

Shamanic Elements  
in the Poetry  
of Ted Hughes



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By

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# INTRODUCTION

## Ted Hughes as Shaman

Most scholarly research is the result of a kind of evolution. The poetry of Ted Hughes became the subject of my PhD thesis, which I completed in the year of his death, in 1998. For the following two decades – a substantial period of time in a reader’s and a scholar’s life – I read Hughes and discussed his poems with students. Twenty years means a lot in a reader’s and a scholar’s life. The present monograph is my second look at Hughes’ verse, which, it is hoped, will reveal more depth and substance than the original range of perspectives. Not only are the old themes revitalized, but a closer look at the criticism of Hughes is taken.

While considering new ways into the reading of his poetry, I was aided by my research on Poets Laureate, *Literature and the Monarchy: The Traditional and the Modern Concept of the Office of Poet Laureate of England*, published in 2014, where, among twenty official bearers of the title, I wrote about the 14-year tenure of Ted Hughes. When Hughes was appointed to the office, Seamus Heaney called him “shaman of the tribe”, whose role would be to put his readers in vital imaginative contact with the geological, botanical, historical and legendary reality of England itself.<sup>1</sup>

In the modern perspective, the mission of the Poet Laureate of England is to speak for the nation and comment on the nation’s current concerns rather than to praise the monarch. As Laureate, Ted Hughes was more than an exotic cultural figure of Mircea Eliade’s shaman or a Jungian offshoot of imaginal psychology. His poetry offered a healing substance, uniting the beautiful and the sublime, and thus illuminating the natural world as a path to spiritual experience. For Hughes, the unifying vision was symbolized by the Crown and needed to be constantly re-negotiated, ‘re-folded’ and ‘re-hammered’.<sup>2</sup> When Hughes was admitted to Poets’ Corner in Westminster Abbey, Jeanette Winterson wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Seamus Heaney in: Scigaj, Leonard. *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1992), p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

He is a poet working to bring back into touch two continents of experience that have tectonically separated. The natural world and its rhythms, he believed, are as necessary to humankind as any amount of progress, and so Hughes uses his own body as a bridge, feeling everything that he writes through the shock of being there - he fished the rivers, crouched under the trees, had the adventure-spirit of a wild man. Then he translated nature's hermetic language into one we can read.<sup>3</sup>

The day of Hughes' death was dark and cold. To some it recalled the storm scene in *King Lear*, with black clouds covering the entire country, torrential rain, hail beating down and gales blasting autumn leaves. The Poet Laureate, one of the most eminent in the British bardic tradition, embarked on his last shamanistic flight and it seemed as if nature was bemoaning the loss. William Scammell wrote in his tribute:

If we'd absorbed Ted's best poems into some part of our being, as a great many people have, the idea of nature sharing in our grief at the death of its greatest celebrant since Hopkins, Wordsworth or Keats, is not so fanciful after all. Thanks to him we have been 'startled by [our] own existence' into some awareness of those awesome powers we share the universe with. Who's to say that on occasion they don't speak to us and for us, better than we speak for ourselves?<sup>4</sup>

How did Ted Hughes make his readers aware of 'those awesome powers'? In his poems he called for the destruction of the artificial, sterile personality created by Western culture and thus offered a way of liberating man's true, instinctual self. In doing so he performed a healing, regenerating ritual, often likened to shamanistic practitioners' magic.

Poetry is a natural vehicle for the expression of feelings and emotions, and the shaman – poet can transcend the constraints of ordinary language.<sup>5</sup> Hughes claimed that in human language, 'animal music' in which the poet can evoke the spirits, is present.<sup>6</sup> Since most of Hughes' animal poems, and some whose protagonists are human, are based on shamanistic rites, for the sake of the following discussion it will be helpful to summarize a general formula of the shamanistic crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanette Winterson, in: *The Guardian*, March, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> William Scammell, A Tribute to Ted Hughes' in: *The Independent on Sunday Culture*, 1 November 1998, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous* (New York: Random House), 1996, p. 256.

<sup>6</sup> Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes*, citing an interview with Hughes, *Times Literary Supplement* 1, October 1971.



A shaman is a kind of exorcist whose function is to restore natural order. He is an intermediary between this world and the next. Dissatisfied with reality, he identifies himself with an animal, and clad in the animal's skin undergoes a series of transformations, involving suffering and dismemberment. He enters the underworld which he visits escorted and instructed by a guide. Having acquired a new awareness of himself and the world, the shaman comes back to the community which he serves, sharing the revelation. Joseph Campbell gives the following account of the ritual:

A.

A spontaneously precipitated rupture with the world of common day, revealed in symptoms analogous to those of a serious breakdown: visions of dismemberment, fosterage in the world of the spirits, and restitution.

B.

A course of shamanistic, mythological instruction under a master, through which an actual restitution of a superior level is achieved.

C.

A career of magical practice in the service of the community, defended from the natural resentment of the assisted community by various tricks and parodies of power.<sup>7</sup>

It is important to see that the shaman undergoes all the suffering for the sake of his community and that his mission is to cure and to heal.

Mircea Eliade, in his interpretation of shamanism, accentuates the shaman's role as one of magical defense, the exorcism of evil and restoration of spiritual health. Thus the shaman is, first of all, a witch doctor and a psychotherapist:

The shamans have played an essential role in the defense of the psychic integrity of the community. They are pre-eminently the antidemonic champions; they combat not only demons but also the black magicians!<sup>8</sup>

The shaman performs a cultural function as well. The animal mask he chooses is 'charged' with all the mythology of the species.<sup>9</sup> His ecstatic journey to the underworld has the intention to restore natural order. The shaman's guides, his 'helping spirits', often assume animal forms. Eliade explains:

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 265.

<sup>8</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism; Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (New York: Princeton University Press, 1972), p.508.

<sup>9</sup> Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes* (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes and Noble, 1981), p. 11.

Each time a shaman succeeds in sharing in the animal mode of being, he in a manner re-establishes the situation that existed in *illo tempore*, in mythical times, when the divorce between man and the animal world had not yet occurred.<sup>10</sup>

The shaman can cross the borderline between the living and the dead and as such, he can 'die' and 'return'. Having come to grips with suffering, with a terrifying inward experience, the shaman is no longer at the mercy of death. What is more, he contributes to his community's knowledge of dying by presenting it as a rite of passage to a spiritual mode of being. Eliade thus summarizes the journey:

The lands that the shaman sees and the personages that he meets during his ecstatic journeys in the beyond are minutely described by shaman himself, during and after his trance. The unknown and terrifying world of death assumes form, is organized in accordance with particular patterns; finally it displays a structure and, in course of time, becomes familiar and acceptable.<sup>11</sup>

Is it possible for a modern poet to become a shaman? Perhaps for many it would be too demanding a task, but not for Ted Hughes, who, along with his title of Poet Laureate enjoyed the well-deserved nickname of the Crow of Avon, coined by Holbrook.<sup>12</sup> Both critics and Hughes' readers alike saw this particular Laureate as a shaman who speaks to the readers clad in his animal, crow-like mask. It would be interesting to apply the description of the shamanistic crisis offered by Campbell in order to establish if Ted Hughes' life and work followed the successive stages of the ritual.

Stage A is about suffering. Of pain and anguish Hughes had more than a fair share. The trauma of Sylvia Plath's tragic suicide (11 February 1963) caused the poet to fall silent for two years. In 1969, Assia Wevill, at that time Hughes' lover, took her own life and that of their daughter. Campbell says that a good shaman dies more than once:

'It is said,' declared Alexeyev Ivan, 'that the really good shamans are cut up three times in their life, the poor only once. The spirit of an exceptional

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<sup>10</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism...*, p.94.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.p. 509-510.

<sup>12</sup> David Holbrook, 'The Crow of Avon? Shakespeare, Sex and Ted Hughes' in: *The Cambridge Quarterly* vol. 15, 1986, p.p. 1-12.

shaman is born again after his death. They say that great shamans are reborn three times.<sup>13</sup>

The shaman, in addition to his private suffering, takes upon himself the community's crises. A state of personal anguish can heighten his awareness of tribal disasters.

So what, for Hughes, is the modern tribal disaster, and what, according to the poet, needs to be healed? In his poetry, he voices his disillusionment with Western Christian culture, which he on numerous occasions labelled 'mistreatment of the White Goddess'.

Hughes claims that from the 1560s, there has been a gradual rise in the determination to divide nature into abstract good and physical evil.<sup>14</sup> He identifies nature with a goddess who recalls Robert Graves' White Goddess presented in his famous study of poetic myth. The White Goddess represents natural law and love of sensation and organic life. Graves tries to show that in the beginning of all world myths there is always a powerful female goddess who is usurped by a male god.<sup>15</sup> Walder concurs, reminding us of Graves' idea that the suppression of the female was first enacted by the Greek mythologists.<sup>16</sup>

Hughes insists that during the Reformation, the 'goddess' - in the form of Roman Catholicism -

was being put down, finally and decisively, by a pragmatic, skeptical, moralizing, desacralizing spirit: (...) the spirit of the ascendant, Puritan God of the individual conscience, the Age of Reason cloaked in the Reformation.<sup>17</sup>

The poet feels that there is a need for a new divinity to replace Christianity, which he calls the worn out religious machinery of a worn out culture. Michael Sweeting interprets Hughes' diagnosis of the tribal

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<sup>13</sup> Campbell, *The Masks of God...*, p.265.

<sup>14</sup> Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London: Faber, 1992), p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth*, amended edition (London: Faber, 1961)

<sup>16</sup> Dennis Walder, *Ted Hughes*. Open Guides to Literature (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1987), p. 81.

<sup>17</sup> Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess...* p. 85.

disaster saying that today's world is 'too much held back by its rationality and its arbitrary taboos'.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of his disappointment with Western Christian culture and following his long silence after the death of Sylvia Plath, Hughes wrote *Wodwo* (1967). Scigaj interprets the volume as a shamanistic flight:

In the poems of *Wodwo* one learns that Hughes' disenchantment is personally experienced in private life and analyzed through plausible social psychology. The disenchantment is earned through the unremitting agony of the poems and a positive alternative is offered. Through this disencumbering process Hughes opens the door for the emergence of Oriental patterns of thought he had been meditating on throughout the early sixties.<sup>19</sup>

If we view Hughes' life as that of a shaman, stage B is, according to Campbell, the time of mythological instruction. Having suffered and having diagnosed the reasons, the shaman is instructed by a guide. It was the White Goddess who guided Hughes to regeneration. At Cambridge he studied Anthropology and Archeology, and in the sixties he and Sylvia Plath acquired extensive knowledge of Ancient Greek, Hermetic and Sufi practices and philosophies. Hughes considers himself a myth-maker for a post-Christian world. Although Malinowski claims that myths cannot be 'invented' deliberately because as such they will be alien to the social context to which they should belong,<sup>20</sup> Hughes insists on re-inventing the myth. He wants a myth which will be universal:

as it might be invented after the holocaust and demolition of all libraries, where essential things spring again - if at all - only from their seeds in nature - and are not lugged around or hoarded as preserved harvests from the past.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Michael Sweeting, 'Hughes and Shamanism' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 74.

<sup>19</sup> Leonard Scigaj, 'Oriental Mythology in *Wodwo*' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement....*, p. 128.

<sup>20</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (New York: Anchor Books paperback, 1954), p.p. 45-55.

<sup>21</sup> Ted Hughes, a letter to Keith Sagar in: Sagar, Keith *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1978). p. 107.

Ritual story telling has a healing function, McKenna calls it 'epic narration of mythical scenarios'.<sup>22</sup> An important aspect of myth-telling is its practicality; it can heal mistreatment of the White Goddess. In other words, it can offer solutions to problems in order, as Scigaj puts it:

To heal the subject - object dualism and the divorce of mind from instinct that leads to cultural schizophrenia.<sup>23</sup>

Hughes expresses a similar view:

The myths and legends, which Plato proposed as the ideal educational material for his young citizens, can be seen as large - scale accounts of negotiations between the powers of the inner world, under which ordinary men and women have to live. They are immense and at the same time highly detailed sketches for the possibilities of understanding and reconciling the two.<sup>24</sup>

Hughes viewed writing as a shamanistic experience and gave numerous accounts of various poets as shamans. He considered Yeats a shaman because of his (Yeats') sense of a tribal disaster,<sup>25</sup> he saw Shakespeare's fable as a shamanistic dream,<sup>26</sup> and applied shamanistic patterns to his discussion of Leonard Baskin' s prints, thus showing that such shamanistic patterns can successfully explain not only literature but also visual arts.<sup>27</sup>

Some critics remained skeptical. Bradshaw wrote that before accepting the shaman as a symbol of psychic integration, we have to ask practical questions:

Do we believe that shamans fly, or that their intestines turn to opal after death? What do we actually know about the incidence of neurosis and schizophrenia in primitive societies?<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Dennis J. McKenna & T.K. McKenna, *The Invisible Landscape* (New York: the Seabury Press, 1975), p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> Leonard Scigaj, (ed.). *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1992), p. 227.

<sup>24</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Myth and Education' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Poetic Self' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 271.

<sup>26</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Notes on Shakespeare' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 120.

<sup>27</sup> Ted Hughes, Introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1984).

<sup>28</sup> Graham Bradshaw, 'Creative Mythology in Cave Birds' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p. 213.

It seems that Hughes answered those questions in his interview with Faas, when he explained that shamanism is a method of controlling natural energies, of harnessing them through myth and religion:

If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control - rituals, the machinery of religion.<sup>29</sup>

Using his knowledge of primitive cultures and their mythologies and religions, through shamanistic techniques, with the help of powerful symbols, Hughes can invoke the Universal Energies and make them subservient to himself. Skea comments:

Hughes' poetry shows the persistence of his early belief that he has a special and unusual relationship with Nature and that this gives him privileged access to the Energies. Together with his visionary and poetic skills, such beliefs have convinced Hughes that he is, like his *Cave Birds* protagonist, an appointed being, and that his poetic task is essentially that of the ancient poets and shamans. His stated intention has always been to use poetry as a means of negotiating with the Energies, and of channeling them into our world in order to bring us healing and enlightenment.<sup>30</sup>

Eliade calls the shaman an artist, a creator of oral literature. The shaman's adventures in the other world recall the adventures of epic heroes. The shaman, in order to fall into a state of trance, imitates songs of birds and his 'second state' of heightened emotional awareness resembles that of lyrical poetry. The shamanic seance follows a dramatic structure, with highly elaborate 'staging'. Very modestly, Eliade concludes his study of shamanism by saying:

These few remarks on the cultural creations made possible or simulated by the experiences of shaman must suffice. A thorough study of them would exceed the limits of this work. What a magnificent book remains to be written on the ecstatic 'sources' of epic and lyric poetry, on the prehistory

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<sup>29</sup> Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and Crow'. Interview with Ted Hughes, *London Magazine* vol. 10, 1971.

<sup>30</sup> Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, New South Wales: University of New England Press, 1994), p. 238.

of dramatic spectacles, and, in general, on the fabulous worlds discovered, explored, and described by the ancient shamans...<sup>31</sup>

Graves suggests that the best test of a poet's vision is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess and the island over which she rules.<sup>32</sup>

The goddess is not separate from the world of things and she is present also in the human unconscious, from where she can be summoned and made accessible by an expert shaman.<sup>33</sup> The very language of the shaman, the music or the melody of it, can alone have healing properties. The music can put listeners, as poetry can put readers, into a state of trance, which is a pre-requisite for healing. There is a description of the process in *Gaudete*:

Lumb  
 Is walking in a circle. The room is a maze of smoke  
 From smouldering piles of herbs in ashtrays.  
 He is holding something up, it is a stag's antlered head on  
 a pole,  
 Heavy and swaying and shag-maned.  
 The pipe and drum music is tight, shuddering,  
 repetitive machine  
 Which seems bolted into the ground  
 And as if they were all its mechanical parts, the women  
 are fastened into it,  
 As if the smoke were the noise of it,  
 The noise of it raucous with the smoke and the smoke  
 stirred by it.  
 A hobbling, nodding, four-square music, a goblin  
 monotony,  
 The women in a circle clapping to the tread of it.  
 Their hair dangles loose, their eyes slide oiled, their faces  
 oiled with sweat  
 In the trundling treadmill of it.  
 It is like the music of a slogging, deadening, repetitive  
 labour.  
 They have left their faces hanging on the outside of the  
 music as abandoned masks.  
 They no longer feel their bodies.

<sup>31</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism...*, p.p. 510-511.

<sup>32</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess...*, p.p. 24-25.

<sup>33</sup> Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber, 1981), p. 19.

They have been taken deep into the perpetual motion of  
the music  
 And have become the music.  
*Gaudete*, p. 139.

It will be obvious from the tragic story of Reverend Lumb that the shaman's mission requires a lot of courage; balancing between reality and the supernatural realm, he runs the risk of losing control of spiritual forces with a resulting dissociation of personality. The White Goddess combines beauty and horror, and she can be dangerous to those who love her:

The poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth: his heart breaks with longing and love for her. She is the Flower-goddess Olwen or Blodeuwedd; but she is also Blodeuwedd the Owl, lamp eyed, hooting dismally, with her foul nest in the hollow of a dead tree, or Circe the pitiless falcon, or Lamia with her flickering tongue, or the snarling-chopped Sow-goddess, or the mare-headed Rhinon who feeds on raw flesh. Odi atque omo: 'to be in love' is also to hate.<sup>34</sup>

Hirschberg interprets Hughes' *Skylarks* as a poem about Sylvia Plath, whose 'terrifying ambivalence of a personality' is 'so open to the powers of creation that it brings on its own destruction'.<sup>35</sup>

To heed the danger, shamans use animal totems onto which they transfer their suffering and anguish. Transferring the totemic ritual into the world of the poet's reality, we can say that the poet needs a way to distance himself from his personal experience; otherwise, he will not be able to keep himself from the dreaded dissociation of personality. To illustrate Plath's phenomenon, Hirschberg quotes after Aristophanes the myth of the lark who existed before the earth and before the gods. When the lark's father died the lark buried him in his own head, as there was no other place; no earth to bury him in. According to Hughes, or rather according to Hirschberg's interpretation of *Skylarks*, Sylvia Plath buried her father in her own head, and 'carried his grave continually with her, as the lark bears its crest'.<sup>36</sup>

Hughes' way, fortunately, was not Plath's way: he gave account of his coming to grips with the experience of her death in *Birthday Letters*, which saw light thirty years after her suicide, when the poet felt he had acquired enough distance and control over his pain and his sense of loss.

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<sup>34</sup> Graves, *The White Goddess...*, p. 448.

<sup>35</sup> Hirschberg, *Myth...*, p. 59.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



Both his life and personality testify that Ted Hughes was himself a mythic presence. In such moments, he saw Sylvia Plath as an embodiment of the White Goddess, and Assia Wevill as the Black One.<sup>37</sup> Hughes uses myth with the same intent as psychologists do:

We live in the translation, where what had been religious and centered on God is psychological and centered on an idea of the self-albeit a self that remains a measureless if not infinite question mark (...)<sup>38</sup>

According to Levi-Strauss, through a language of myth provided by the shaman, sick people can express psychic states which are 'unexpressed' and 'otherwise inexpressible'.<sup>39</sup> This idea recalls what Jung said on individuation of the self. We need to go through a sort of transformation mystery in order to arrive at our true, integrated self.<sup>40</sup> The shaman provides us with a language to express our psychic states very much in the way the psychiatrist offers diagnosis and therapy.

The shamanistic ritual as it is performed in Hughes' opus. As a modern shaman, he suffered and offered the readers new insights acquired through his suffering : he wrote poetry.

As a modern shaman, Hughes suffered and offered readers new insights acquired through his suffering: he wrote poetry. Yet, there was a practical side to his preoccupation with the Goddess as well. It can be argued that Hughes managed to accomplish the final, 'C' stage of the shamanistic crisis which, according to Campbell, consists in the shaman's magical practice in the service of the community.

In 1984, the appointment of Hughes as Poet Laureate came as a shock. Some believed that a poet so obviously subversive, celebrating the amoral and often violent energies of nature, fighting against the civilizing norms of society, accused of 'nihilism' and even "sadism"<sup>41</sup> should never have been given the title.

But Hughes treated the post of Poet Laureate seriously, seeing it perhaps as something akin to becoming the nation's shaman, and to becoming the nation's shamanistic healer, not only in the metaphorical,

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<sup>37</sup> Edward Hadley, *The Elegies of Ted Hughes* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 142.

<sup>38</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Poetic Self'..., p.p. 274-275.

<sup>39</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (London: Penguin, 1963), p. 21.

<sup>40</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* revised edition (London: Routledge, 1968), p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (London: Longman, 1998), p.p. 51-52.

but also in the literal sense. He engaged audiences in his poetic-shamanistic rituals and strived to educate the young, for whom, he believed, there was still hope. As Morpurgo commented:

Ted Hughes opened our eyes, he taught us to fly.<sup>42</sup>

Ted Hughes wrote 'The Last Migration' for a book whose royalties were donated to the Fauna Preservation Society. He wrote a knowledgeable review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*<sup>43</sup> and submitted an offer to *The Times Educational Supplement* suggesting that schools should encourage children to plant trees. He also launched an educational charity which he called 'Farms for City Children', a project that would enable thousands of city children a year to live and work on a farm for a week.

As a shaman proper, Hughes read his poetry publicly and his audiences were thrilled.

Reid writes that hearing Hughes was like

getting a secret glimpse into the workings of what had been powerful but also puzzling, we were being, not just diverted, but initiated, introduced to mysteries.<sup>44</sup>

Hughes naturally preferred young audiences. He came to 'Farms for City Children' and read his poetry to children in the evenings. He created 'The Children's Laureate', an honour to be awarded biannually to a writer or illustrator of children's literature in order to focus awareness of the best of children's books among adults and children alike.

Hughes also worked for the theatre. He was tireless in his support of new plays, and founded Sacred Earth Drama, which promoted plays by children or adults that, instead of focusing exclusively on man's relationship to man, dealt with man's relationship to the natural world. Robert Butler, who sat on a committee with him, said:

Hughes believed that adults could be especially moved by plays they watched with children or plays that were performed by children. He quoted

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<sup>42</sup> Michael Morpurgo, 'Ted Hughes: Children's Champion' in: *The Epic Poise...*, p. 227.

<sup>43</sup> Ted Hughes, Review of *The Environmental Revolution* by Max Nicholson in: *Spectator*, 21 March 1970.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Reid, 'Ted Hughes as Reader' in: Gommage, Nick (ed.) *The Epic Poise* (London: Faber, 1999), p. 228.

the Chinese sages that the man in whom the child's heart and mind has died is no better than a dead man.<sup>45</sup>

Hughes founded the Avron Foundation, which was set up to run short courses for 'apprentice writers'. With the Avron Foundation, fourteen apprentice writers live and work for a week with two well-known, published authors, gaining help and inspiration from such interaction.

In 1992, when Hughes published *Rain — Charm for the Duchy and other Laureate Poems*, he spoke of his 'boyhood fanatic patriotism' in the notes provided to accompany the collection. There is a sense in his poems that in order to 'exorcise a ghost it must be allowed to speak'<sup>46</sup>. For Hughes, the shock was that of the Great War and its tremendous impact on England and his family.

It is interesting that a rebel like Hughes should further show his patriotism by supporting the institution of the monarchy. The Queen of a secular democracy is head of the Church of England, which must have become an inspiration to Hughes, the worshipper of the White Goddess.

## Hughes and Tradition

In order to analyze his poetry it is necessary to place Hughes in the literary tradition of his times. In the mid-1950s, Ted Hughes defined himself as a poet writing in opposition to the Movement. The Movement was never a recognised school of poetry, but rather, a coherent attitude towards writing poems. Robert Conquest, in 'Introduction' to the anthology of the Movement poems titled *New Lines*, wrote that 'it is free from both mystical and logical compulsions and - like modern philosophy - is empirical in its attitude to all that comes'<sup>47</sup>.

In other words, Conquest claimed that the authors of his anthology - John Holloway, Kingsley Amis, Philip Larkin, Donald Davie - advocated a new approach to literature, refusing to present visionary wastelands with heaps of broken images obscuring the view, and substituting them with neat, trimmed lawns and well-clipped gardens. The poets refused to enter the world of vision, the world of the unconscious, and that of the dark gods. The reason was simple enough: the Movement in the mid-1950s was

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Butler, 'Ted Hughes and the Stage' in: *The Independent on Sunday Culture*, 1 November 1998, p. 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>47</sup> Robert Conquest, (ed.), *Introduction to New Lines: An Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1956).

still suffering from post-war trauma, trying to forget the dreadful past rather than come to grips with the experience.

Hughes said about the Movement:

One of the things these poets had in common I think was the post-war mood of having had enough...enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the Angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs.<sup>48</sup>

The Movement wrote against Eliot and against the 1940s, which both 'gave the Id too much of a say.'<sup>49</sup>

Ted Hughes, from the very beginning of his career, adopted a different stand. His first adult poem, *The Little Boys and the Seasons*, appeared in 1954 and was written under the pseudonym Daniel Hearing. Later, Hughes abandoned the pseudonym, but he never strayed from the sense of mission of the Biblical Daniel. As Annie Schofield helpfully reminds us,<sup>50</sup> the canonical *Book of Daniel* from the Old Testament is an apocalyptic poem written in a period of crisis, when Israel was suffering under the rule of Antiochus Epiphanes.

Daniel is a prophet, a visionary whose visions are shamanistic flights preceded by ritual preparation:

And I Daniel alone saw the vision: for the men that were with me saw not the vision: but a greater quaking fell upon them, so that they fled to hide themselves. Therefore I was left alone, and saw this great vision, and there reminded no strength in me: for my comeliness was turned in me into corruption, and I retained no strength.

Yet I heard the voice of his words: and when I heard the voice of his words, then I was in deep sleep on my face, and my face toward the ground.

And, behold, an hand touched me, which set me upon my knees and upon the palms of my hands.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the poets of the Movement, Hughes does not shrink from the dreadful experience of the nuclear disaster. *Crow* gives us his account of the battle. Sharing his vision is a profoundly disturbing task but Hughes, a

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<sup>48</sup> Annie Schofield, 'Hughes and the Movement' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p.p. 22-35.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>51</sup> *Book of Daniel*: 7-10.

Daniel, refuses to lull his readers to sleep with the Movement's quasi-Augustan tune.

It seems that the contemporary scene of British poetry can be divided into the respective adherents of nature or culture, very much reflecting the dilemma that has always been present in literature. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts see Ted Hughes between Peter Redgrove and Seamus Heaney saying that:

Both of these poets have shown a keen interest in Hughes, and the interest has been reciprocated. There are close parallels in the three writers' thoughts about poetry, and (...) the differences that emerge against this background will we hope illuminate the work of each poet more interestingly than a comparison of more obviously contrasting writers would.<sup>52</sup>

The 'more contrasting' perspective can be seen in the poetry of Philip Larkin and Geoffrey Hill: while Hughes, Redgrove and Heaney profess their faith in nature, Larkin and Hill are 'on the side' of culture.

Hughes, Redgrove and Heaney consider themselves visionaries; they believe in the inward source of inspiration. For Hughes, writing poetry is capturing animals, and Redgrove once said: 'what you write in a book is only one variety of organic growth, organic life'.<sup>53</sup> Seamus Heaney expressed a similar view:

A poem is alive in an animal, mineral and vegetable way. It comes out of a creature, out of a man's mind and feelings, and it lives and is clothed in the substance of words.<sup>54</sup>

All three poets have criticised the Platonic-Christian division between soul and body, and all condemned Western civilization which abused Nature and the feminine. All admit to being influenced by Jung and Graves. It is interesting to study the subtle differences between poets whose approach is overtly similar. The main difference between Heaney and Hughes is in their treatment of Celtic mythology. While the myth of *Gaudete* has to be lived through by the parishioners of Lumb, the *Bog Queen* does not 'process' the myth any further.<sup>55</sup> Paul Redgrove, on the

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<sup>52</sup> Gifford and Roberts in: *Achievement...*, p. 90.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Mike Erwin and Jed Rasula, *Hudson Review*, vol. 8, No 3, autumn 1975.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Anthony Bailey, *Quest*, Jan/Feb, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> Gifford & Roberts, p. 96.

other hand, presents his vision as ‘practising his enlightenment in his poetry.’<sup>56</sup> In Redgrove there is less pain and suffering, and less of a search, than in Hughes. There is also less of a question mark. Gifford and Roberts analyze Redgrove’s *Silence Fiction*:

The protagonists of this poem live in a house built over an early cave dwelling, to which they are admitted by a ‘bismirched woman’ in ‘defiled white.’ While they ‘Light in the chimney roots our lower fires, and begin our lives on the unadorned earth floor’, the wind and rain can be heard cleansing the upper hearth of its soot-flowers.’ The poem concludes with their return to the house on the surface, and conveys the calm of the remembered lower levels which are the foundations of the ‘clattering’ conscious life.<sup>57</sup>

Hughes would have asked: what did they feel before they returned, and what price did they have to pay? Unlike Redgrove’s, Hughes’ vision is never finished. It is always at the stage of negation.

In order to position Hughes in the context of ‘poets of culture’, it is helpful to rely on Seamus Heaney and his brilliant account of the language of Hughes, Hill and Larkin viewed in Eliot’s context of auditory imagination.<sup>58</sup> Auditory imagination, according to Eliot, means the influence of cultural and historical depths, and the implications of certain words and rhythms. Heaney thus classifies Hughes as a pagan, drawing upon Anglo-Saxon and Norse elements, and on the Middle English alliterative tradition. Consequently, his language is that of primitive cultures, folk poetry, ballads and Shakespeare. Hill, according to Heaney, has a similar Anglo-Saxon base, but it has been modified by the medieval Latin influence, by the vocabulary and values of the Mediterranean, and by the Anglo- Romanesque scholastic imagination. Hill has always insisted on technical discipline and has tried to rid his language of excessive passion. As a result, he has accomplished a dry poetry, often verging on the cliché:

Philip Larkin’s language, according to Seamus Heaney, is the language of the Renaissance, ‘frenchified and turned humanist by the Norman conquest, made nimble, melodious and plangent by Chaucer and Spenser, and besomed clean of its inkhomisms and its irrational magics by the eighteenth century.’<sup>59</sup> The industrial landscape of Larkin and his

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 104.

<sup>58</sup> Heaney, in: *Achievement...*, p. 14.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

presentation of the modern predicament are devoid of the magical and the melodious lament of Hughes' *The Remains of Elmet*.

### Shamanistic Knowledge of Death

Hughes' life followed the successive stages of shamanistic initiation. The part about a good shaman dying many times must, of course, be taken with a pinch of salt, or rather understood in a metaphorical sense, as a period of heightened awareness caused by spiritual, and not necessarily physical suffering. After all, in Western culture, people who inflict physical pain or suffering on themselves are often considered not altogether sane. And yet Hughes thought about death very much in the way Japanese samurai did, believing that physical suffering relieves the pain of the soul. In a letter to Gifford and Roberts he writes:

Part of the fascination of Hara-kiri is our recognition of what it implies - an ultimate confrontation of the real pain of pain, a deliberate, controlled translation of psychological pain into physical pain, the absolute acceptance of the reality of what hurts. It is part of the reverence - in that case not short of worship - for the actuality of inner experience.<sup>60</sup>

Consequently, Hughes viewed the moment close to extinction as a threshold for initiation, a gate opening to some new insight. This explains why he always felt a certain affinity with Eastern European poets such as Popa, Pilinszky, Hoľub, Herbert, Milosz and Różewicz, to whom he could relate better than to his compatriot colleagues, members of the Movement. The reason was the difference between British and Eastern and Central European attitudes to the war. Hughes' interest in war had first been fed by his father's experience at Gallipoli during the First World War, and by the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who died in that war. Hughes was also fascinated with the poems of Keith Douglas, who fought in the Western Desert and was killed in Normandy during the Second World War. He felt that Eastern European poets shared with him the knowledge of war, which he thus defined in the introduction to a volume of Keith Douglas' poetry:

In a sense, war was his [Douglas'] ideal subject: the burning away of all human pretensions in the ray cast by death. This was the vision, the unifying generalization that shed the meaning and urgency into all his observations and particulars: not truth is beauty only, but truth kills

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<sup>60</sup> Thomas West, *Ted Hughes*. Contemporary Writers (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 83.

everybody. The truth of a man is the doomed man in him or his dead body.<sup>61</sup>

The Movement typically looked the other way. In a natural self-defense impulse, they preferred to be silent about Hiroshima and death camps. In contrast, Hughes turned to Eastern Europe for inspiration and enlightenment on the shamanistic knowledge of death.<sup>62</sup> In 1969, Vasco Popa, Janos Pilinszky, Miroslav Holub and Zbigniew Herbert, along with W.H. Auden, took part in a 'Poetry International' in London, an event made possible through Hughes' personal contacts. The poets proclaimed poetry to be the 'universal language of understanding'.<sup>63</sup>

Ted Hughes tried to project his world imaginatively into the world of Eastern Europe poets because he found his western perspective inadequate to express the concerns of the post-war reality:

The Western poet perhaps envies his brother in the East, for while he sings of comparative comfort, comparative freedom, comparative despair, the reality of the threat and the disaster is not his. There is a tendency for the Western poet to become isolated and turn inwards, whereas the poet of the East is in tune with the rhythms of his people in a much more direct and dynamic way.<sup>64</sup>

Hughes, not wanting to write about 'comparative' experience, sought empathy with his 'eastern European brother.' We find an extreme example of such empathy in the poetry of his wife, Sylvia Plath, who created the figure of an imaginary Jew, a survivor of the concentration camps, herself an imaginary woman, transported to Auschwitz on the death trains. Survivors have enhanced perception and can provide us with models for survival.<sup>65</sup>

He appreciated not only the message, but also the style of their poetry which gave the otherwise chaotic and terrifying experience a clarity achieved through images, tales and myth (*Crow*). This is what Hughes

<sup>61</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Keith Douglas' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 214.

<sup>62</sup> Annie Schofield, 'Hughes and the Movement' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p.p. 22-35.

<sup>63</sup> Michael Parker, *Hughes and the poets of Eastern Europe* in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p. 37.

<sup>64</sup> Miroslav Holub, 'The Lesson' in: *Selected Poems*, trans. Ian Milner and George Themer (London: Harmondsworth, 1967), p.p. 27-29.

<sup>65</sup> Parker, p. 44.



himself said about Eastern European poets in the introduction to Popa's *Selected Poetry*:

Like men come back from the dead they have an improved perception, an unerring sense of what really counts in being alive. This helplessness in the circumstances has purged them of rhetoric. With delicate maneuvering, they precipitate out of a world of malicious negatives a happy positive. And they have created a small ironic space, a work of lyrical art, in which their humanity can respect itself.<sup>66</sup>

Hughes defined the 'coming clear' stage, the 'extreme moment', as one experienced by man close to death, in his famous essay on Janos Pilinszky, a Hungarian poet who saw the reality of war and prison camps, and whose personal experience became 'the world of his deepest, most private poetic knowledge'.<sup>67</sup> The moment closest to extinction turns out to be *the* creative moment. In the essay Hughes says:

We come to this Truth only on the simplest terms: through what has been suffered, what is being suffered and the objects that participate in the suffering. The mysterious thing is that in Pilinszky the naked, carnal, helpless quality of this truth is fused with the utmost spiritual intensity. The desolate furnishings of his vision are revealed by their radiance. The epiphany of this peculiarly bleak and pitiless God is the flash-point in all these psalms.<sup>68</sup>

The idea of 'extreme moment' is also presented in Hughes' interpretation of drawings by Leonard Baskin.<sup>69</sup> And again, this 'extreme moment' is viewed as a moment of 'flash vision', a sudden illumination earned at the threshold of death.

Another consequence of near-death and coming back to life through successive regeneration is that of moral development.<sup>70</sup> Hughes called it 'the central experience of a shattering of the self and the labor of fitting it together again or finding a new one.'<sup>71</sup> Jung believed that in the process of

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<sup>66</sup> Ted Hughes, Introduction to Vasko Popa, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), 1969, p.p. 10-11.

<sup>67</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Janos Pilinszky' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 231.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>69</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 92.

<sup>70</sup> Nicholas Bishop, *Poetry and Grace: the Dynamics of Self in Ted Hughes adult poetry* (Ph. D. Exeter University, 1998), p. 13.

<sup>71</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems' in: *Tri-Quarterly* vol. 7, 1966, p.p. 81-88.

individuation, we have to go through the pain of death to the falsity of the self. The false personality must die in order for the true one to be born.

Jung diagnoses Western Man by saying that:

the Logos ... eternally struggles to extricate itself from the primal warmth and primal darkness of the maternal womb; in a word, from unconsciousness. Divine curiosity yearns to be born and does not shrink from conflict, suffering, or sin. Unconsciousness is the primal sin, evil itself, for the Logos. Therefore its first creative act of liberation is matricide, and the spirit that dared all the heights and all depths must, as Synesius says, suffer the divine punishment, enchainment on the rocks of the Caucasus. Nothing can exist without its opposite; the two were one in the beginning and will be one again in the end. Consciousness can only exist through continual recognition of the unconscious, just as everything that lives must pass through many deaths.<sup>72</sup>

The character of Birkin in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love* puts it very simply:

one must cease to be, for that which is perfectly [himself] to take place in [him].<sup>73</sup>

Gifford and Roberts give an analysis of *Stations* by Ted Hughes, reading the poem as an illustration of regeneration through annihilation.<sup>74</sup> In doing so, they also indicate that Hughes' choice of animal masks came out of his belief that 'the creative - destructive tension in animals is a natural part of the larger cycle of forces in the universe.'<sup>75</sup>

A special experience requires an appropriate language of expression. Kristeva says that the death drive, which Freud diagnoses as characteristic of a melancholic person's superego, can ultimately turn to depressive withdrawal and the creating of a metalanguage which is different from the language of pain.<sup>76</sup>

Bentley claims that Kristeva's theory explains the disfigured and abstracted language of *Crow*:

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<sup>72</sup> Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* Collected Works (London: Routledge, 1959), p. 96.

<sup>73</sup> D.H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), p. 209.

<sup>74</sup> Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study...*, p. 92.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>76</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* trans. Leon S. Roudinez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), p. 27.

The poems function as so many attempts to get a potentially debilitating 'encounter with despair' back on the Symbolic move, to fix it in a representation, a move that none the less repeatedly falls through itself as the chosen signifier or field of signifiers proves to be too flimsy for the task.<sup>77</sup>

The language of the shaman is the language of despair and that of death.<sup>78</sup>

## Shamanistic Healing

The shamanic poet speaks in the language of death which he acquired through illumination in a moment close to extinction. His main function is to serve his community by dressing its wounds, and by healing. About poetry's power of healing, Hughes wrote in his essay on Keats:

what I imagine he [Keats] meant was that true poetry (he was very keen on the necessary discrimination), the stuff which mankind finally values, is a healing substance - the vital energy of it is a healing energy, as if it were produced, in a natural and spontaneous way, by the psychological component of the auto-immune system, the body's self-repair system.<sup>79</sup>

In a discussion on how it is possible for the poet to heal, Sweeting quotes the example of Parzival, who healed the Fisher King by asking about his health.<sup>80</sup> By analogy, it could be argued that it is enough for the poet to ask questions for his community to be healed.

Sweeting qualifies this, saying that the act of asking questions need not always be premeditated or conscious;

It should be noted that the goal is always interaction with the reader / patient even if the poet is not aware of that when writing.<sup>81</sup>

Of course, to achieve his aim, the poet / shaman has to ask the right sort of questions, the ones which, painful as they appear, can shake us to a new awareness. Hughes describes shamanistic suffering as a painful stage on the way to regeneration, which can be called the psychic equilibrium of

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<sup>77</sup> Bentley, p.p. 51-52.

<sup>78</sup> Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study...*, p.p. 85-86.

<sup>79</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Keats on the Difference between the Dreamer and the Poet' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 249.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Sweeting, 'Hughes and Shamanism' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p. 77.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

the shaman's community. However, he does not write about his own experience; Hughes' account of the poet-shaman and healer is devoted to T.S. Eliot:

But Eros exacted his cost at the beginning. Everything about Eliot's early life suggests that in some obscure part of himself he had foresuffered the sacrificial death of that deity even before he began to write under compulsion. This event, which was so much of his theme, and which lies so visibly among the roots of his poetry, can be seen as the spontaneous occurrence, in extraordinarily vivid and literal form, within him of that universal phenomenon, the traditional shaman's crucial initiatory experience of visionary dismemberment. And just as only after that 'death' (and after being reassembled by divine beings) the conventional shaman can begin to turn his abnormal powers and susceptibilities to account and launch out on his poetic, dramatic, visionary, healing-trance enterprise for the benefit of his people, so Eliot's case suggests how closely the creative, redemptive activity of poetry (of art in general) conforms to this thaumaturgical, natural process...<sup>82</sup>

In his essay on Leonard Baskin's drawings, Hughes explains the workings of 'mana'. He says that mana is the body's natural response to a serious hurt, a wound. It is a common mythological and folklore belief that a wound to be healed 'needs laid in it the blade that made it. And if the blade might cut to a depth where blood and cries no longer come – only mana comes.'<sup>83</sup> In other words, poetry, in order to be effective, has to be disturbing. Rue Jacobs says that Hughes understood the theatre as a healing stage with actors as healers.<sup>84</sup> Skea thus summarizes Hughes' opus in its healing aspect:

Poetry, therefore, is not just Hughes' personal means of linking his own inner and outer worlds: it is an expression of the Universal Energies in action and, through its musical power and its power to stimulate the common human faculty of imagination, he uses it as a means of channeling these healing energies to others.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T.S. Eliot' in: *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* ed. William Scammell (London: Faber, 1995), p. 284.

<sup>83</sup> Ted Hughes, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 95.

<sup>84</sup> Fred Rue Jacobs, 'Hughes and Drama' in: Sagar, Keith (ed.) *The Achievement...*, p.p. 154-170.

<sup>85</sup> Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: the Poetic Quest* (Armidale, New South Wales: University of New England Press, 1994), p. 16.

## Healing Akin to Mythmaking

It seems obvious to Hughes that healing can also happen through dreams for a dream is the equivalent of a narrative tale. Such tales have a collective meaning when they possess mythical content. Hughes explains the workings of a tale on a listener, in this case, a child:

When we tell a child a story, the child quickly finds his role; as the story proceeds the child enters a completely imaginative world ... to some extent he goes into a condition of trance ... And so whatever happens to him in the story happens under condition of hypnosis. In other words it really happens. If in a story he is put through a humiliating defeat, the effects on him are of real victory. This is how these early storytellers could claim good fortune and so on for the listeners to their heroic tales.<sup>86</sup>

To sum up, the shamanistic healing process is based upon three factors:

1. energy, or ecstasy (illumination)
2. myth, expressed in some form of ritual (asking questions)
3. resultic catharsis (healing the wound).

Sweeting claims that in the poetry of Hughes, the emphasis is laid not so much on the final product as on the cathartic process itself.<sup>87</sup> Ted Hughes viewed story-telling as a healing strategy which can bring together the inner and outer world. His creative imagination was mythopoetic.

In the course of my argument, the life of Ted Hughes has been presented as including a practical side to his shamanistic vocation. His role was that of bard and Poet Laureate, a public servant, who suffered both personal loss and disappointment with Western Europe. What he learned he tried to teach to his audience, publicly reading his poetry and setting up projects and foundations aimed at saving Nature and educating young poet-shamans. He also wrote for the theatre, initiating stage healing for the public and actors alike.

Since death is essential in the shamanistic flight ritual, Hughes' attitude to dying has been described as 'the extreme moment', as a threshold of illumination. Hughes argued, after Keats, that poetry has a healing substance and that the poet can heal by asking the reader disturbing questions, thus initiating a cathartic, regenerating process.

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<sup>86</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Myth and Education in Children's Literature' in: *Literature in Education* vol. 1. 1970, p. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Ted Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, p. 143.

## Hughes' Mythological Scenarios

Given that, in order to heal, stories told by the shaman need to have a disturbing, mythical content, a closer look has to be taken at the tales Hughes presents to his readers. To me, they all seem to be based on three myths: of the Sufis (Nasrudin), alchemical drama (Chemical Wedding), and Bardo Thödol (*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*).

### *The Sufis*

Hughes always thought highly of the Sufis. He thought they were ‘the only society of sensible men there has ever been on earth’.<sup>88</sup> In his discussion of a book by Idries Shah, Grand Chief of the Sufis, Hughes said that ‘shamanism might well be a barbarized, stray descendant of Sufism’.<sup>89</sup> Hughes claims that everything in European culture outside of Christianity — which is to say, Masons, Rosicrucians, Tarot cards, the Kabbalah, in short everything that is somehow connected with the occult — comes from the doctrine of the Sufis and is a set of ‘degenerate, strayed filterings’<sup>90</sup> of the Sufi teachings. He admits, however, that occasionally the Sufi philosophy manifested itself in its best pure form: here Hughes says in his introduction to the Sufis (borrowing from Graves) that the noble Druidic tradition of bardic schools in Ireland originated precisely from the Sufis.<sup>91</sup>

Hughes gives an interesting account of how candidates for Sufi-hood are selected and trained. Many elements of the ‘curriculum’ recall shamanistic ritual:

Candidates for Sufi-hood are selected for their natural aptitude to live the Sufi way: they undergo many years of rigorous mental and spiritual training in the Sufi schools, a highly refined course of moral self-development, annihilating themselves without heaven or hell or religious paraphernalia of any kind, and without leaving life in the world, to become the living substance of Allah, the power of creation: a master Sufi lives this life, and performs therefore incredible miracles as a matter of

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<sup>88</sup> Ted Hughes, 'Regenerations' in: *Winter Pollen...*, p. 59.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.