

Human Versus Nature in Ted Hughes's Sense of Place: *Remains of Elmet and Moortown Diary*

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Ted Hughes's portrayal of the relationship between mankind and nature in 'Remains of Elmet' and 'Moortown Diary'. The central theme of 'Remains of Elmet' is the toll that both the textile industry and Methodism had on Calder Valley's natural landscape and man's psyche. Hughes believes that the healing process is attainable by connecting with the elemental energy of the natural world, thereby acquiring nature's capacity for continuous rebirth and rejuvenation. However, Hughes provides the possibility of balance between civilisation and the natural world in 'Moortown Diary'. The sequence concentrates on the facets of death and birth of the farm livestock.

Keywords: Calder Valley, Industry, Methodism, Moortown, farming, Mother Nature, mankind

Ted Hughes's interest in the concept of place is influenced by his birthplace Mytholmroyd, a village in Calder Valley, West Yorkshire. Hughes believes that Calder Valley is a place of eternal conflict between mankind and the Nature Goddess, the latter being embodied in the natural elements: water, air, earth and stone. This is the main focus of 'Remains of Elmet' (1979b), which explores the curative power in the natural world, revealed to the poet through Calder Valley's landscape and

Fay Godwin's black and white photographs of the region. In his interpretation of the concept of nature in Hughes's poetry, Keith Sagar (2000) writes:

Nature defined not only as the earth and its life forms, powers and processes, but also as the female in all its manifestations, and as the 'natural man' within the individual psyche. It is the story of Man's mutilation of Nature in his attempt to make it conform to the procrustean bed of his own patriarchal, anthropocentric and rectilinear thinking. (p. 2)

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Hughes (1994) also states his opinion regarding the significance of nature in his poetry: "It is a story of decline. When something abandons Nature, or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end" (p. 129). Hughes's poetry on place hence extends to include more than the issues of Calder Valley; it concerns the sickness of modern civilisation and human psyche due to crimes against the Nature Goddess.

The lives of Calder Valley's people are addressed in "Hill-Stone was Content". The poem portrays the readiness of an anthropomorphised stone to lose its contact with the earth, its origin and be fixed in a mill. The stone is enslaved by civilisation, the noises of which veil the divine language of the natural world. "The rise of classical science . . . [is] associated with the rise of secular values: notions of progress and liberalism which were increasingly to regard nature as something to be controlled and manipulated for utilitarian, material purposes" (Pepper, 1996, p.148). Therefore Hughes seeks to recover the sense of the sacred, which is veiled by the dark shades of industry:

*Hill-Stone was Content
To be cut, to be carted
And fixed in its new place.
It let itself be conscripted
Into mills. And it stayed in position
Defending this slavery against all.
It forgot its wild roots
Its earth-song
In cement and the drum-song of
looms. (RE, p. 37)*

Not only was the stone alienated from its origins in Calder Valley, the people as well were converted into spiritless, almost stone-like beings.

*The discipline of war and the
discipline of industry reinforce
each other – conscription serves
to produce a compliant workforce;
the conscripted men (both literal
and metaphorical) identify with
their oppression, enacting it as a
defiant heroism; industry like war
reduces the workers to replaceable
functions, alienating them from
their own humanity.*

(Roberts, 2011, p.157).

Civilisation shelters man, denying him direct contact with nature. Ultimately man's disconnection from the natural world led to his denial of the natural inside him. Man's psyche consequently became ill and corrupted. The people of Calder Valley were fixed to their working places inside mills, among machines. They gradually forgot their sense of the natural, spiritual and divine:

*And inside the mills mankind
With bodies that came and went
Stayed in position, fixed like the
stones
Trembling in the song of looms.
And they too became four-cornered,
stony
In their long, darkening stand
Against the guerrilla patience
Of the soft hill-water. (RE, p. 37)*

The poem addresses crimes against nature on two levels: the natural world and the natural instincts of human beings. The destruction of man's relationship with nature is followed in the poem by the defeat of his most powerful tools of destruction, his military forces. They were defeated by natural elements that have long been ignored, as they were considered inferior to human mental prowess. The poem was written "in the aftermath of the most humiliating failure of a technologically superior army, in Vietnam, against guerilla fighters, whose native strength and attunement to the land is not merely a metaphor for the strength of the water but a model of human relationship to land" (Roberts, 2006, p. 132). Calder Valley's mills have not only enslaved the people but also reduced the quality of their life. The subject of "Hill-stone was Content" is thus the cultural bankruptcy and a hypnotised generation enslaved by a bleak landscape and harsh social structure. The poem makes explicit the extent to which places can shape a people's destiny and, conversely, the people's contribution to destruction of a place.

Hughes continues exploring the destructive elements of human civilisation in "Mount Zion". The poem demonstrates that Hughes is attentive to the way in which the architecture of religion incorporates its spirit into the landscape. The poem is accompanied by a photograph of a grim, jet-black chapel, suggesting the quality of life that Methodism has brought to Calder Valley. Hughes believes that Methodism is harmful because its emphasis on the

masculinity of God is an implicit denial of the concept of the Mother Goddess, the feminine principle underpinning earth and nature. Nature consequently lost her sacredness and was destroyed by the people of Calder Valley whenever doing so served their economic needs. Methodism further neglects the imaginative perception of life, human instincts and the natural urges of the body, which contribute to the fulfilment of the human psyche. Hughes mentions the following regarding the negative impact of the preaching of Parson William Grimshaw of Haworth, the late eighteenth-century preacher, on Calder Valley's cultural landscape:

To judge by the shock-wave, which could still be felt, I think, well into this century, he struck the whole region 'like a planet' . . . To a degree, he changed the very landscape. His heavenly fire, straight out of Blake's Prophetic Books, shattered the terrain into biblical landmarks: quarries burst open like craters, and chapels the bedrock transfigured – materialized standing in them.

(Weissbort, 2002, p. 96)

Hughes believes that Calder Valley's cultural landscape is responsible for the place's forbidding outlook. Glyn Hughes (1975) also criticises Methodism, its "absolute determination, overcoming all difficulties, overcoming all human need for rest, to build God's mansion! – which, as

it turned out, was as bleak as an outcrop of millstone-grit rock; and whose conditions were as harsh, spiritually, as those of a mill were, physically” (pp. 82-83). However, this sense of being trapped could be the reason for Hughes’ subsequent interest in Calder Valley’s landscape. Hughes’ fears of restrictions freed his imagination to explore the place, searching through it for reflections of his inner being, which is essentially divine, infinite and free.

The poet offers a bleak description of Calder Valley’s chapel, indicating that its gloom shadowed the sacred light of the White Goddess. It was the place to which the poet headed during his childhood, an unavoidable duty rather than a spiritual yearning:

Blackness

*Was a building blocking the moon.
Its wall – my first world-direction –
Mount Zion’s gravestone slab.
Above the kitchen window, that
uplifted mass
Was a deadfall –
Darkening the sun of everyday
Right to the eleventh hour.
Marched in under, gripped by elders
Like a jibbing calf
I knew what was coming.
(RE, p. 82)*

The poetic lines concisely portray the sacrifice of nature by culture through the image of the “jibbing calf”. The chapel-people were like “a mesmerised commissariat”. The women were “bleak

as Sunday rose-gardens” and the men were “in their prison-yard, at attention, / Exercising their cowed, shaven souls” (RE, p. 82). Hughes criticises the chapel-people’s excessive fear of life and joy. He believes that this sense of fear is responsible for the suppression of the nature and freedom they carry within them:

*The convicting holy eyes, the
convulsed Moses mouthings.
They were terrified too.
.....
They terrified me, but they terrified
each other.
And Christ was only a naked
bleeding worm
Who had given up the ghost.
(RE, p. 82)*

Hughes (2007) writes in a letter addressed to Moelwyn Merchant: “It began to dawn on me why from early days I had always dreaded Sunday as a day of psychological torment, and why the whole business of Sunday in the Calder Valley (Fanatic blend of Methodism and Chartism) had always seemed to me a performance at the expense of the real thing” (p. 579). The suppression of the people’s inner-life was so complete that any spiritual stirring, even as slight as a cricket’s music, would cause panic and be received with suspicion:

*Alarm shouts at dusk!
A cricket had rigged up its music
In a crack of Mount Zion wall.
A cricket! The news awful, the
shouts awful, at dusk –*

*Like the bear-alarm, at dusk, among
smoky tents –
What was a cricket? How big is a
cricket? (RE, p. 82)*

The element of fear is again addressed through the “alarm shouts” of the chapel-people in response to the cricket’s harmonious music. The cricket’s music symbolises the raw energy of the natural world that stimulates an awareness of the divine presence of Mother Nature. Yet, the community’s hostile stance towards nature is a reflection of the failure of Methodism to connect with the supreme spirit of the universe.

However, in “Heptonstall Old Church” Hughes holds the refining culture of medieval Christianity in high regard. The church of St. Thomas à Becket was built in Heptonstall between 1256 and 1260. The west face of the church tower fell in 1847 after a storm. The ruin of the church, Leonard M. Scigaj (1986) writes, “becomes in Hughes’ words and in Fay Godwin’s photographs the shrine where an uplifting cultural idea landed like ‘a great bird.’ The bare arches of the church, which stand so nakedly in Godwin’s photograph, coax from the poet’s animated spirit an image of a huge bird carcass” (p. 242):

*A great bird landed here.
Its song drew men out of rock,
Living men out of bog and heather.
Its song put a light in the valleys
And harness on the long moors.*

*Its song brought a crystal from
space
And set it in men’s heads.
(RE, p. 118)*

Edward Hadley (2010) writes that “the central image of the crystal carries with it connotations of clarity and, as naturally occurring mineral, an authentic natural connection” (p. 61). The ‘great bird’ refers to the nature Goddess, whose divine light is dimmed due to the alienation of the community of Calder Valley from nature:

*Then the bird died.
Its giant bones
Blackened and became a mystery.
The crystal in men’s heads
Blackened and fell to pieces.
The valleys went out.
The moorland broke loose.
(RE, p. 118)*

In Hughes’ poetry, black is associated with Protestantism, Methodism and industry. These are the destructive forces that, Hughes believes, alienated the community of Calder Valley from the Nature Goddess and consequently, conferred on the place its mournful and sorrowful aspect. Finally, ‘Remains of Elmet’ (1979 b) reveals a conflict at the heart of the place, a struggle in the natural world and the very soul of the human inhabitant. Hughes believes that

Calder Valley's Nature Goddess was raped by industry, but the community of the Valley was totally indifferent to the violation of their natural surroundings. Hughes seeks to harmonise and reconcile man's relationship with the Goddess. His poetic quest continues in his next book of verse, in which he attempts to reach a balance between nature and culture.

The harmonious relationship between man and nature is a key theme in Hughes' 'Moortown Diary' (1979a). This sequence is a diary in verse on everyday life on Moortown farm. The farm is near Winkleigh, in Devon. Hughes ran Moortown with his father-in-law, Jack Orchard. The book is partly inspired by the retreat of the farming community in North Devon and the near extinction of organic procedures in farming. Concerning this secluded region of England, Hughes (1979 a) wrote the following in his introduction to 'Moortown Diary':

In the early 1970s, the ancient farming community in North Devon was still pretty intact and undisturbed, more so than anywhere else in England. No industrial development or immigrant population had ever disturbed it. A lucky combination of factors kept tourists to the minimum, and those few to the sparse resorts on the rocky fringe. The high rainfall

and poor soil deterred the sort of farmer who might try to change things. (p. vii)

However, 'Moortown Diary' frequently addresses the pattern of birth and death in animal life and mourns the absence of man's solitary encounter with this natural process that constitutes part of the melodious rhythm of life.

This is evident in "Last Night", which addresses death that is immediately followed by regeneration. The poem presents a ewe that has lost her twin lambs, which were either born prematurely or were defective at birth (Twiddy, 2009, p. 255). Hughes, the farmer-poet, and the other farm-workers left the bereaved ewe with one of her dead lambs, which she called for mournfully to join her in the next field:

*She would not leave her dead twins.
The whole flock
Went on into the next field, over
the hill,
But she stayed with her corpses. We
took one
And left one to keep her happy.
.....
. She had gone through
Into the next field, but still lingered
Within close crying of her lamb,
who lay now
Without eyes, already entrails
pulled out
Between his legs. She cried for him
to follow. . . (MD, p. 25)*

The ewe's call of grief brought to her two rams, grey-face and black-face, and as life should on occasion persist though brutally,

*The greyface turned away as if
He'd done something quite slight
but necessary
And mounted her as she nibbled.
There he stayed.
The blackface ran at her and,
baffled, paused.
Searched where to attack to get her
for himself.
The greyface withdrew and flopped
off,
And she ran on nibbling.
(MD, p. 26)*

Ian Twiddy (2009) writes that the action of the poem moves "from grief to substitution . . . from . . . [grieving] for a dead lamb, to the consolatory reproduction of another" (p. 256). The poem concludes with the image of "two or three lambs [that] wobbled in the cold" (MD, p. 26), struggling to survive in an apparently impersonal and unsympathetic universe. Mankind's hidden self is exposed in the poem through the more instinctual behaviour of the animal world.

The partnership between life and death continues in the next poem, "February 17th". The poem presents a lamb that cannot be delivered, and consequently is strangled while his mother is giving birth. To save the life of the mother, the farmer-poet,

*Went
Two miles for the injection and a
razor.
Sliced the lamb's throat-strings,
levered with a knife
Between the vertebrae and brought
the head off
To stare at its mother, its pipes
sitting in the mud
With all earth for a body.
(MD, p. 30)*

The final image of the lamb's decapitated head staring at his living mother reveals that life sometimes fails to regenerate itself. It also suggests that the dead lamb would ultimately mingle with the body of the earth, and death is the process of transforming into a new form of life. However, the farmer-poet extracted the rest of the lamb's body by placing his hand in the mother's entrails while pushing against the mother's birth push. He caught the knee of the dead body, and then began pulling with the birth push until "in a smoking slither of oils and soups and syrups - / . . . the body lay born, beside the hacked-off head" (MD, p. 31). Terry Gifford (2009) writes the following in regard to the poetic lines above:

The alliteration of these final two lines creates two quite opposite effects. The long run of the 's' sounds is onomatopoeic in enacting a flow, while the two beats of the 'b' and of the 'h' are a staccato enactment of body and head, birth and death, confronting each other.

This echoes the earlier image of a living mother facing the dead head of its offspring in the mud, 'with all earth for a body'. Here is a forceful and primeval image that links these processes back into the cycles of the earth itself. (p. 25)

Hughes believes that using chemicals in the agricultural process brings a detrimental effect to the land and the produce. He mentions that "this pressure, like 'the technological revolutions and international market madness that have devastated farmers, farms and farming', is under the surface of what these poems record" (Gifford, 2009, p. 52). The farmer-poet exhibits moral certainty in the struggle against death. This brought out the best of him: his love, strength and courage. Further, the ability of man to carry on with natural conditions makes him physically and emotionally strong. It offers him the chance to see the miracle of life and to endure with high dignity the dark side of it. It also kindles within him care for the environment and compassion for animals.

This Hughes tackles again in "Little Red Twin". The poem is about a newly born calf that seems unlikely to survive and is abandoned by her mother whose,

*Power-milk
Has overdone this baby's digestion
who now,
Wobbly-legged, lags behind the
migrations
From field-corner to corner.
(MD, p. 42)*

The farmers do not abandon hope, and they "brim her with pints of glucose water" (MD, p. 42), despite that "examiners" believed that "She might not make it. Scour / Has drained her. She parches, dry-nosed" (MD, p. 42). Ultimately, it is the curing power of the Nature Goddess that brings the calf back to life:

*The smell of the mown hay
Mixed by moonlight with driftings
of honeysuckle
And dog-roses and foxgloves, and
all
The warmed spices of earth
In the safe casket of stars and velvet
Did bring her to morning. And now
she will live. (MD, p. 44)*

The poem demonstrates that miracles can happen in a place once the will of mankind unites with that of the natural world. Moortown farm integrates nature and culture, reflecting the necessity of striking a balance between civilisation and the natural world.

In conclusion, 'Moortown Diary' is considerably different from 'Remains of Elmet' concerning man's relationship with nature. 'Remains of Elmet' presents people who are remains of religious traditions and industrial enterprise. Hughes' exploration of the place aims at healing the damage brought by industry and Methodism to the human psyche and to man's relationship with the natural world. He believes that the people of Calder Valley should recognise the existence of God through nature, not through their limited interpretation of the scriptures

which enslaved their bodies and souls rather than attuning them with the spirit of the Nature Goddess. Nature, in Hughes' poetry, is the element of man's higher self; nature should be approached and assimilated, not feared, avoided and exploited. Hughes' poetic quest continues in 'Moortown Diary', where man is successfully coping with the natural world; he is a midwife to nature's course of regeneration. Farming brought Hughes in contact with animals, the land and the seasons, and in direct proximity to the process of life and death. This allowed him to connect with his own essence deep within, have a wholesome relationship with the self and the other and apprehend his responsibility for planet Earth.

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