autumn 1959).

horror of the scene is so intense that the onlookers who stood around him became petrified. The description of the body is given thus:

Now that he has
 No spine against heaped sheaves they prop him up,
 Arrange his limbs in order, open his eyes,
 Then stand helpless as ghosts.
 (The Casualty, *The Hawk in the Rain*)

'Bayonet Charge' is another striking war poem of Hughes which graphically draws the picture of horror and fear of a soldier in the field. Dread of death and fire of guns and cannons and screams of fighting soldiers reveal the picture of terrible violence in the battle-field. The title itself is suggestive of physical violence in the field. It penetrates into the soul and psyche of a soldier who is engaged in a mortal combat. The poet does not superimpose any romantic idealism of war that celebrates the bravery, patriotism and self-sacrifice of a soldier. He consciously excludes such false, sham, meaningless idealism which tries to justify martyr's death in the battle-field. Rather he shows the fear and terror of the soldier who is stupefied at the dread and ferocity of the war and for the time being becomes bewildered. After gaining consciousness his sole concern becomes how to save his life. He thinks neither of the 'king, honor, human dignity' nor the false propagation which inspired him to come to the field. The very first line of the poem set the tone and posture of the soldier's duty, urge and action that one feels in the battle-field: 'Suddenly he awake and was running – raw'. This urge and feeling of the soldier and his subsequent action is further consolidated in the concluding few lines which reveal the true nature and not the nature 'methodized'. Through this revelation of the truth of war and unfolding the soul of a soldier in the war, Hughes in one way, depicts violence and ferocity of war and other way, exposes the false idealism of war propagated by the war-mongers. Here follows the last few lines:

He plunged past with his bayonet toward the green hedge,

King, honor, human, etcetera
 Dropped like luxuries in a yelling alarm
 To get out of that blue cracking air
 His terror's touchy dynamite.
 (Bayonet Charge, *The Hawk in the Rain*)

In the poem 'Six Young Men' there is a panoramic presentation of the photograph of six young soldiers who died in action some forty years back. The pathos of war and death is the central theme of the elegy. The poet does not lament as in a traditional elegy, but the narrator's subdued pain and sense of loss is suggested through contrast between the vigour, vitality and freshness of the six men in the photograph and their sad, pathetic consequence. Here too, the poet's oblique message regarding war and death is conveyed to the readers. Interestingly enough, Hughes attaches no tinge of glory for the soldier, neither their death has been immortalized. He maintains ambivalence, the romantic notion of immortality of a soldier's death and paradoxically, the faded and worn out photograph that belies the demand for immortality.

Two other poems of the anthology, 'Two Wise Generals' and 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot' deal with topical event of war and death. 'Two Wise Generals' deals with James, Lord of Douglas, known as Black Douglas fought for Scottish independence at the side of Robert Bruce, on whose death in 1329, he was entrusted to carry his monarch's heart on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and bury it there, but was killed fighting the Moors in Spain en route to Palestine in 1330. This historical event is metamorphosed in a fine poetic expression. The suggestion is again meaningless slaughter and death. Of course, Hughes here maintains ambivalence between heroic sacrifice for a noble cause and meaningless bloodshed and violence. The historical reference indicates the continuity of violence from dim and distant past to the contemporary time. 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot' also bears same message. Few lines from the poem may be quoted:

With nothing to brag about but the size of their hearts,

Tearing boar-flesh swilling ale,

A fermenting of huge-chested braggarts
 Got nowhere by sitting still
 To hear some timorous poet enlarge heroisms,
 To suffer their veins stifle and swell –
 Soon, far easier, imagination all flames,
 In the white orbit of a sword,
 Their chariot-wheels tumbling the necks of screams,

When archaeologists dig their remainder out –
 Bits of bones, rust –
 The grandeur of their wars humbles my thought.
 (The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot, *The Hawk in the Rain*)

The poet depicts the finality, the outcome of war where there is neither anything to glorify nor to give eternal praise to fighting soldiers in the name of heroism, but remains feelings of terrible mortality, 'bits of bones, rust'.

Conclusion

The major poems in the maiden anthology thus reveal the ethos and spirit of war that prevailed upon the mid-twentieth century. The huge deadly shadow of Hitler's autocratic hunger for power and hate philosophy undoubtedly influenced Hughes's poetic craft and vision. Nazi dictatorship, its racial hatred and the vast holocaust it inflicted upon the world is summed up by Ian Kershaw:

"In Nazism we have a phenomenon which seems scarcely capable of subjection to national analysis. Under a leader who talked of apocalyptic tones of world power or destruction and a regime founded on an utterly repulsive ideology of race hatred, one of the most culturally and economically advanced countries of Europe planned for war, launched a world conflagration which killed around 50 million, and perpetrated atrocities culminating in the mechanized mass murder of millions of Jews –of a nature and scale as to defy imagination."^{viii}

Hughes endeavoured to provide an appropriate space and speech for this murderous madness of war, holocaust and hatred in the major poems of his maiden anthology. The article tries to represent this through references, analysis and interpretation of the significant poems of the book.

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