Warszawa 2015 PFLIT, no. 5(8): 427-439

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THE SECRET RITES OF NATURE IN *RIVER* BY TED HUGHES

Keywords: Ted Hughes, *River*, Eco-criticism, meditative poetry, logos, nature

Słowa kluczowe: Ted Hughes, *Rzeka*, eko-krytyka, poezja medytacyjna, logos, natura

1.

In the first edition of Ted Hughes' poetic sequence *River* (1983), each poem is accompanied by full-page photographs by Peter Keen[1]. The visual appeal of this dialogue between poetic word and artistic image drew the attention of another well-known British poet of the twentieth century, Tom Paulin, who wrote that "[t]he glossy appearance [of the book] and the photographs it contains make it resemble a coffee-table book"[2]; a material *objet d'art* admired for its fine appearance as much as for the content of the volume. At the same time, this felicitous marriage of poetry and artistic photography brilliantly foregrounds the pithy sensuality and sturdy corporeality of Hughes' poetic language, which draws its inspiration from the secret life of the riverside environment: murky or iridescent, murmuring or silent, sweetly odorous or smelling of the sickbed. Small wonder, then, that the sequence has been recognised as the peak of his poetic achievement[3]. It has also been noted that the titular river is not a mere background for the poet's reflection, nor even a setting for the drama of nature, but a fully-fledged protagonist of the volume. One can certainly argue that the poems included in this collection show much "more than just his most intimately known part of our environment"[4].

[1] T. Hughes, *River* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983).

[2] Quoted in R. Hibbet, *Ted Hughes and Philip Larkin. Now* (Ann Arbor, 2006), 145.

[3] L. Ścigaj, quoted by T. Gifford, "Hughes Social Ecology", in T. Gifford, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), 85-86.

[4] T. Gifford, *Ted Hughes* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 57.

The point is not only the incomparable accuracy and vividness of the poetic landscape as drawn by Hughes: the poet's life-long interest in alternative forms of spirituality and his fascination with occult philosophy, pagan mythology and shamanism have become commonplace in literary criticism. Viewed from this perspective, his interest in nature goes beyond an ordinary enjoyment of the beauty of the surrounding world. Terry Gifford writes, for instance, that "Hughes celebrates the carefully observed lives of the inhabitants of rivers in his freshly minted metaphors that reach for an appreciation of the essential qualities of these creatures"[5].

In this sense, Hughes' poetry can be deemed "meditative", if meditation is understood as an art of paying attention and leading to the moments of heightened awareness that William Wordsworth once called "spots of time": "that with distinct preeminence retain / A renovating virtue... by which pleasure is enhanced, / That penetrates, enables us to mount"[6]. Meditation implies also one's readiness to recognise the regenerative fullness of life that gives itself in the present moment. This definition certainly fits Hughes' rich repertoire of conceits and succinct images of fish, birds, plants, stones, mud and water, in which we find "much more than visual description evoked. Uniqueness, the primeval, healing and mystery each deepen the reader's attention"[7]. Indeed, this is not what we could call descriptive poetry in the tradition of Ben Jonson's or Andrew Marvell's country house poems ("To Penshurst" and "Upon Appleton House", respectively), in Alexander Pope's "Windsor Forest", James Thomson's "The Seasons" or William Wordsworth's "The Prelude". Even if we recall the pantheistic character of Wordsworth's poetry, we cannot fail to notice that Hughes' sequence differs from traditional nature poems in focusing our attention on the secret rites of sacrifice and redemption that are continually performed in and through nature.

Hughes can be called a "religious poet", if we agree with Tadeusz Sławek that "religion is what connects man and the world; in terms of the articles of faith, certainly, but also in the sense of prevailing generality – **religion, and prayer as its fundamental modality, is a way of bringing things together**"[8]. Yet it must also be stressed that in the case of Hughes this sense of connectedness and belonging, which very often erupts in wonder or ecstatic joy, lies entirely in a created world that is densely populated with "savage gods and silver ghosts"[9].

[5] Ibidem.

[6] W. Wordsworth, "The Prelude, Book I", in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, vol. V (London, 1870), 335.

[7] T. Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, 57.

[8] T. Sławek, "The Tremulous Word: On Language in Prayer", in M. Grzegorzewska, J. Ward, M. Burrows, eds., *Breaking the Silence. Poetry and the Kenotic Word* (Frankfurt am Mein, in print).

[9] I allude here to the title of E. Boyanovsky, *Silver Ghosts, Savage Gods: In the Wild with Ted Hughes* (Vancouver: D&M Publishers, 2009).

Some critics even venture to speak about the "anti-Christian ethos of this poetry", seeing it as rooted in New Age neo-paganism[10]. No doubt the poet's preoccupation with restless movement and unmoved stillness, light and darkness, fecundity and death, owes much to a compelling fusion of ecology and New Age mysticism. The reader may recognise in these poems traces of hermetic philosophy, alchemy and shamanic healing practices. Hughes' intensely alert, sharp-eyed perceptions of a hunting kingfisher, a dying salmon and newly born myriad minnows encourage the reader to join in the neo-pagan (and anti--Christian) celebration of life and death; to rejoice in every creature and to participate in the constantly changing but never exhausted resources of the created world, best epitomised by the vibrant currents of the river. The seasons of the year, which change the face of the river and affect the lives of the local deities, provide a fitting background for Hughes' animistic beliefs and his poetic liturgies of "Earth's coming – harrowing, crowned – a travail / of raptures and rendings" ("Salmon eggs")[11]. This is how the English poet appropriates the idiom of Christianity and transforms the Christian drama of Salvation (including the Harrowing of Hell and the royal glory of Ascension) into a pagan worship of the cycles of nature. What Christianity celebrates in the unique sacrifice of the Son of God, who suffered death on the Cross for the sins of humankind and rose from the dead on the third day, delivering humankind from eternal death, in Hughes' account is presented as the suffering matter and cyclic rebirth of life on earth, as epitomised by the river. The message is enhanced by the poet's treatment of poetic language, which apart from frequent references to religion, seeks to supplant the allegedly anthropocentric concepts of the Greek *logos* and Christian *Logos*, denoting the word, sense and reason as well as the Word of God, which informs both human words and lives, in favour of a "cosmic", sub- or supra-human language, beyond human reason and logic. In Hughes' poetry, sound and meaning give way to infra- and ultrasounds of nature: a material, neo-pagan equivalent of what John Keats celebrated as the pleasing "unheard melodies" of the Neoplatonic universe[12].

[10] J. Moulin, "Ted Hughes's Anti-Mythic Method", in J. Moulin, ed., *Ted Hughes. Alternative Horizons* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2004), 98.

[11] T. Hughes, *Collected Poems of Ted Hughes*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=hz5O0laGLOgC&pg=PT1631&dq=hughes+ted+selected+poems&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=gF_5VNumMuT7ywOMxILoCQ&ved=0CDYQ6wEwAw#v=onepage&q=hughes%20ted%20selected%20poems&f=false. acc. 3 March 2015.

[12] One of the best-known English Romantic poems: "Ode on a Grecian Urn" voices the praise of an ideal melody, devoid of sound because performed by a piper painted on an ancient urn. (cf. J. Keats, *Complete Poems*, ed. by J. Stillinger, Harvard: Harvard College, 2003, p. 282).

2.

Let us begin our analysis with the poem titled "Under the Hill of Centurions", where the reader is bedazzled by fireworks of new life embodied in a school of minnows. Hughes uses the Christian liturgical calendar here to celebrate the cycle of nature which encompasses endless sacrifice and continual rebirth:

> The river is in a resurrection fever.
> Now at Easter you find them
> Up in the pool's throat, and in the very jugular
> Where the stickle pulses under grass
> Cock minnows![13]

The frenetic movement of the small fish is so appealing that it forces the speaker to imagine the inaudible song that must accompany their dancing: "I imagine their song / Deep-chested, striving, solemn"[14]. The poet strives to imitate this unheard music which fills the pool, and which originates in the veins of the earth, in the incessant pulsation of life itself. Moreover, the following description evokes the movement, flash and rattling of metal fishing lures used to bait larger fish. Alliteration and consonance play an important role in imitating this imaginary fish-song; I have highlighted the repeated sounds:

> In the cla**tt**er of the light loom of wa**t**er
> All singing and
> Toiling together,
> Wreathing their metals
> Into the warp and wef**t** of the li**t** wa**t**er[15].

At the same time, the allusion to Easter connects the glory of Resurrection with the preceding drama of the Passion. Thus, as soon as life dawns in the river in this freshly awakened brilliance and almost palpable, nearly audible glitter, we are also reminded of death and bloody sacrifice. The small fish are "Red--breasted as if they bled, their Roman / Bottle-glass green bodies silked with blood"[16]. Their colour evokes the mesmerising plumage of the kingfishers which feed on them: "A wrestling tress of kingfisher colour / Steely jostling, a washed mass of brilliants"[17].

[13] T. Hughes, *Collected Poems of Ted Hughes*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=hz5O0laGLOgC&pg=PT1631&dq=hughes+ted+selected+poems&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=gF_5VNumMuT7ywOMxILoCQ&ved=0CDYQ6wEwAw#v=onepage&q=hughes%20ted%20selected%20poems&f=false, acc. 3 March 2015.

[14] Ibidem.

[15] Ibidem.

[16] Ibidem.

[17] Ibidem.

When, in turn, the kingfisher appears in another poem, we watch him waiting for prey ("Kingfisher"). The beginning of the poem shows the bird motionless, but intensely vigilant. His poised calm and gem-like plumage contrast with the chaotic torrents of bubbling water and the river's confused darkness:

> The kingfisher perches. He studies.
> Escaped from the jeweler's opium
> X-rays the river's toppling
> Tangle of glooms[18].

Kingfishers' splendid colours were evoked in English poetry long before Hughes, for instance, in Andrew Marvell's masterpiece "Upon Appleton House", where after a day's stroll through different parts of Lord Fairfax's splendid property, the visitor approaches the river and sees there a kingfisher, this time denoted by a feminine personal pronoun, in accordance with the mythical story of Alcyone who was transformed into a winged Halcyon. She is perceived only as a smudge of blue ("azure dy" and "Sapphire-winged mist"[19]), flying just above the surface of the calm water, which seems to freeze as if enchanted by the magnificent, though mortally dangerous sight: "The gellying Stream compacts below, / If it might fix her shadow so; / The stupid Fishes hang, as plain, / As Flies in Chrystal ouert'ane"[20]. Later, in the Edwardian period, kingfishers are mentioned in G. M. Hopkins' brilliant account of how human language harmonises with nature to bring out the hidden glory of God. The eye-catching plumage of the bird is rendered in this well-known poem in a phrase which combines the image with the sound of the name: "where kingfishers catch fire"[21]. Last but not least, in the first part of T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, titled "Burnt Norton", we witness the moment of epiphanic bliss which takes place when a shaft of light suddenly disperses the gloom of the cloudy day. The light fills an empty pool in the deserted garden, and is then reflected in the kingfisher's glossy wing. The bird, who in English folklore represents Christ, engages in a silent conversation with the beam of light. It "answers... light to light, and is silent, the light is still / At the still point of the turning world" (ll. 137-139)[22].

Hughes, in turn, shows the kingfisher diving for prey. In the following section the reader witnesses a sudden eruption of energy which can be compared to an

[18] A. Marvell, *The Complete Poems*, ed. G. de F. Lord (London: Everyman's Library, 1984), 84-85.

[19] Ibidem.

[20] Ibidem.

[21] *Poems of G. M. Hopkins*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=OrGmt-iIjGoC&dq=hopkins+poems+kingfishers&hl=pl&source=gbs_navlinks_s, acc. 3 March 2015.

[22] T. S. Eliot, *Wybór poezji*, sel. W. Rulewicz, intr. W. Rulewicz, ann. K. Boczkowski et W. Rulewicz (Wrocław – Warszawa – Gdańsk – Kraków – Łódź: Ossolineum, 1990), 220.

electric discharge: a frenetic combination of sapphire-blue and vermillion-red, accompanied by a sound that is painful to the ear.

Now he is vanished
Into vibrations.
A sudden electric wire, jarred rigid,
Snaps, – with a blue flare.
He has buried a needle in your ear[23].

In the next stanza, stillness and motion appear in reverse order, beginning with a description of crude trees and dull stones and concluding with the image of the bird emerging from under the water as if through the surface of a mirror, scattering tiny splinters of refracted light, hard and sharp as pieces of glass, hurting the eye:

Oafish oaks, kneeling, bend over,
Dragging with their reflections
For the sunken stones. The kingfisher
Erupts through the mirror, beak full of ingots,

And is away – cutting the one straight line
Over the raggle-taggle tumbledown river
With a diamond.
Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye[24].

The opening phrase in the quoted fragment reveals the originality of Hughes' poetic method: the reader should not only pay attention to the alliteration: "oafish oaks", but also notice that the meaning of the phrase ("dull oak trees") may be obliterated by the possible confusion of the adjective "oafish" with a name of some species living in the river or in the sea (such as catfish, bonefish or cuttlefish), while the plural form in "oaks" might indicate the Present Tense form of some newly coined verb: "to oak". This nonsense alternative must of course be rejected after we read the whole sentence, but it nevertheless indicates a possible departure from regular English grammar and lexis, almost to the point of abolishing the difference between the human vernacular and the manifold, secret languages of nature.

A reader who is familiar with G. M. Hopkins' poetry may also wish to compare Hughes' vivid portrayal of a diving bird with the image of a hunting falcon in "The Windhover", especially the sestet of the sonnet, designed to evoke Christ's bloody agony on the cross:

[23] T. Hughes, *Collected Poems of Ted Hughes*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=hz5O0laGLOgC&pg=PT1631&dq=hughes+ted+selected+poems&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=gF_5VNumMuT7ywOMxILoCQ&ved=0CDYQ6wEwAw#v=onepage&q=hughes%20ted%20selected%20poems&f=false, acc. 3 March 2015.

[24] Ibidem.

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here
Buckle! AND the fire that breaks from thee then, a billion
Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier!
No wonder of it: sheer plod makes plough down sillion
Shine, and blue-bleak embers, ah my dear,
Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion[25].

In both poems the poised and clear-cut contours of the bird's silhouette are suddenly transformed into a burning flame (no doubt the Jesuit poet intended that this image recall the Old Testament practice of burnt offerings), a discharge of fiery colours and violent action. But Hopkins' poem points to Christ's selfless love, whose fullest expression was his death, transforming the kenosis unto death into divine glory, as expressed in the brilliant concluding phrase: "and gash gold-vermillion". Hughes, meanwhile, celebrates the mystical unity and harmony of nature:

Through him, God, whizzing in the sun
Glimpses the angler.
Through him, God
Marries a pit
Of fishy mire.
And look! He's gone again
Spark, sapphire, refracted
From beyond water
Shivering the spine of the river[26].

In these endless returns of the kingfisher there is no place for the kenosis of the God-made man. Divinity remains trapped in the "splinters of rainbow", glimpses of light and the never-ending circulation of living matter: the continual pattern of purifications, deaths, resurrection and ascension, while the allusion to the mystical royal wedding of heaven and earth is perfectly in tune with the hermetic lore of the *Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, whose echoes resonated also in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's pantheist ballad "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner"[27]. In Hughes' poem the kingfisher is not a symbol

[25] *Poems of G. M. Hopkins*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=OrGmt-iIjGoC&dq=hopkins+poems+kingfishers&hl=pl&source=gbs_navlinks_s, acc. 3 March 2015.

[26] T. Hughes, *Collected Poems of Ted Hughes*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=hz5O0laGLOgC&pg=PT1631&dq=hughes+ted+selected+poems&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=gF_5VNumMuT7ywOMxILoCQ&ved=0CDYQ6wEwAw#v=onepage&q=hughes%20ted%20selected%20poems&f=false, acc. 3 March 2015.

[27] The protagonist of Coleridge's ballad discovers the sense of religion as a bond with fellow human beings and nature (as in popular etymology, which links the word with the Latin verb *re-ligere*, i.e. to bind together). After a long period of repentance for an act of gratuitous violence which he committed against an innocent bird, he finds forgiveness and is allowed to go to church together with all the members of the local community to pray there and to preach the truth which he has

but an embodiment of the divine element in the pattern of mutually dependent, "married" opposites. The reference to the bird "shivering the spine of the river" not only makes us think of the river as a vertebrate animal but implies also a touch on the crucial nerve, the spinal cord of this sensible creature. Suffering and pain are then connected with the glorious ascent of the sordid and senseless mire, mud or clay, and the jubilant exultation of base matter.

The human figure, the angler, is not in the centre of our attention, nor does he mediate between the world of nature and the reader, but he is included in the breath-taking spectacle of death and participates in the mystical wedding feast when the "fishy mire" is betrothed to the glory of the sun.

3.

Another important protagonist in the cycle is the salmon, whose migrations to the sea and strenuous return journeys upstream to spawn in the same place where it was born are evoked in the poems titled "October Salmon" and the already mentioned "Salmon Eggs". It has even been claimed that "the salmon is our prototype, its life-cycle a paradigm of our purposes and of the religious life"[28]. October marks the time of death that is inscribed in the yearly scheme of taking to the sea and returning home. The poem that refers to this event begins with an image of the fish "in poor water, / a yard or so of poor safety, / Maybe only two feet under the no-protection of an outleaning small oak, / Half under a tangle of brambles"[29]. Its present state of hopelessness and desolation contrasts starkly with the memory of the salmon's proud ventures into the "covenant of Polar Light", and the royal splendor of his "ravenous joy", experienced by the "king of infinite liberty / in the flashing expanse, / the bloom of sea-life" (Col).

learnt himself: "He prayeth well, who loveth well / Both man and bird and beast. // He prayeth best, who loveth best / All things both great and small; / For the dear God who loveth us, / He made and loveth all" ("Rime of the Ancient Mariner and Selected Poems", in H. Bloom and L. Trilling, eds., *Romantic Poetry and Prose*, London and New York 1973, p. 245). The same spirit of an all-pervading, divine unity that is immanent in nature pervades the poetry of William Wordsworth. See, for example, the following passage from *The Recluse*: "A blended holiness of earth and sky, / Something that makes this individual spot, / This small abiding-place of many men, / A termination, and a last retreat, / A centre, come from wheresoe'er you will, / A whole without dependence or defect, / Made for itself, and happy in itself, / *Perfect contentment, Unity entire*" (lines 144-151, emphasis added; http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww301.html, acc. 10 March 2015).

[28] K. Sagar, "Fourfold Vision in Hughes", in K. Sagar, ed., *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), 309.

[29] Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems of Ted Hughes*, https://books.google.pl/books?id=hz5O0laGLOgC&pg=PT1631&dq=hughes+ted+selected+poems&hl=pl&sa=X&ei=gF_5VNumMuT7ywOMxILoCQ&ved=0CDYQ6wEwAw#v=onepage&q=hughes%20ted%20selected%20poems&f=false, acc. 3 March 2015. Sign. "Col".

The imagery of the poem concentrates on clothing, from "earth's beauty--dress / Her life-robe", through the appearance of the salmon as compared to "a frayed scarf", his "leper clothes", up to his "shroud in the gutter" (Col). Awaiting the inevitable, the salmon looks almost like a war veteran, his patched skin reminiscent of the medals and distinctions on an old soldier's uniform:

> Death has already dressed him
> In her clownish regimentals, her badges and decorations,
> Mapping the completion of his service,
> His face a ghoul-mask, a dinosaur of senility, and his whole body
> A fungoid anemone of canker [Col].

The face of the river is also disfigured by traces of the inconsiderate human treatment of the natural surroundings: "bicycle wheels, car tyres, bottles / And sunk sheets of corrugated iron" (Col), which strengthen the sense of sterility and waste. Human civilisation is accused of deadly arrogance and pride, both of which suppress nature's regenerative power. Yet, even this most humiliating aspect of the salmon's death proves to be only a part of an intricately woven cosmic scheme, the very texture of the universe, as we read in the last stanza:

> All this, too, is stitched in into the torn richness
> The epic poise
> That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom
> So patient
> In the machinery of heaven [Col].

The fact that "October Salmon" is followed by a poem devoted to the miracle of birth only confirms the validity of the statement that "this chamber of horrors is also home" (Col), and that the present agony was inscribed in the fish egg. Therefore, the story of the salmon does not end in October but continues with the image of spawning, set against the background of a January landscape dimmed by haze, lit only by "a veined yolk of sun" (Col). In "Salmon Eggs", the human observer is not transparent as he was in the previously discussed poems of the cycle, but instead the poem concentrates on the bedazzled consciousness of the lyrical "I", who in a moment of frenetic ecstasy is initiated into the secret rites of the river's life, its comings and goings, its violent "Caesarean" ruptures that foster birth and the raptures of the shamanic healing trance; finally, into its indelible memory of extinct prehistoric species which may stand for its continually fluctuating, tirelessly mutable, time-bound and recurrent eternity.

> In bone damp cold
> I lean and watch the water, listening to the water

Till my eyes forget me
And the piled flow supplants me, the mud blooms
All this ponderous light of everlasting
Collapsing away under its own weight
Mastodon ephemera
Mud-curling, bull-dozing, hem-twinkling
Caesarean of heaven and earth, unleft
With exhumations and delirious advents [Col].

And yet we may also say that the conscious observer disappears from the poem almost as soon as he has entered the scene of writing. When his eyes "forget" him, his consciousness is supplanted by the currents of the river, symbolising cosmic energy. Already the opening, oxymoronic phrase, "bone damp", defamiliarises the colloquial expression "bone dry" and defies human logic by abolishing the commonsense difference between life connected with moisture and fertility, and death, epitomised by lifeless, dry bones. The poem's obvious preoccupation with religious vocabulary emphasises the inspired spirit of the poet's visions, leading the reader beyond the simple appreciation of nature. Around this "time-hewn, time-riven altar" there arises a perpetual song: "Sanctus Sanctus / Swathes the blessed issue... / Perpetual mass / Of the waters / Wells from the cleft" (Col). The pun on "mass", understood as "bulk, accumulation" or as a Divine Service, reflects well the religious slant of this verse, with its incessant focus on the immanent divinity of the world. That which is beyond words and reason (i.e. beyond what is denoted by the Greek *logos*), the secret and "nameless" reality, is said to dwell "*inside* atoms – and *inside* the haze / And *inside* the sun, and *inside* the earth" (emphasis added) (Col). The litany--like parallelisms "and... and... and" bring to mind both Wordsworth's and especially Shelley's frequent enumerations, but in the poem by Hughes the same device serves mainly to stress the sacred character of nature: "more vital than death... more grave than life" (with another clever pun on "grave" as an adjective denoting something "serious, weighty, momentous" and as a noun referring to a burial place), as articulated in the last lines of the poem:

Only birth matters
Say the river's whorls
And the river
Silences everything in a leaf-mouldering hush
Where sun rolls bare, and earth rolls
And mind condenses on old haws [Col].

The issue at stake here is the possibility of inventing a poetic language which is capable of transcending reason and overcoming the stringent discipline of human logic and speech. The figure of prosopopoeia, thanks to which the river

proclaims its crucial message in the human tongue, is frequently classified as a kind of personification, which at first glance seems to fit the overall meaning of Hughes' poetic sequence, in which nature is endowed with human qualities. This would mean that in the act of speaking the river acquires a human face and becomes a thinking, speaking person, as opposed to an irrational, mute animal or other creature. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that in the quoted fragment of "Salmon Eggs" the trope of counterfeit speech is immediately followed by an aporetic gesture of a "leaf-mouldering hush" (Col), indicating a radical departure from the logocentric and anthropocentric discourses of Western civilisation. The poems included in the sequence aim at de-centring the human and supplanting human language by the voices of the earth and the river: the incomprehensible, secret clattering, whispering, rustling, mumbling, babbling and murmuring of stones, water, grass and leaves.

Hughes' poetry can thus be read as the exact reverse of the narrative of the Book of Genesis – in other words, the biblical Book of Birth – where all creatures were moulded by God and emerged from His imperial Word. Here, quite contrarily, insufficient human words, recorded on pages that are sometimes referred to as "leaves", are said to "moulder", i.e. die and rot away in the currents of the river. But instead of vanishing completely, they are transformed into another mode of existence in the never-ending cycle of nature. So, too, the language of this poetry, instead of depicting or grasping the appearance of things, water, stones, plants or animals, records their voices and lets them utter the unnameable in their own tongues by means of frequent alliteration, internal rhymes, consonance and countless onomatopoeic words, such as "whorl, hush, haw", which imitate the "speech" of the river. Nature truly speaks and sings in and through these poems. If we wanted to point to analogous achievements in British poetry, we could invoke George Mackay Brown's sound poems here, but as in the case of the previously discussed similarity between Hughes' work and the tradition of descriptive poetry, we also need to stress his idiosyncratic application of methods used by others, and to connect the peculiarity of his language with the religious, mythical character of his project. Unlike Brown, Hughes does not aim at writing a poem that perfectly imitates the sounds of nature but ventures instead to seek a language that allows the reader to worship and converse with the gods of nature, a language that can heal humankind by celebrating life and death in nature.

Under the rolling sun, on the rolling earth nothing dies; everything is born and re-born according to the mysterious plan which cannot be expressed in the limited grammar and logic of human languages. Hence the "haw" of hesitation, a pause in speech which in the end proves more valid than naming. Hughes' poetry can therefore be deemed "religious" not only because of its steadfast attention to the mystery of the world, and not even because of its shamanic

undertones, but first and foremost due to its awareness that human language is only one among others in which we can pray, "*in so far as we, humans, no longer hegemonically alienate ourselves from the community of 'every Creature'*" (emphasis added)[30]. The question remains as to whether the poet's determination to challenge the pre-eminently anthropocentric slant of Western civilisation (as is evident in most poetry written in English as well as in the basic tenets of Christianity) does not result in a vision that, in the end, proves deeply anti--humanist, even if irresistibly imaginative and persuasive. This question, however, should be left for the reader to answer.

The Secret Rites of Nature in *River* by Ted Hughes

Summary

The text discusses Ted Hughes' poetic sequence *River* from the perspective of eco--criticism. The poems included in this sequence illustrate the poet's life-long interest in alternative forms of spirituality. The reader may recognise in them traces of hermetic philosophy, alchemy and shamanic healing practices. Hughes can also be called a meditative poet, if meditation is understood as a practice of attentively observing the surrounding reality. His treatment of nature is reflected in his original poetic idiom, where the sound and meaning of the human language frequently give way to the infra- and ultrasounds of the "unheard melodies" sung by plants and animals.

Tajemne obrzędy natury w cyklu Teda Hughesa *Rzeka*

Streszczenie

Artykuł omawia cykl poetycki Teda Hughesa *River* [Rzeka] z perspektywy założeń tzw. eko-krytyki. Zawarte w tym cyklu wiersze stanowią dobry przykład wieloletniego zaangażowania poety w alternatywne formy duchowości w nurcie New Age. Czytelnik łatwo rozpozna w nich ślady tradycji hermetycznej, alchemii i szamańskich rytuałów. Można również Hughesa nazwać poetą medytacyjnym, jeśli przyjmiemy, że zadaniem medytacji jest uważna obserwacja otaczającej nas rzeczywistości. Jego stosunek do natury wpływa także na ukształtowanie niezwykle oryginalnego języka poetyckiego, w którym dźwięk i sens ludzkiej mowy zostają często zastąpione przez ultra i infra-dźwięki niesłyszalnych melodii wyśpiewywanych przez rośliny i zwierzęta.

[30] Tadeusz Sławek, op. cit.

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