Meta-Mythopoeia
in Ted Hughes's Poetry

Lect.Dr. **Amer Rasool Mahdi**
College of Education Ibn Rushd for Humanities
Department of English Language
rasoolamer@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract
  This paper aims at resetting, and delving into, the question of mythmaking or mythopoeia with regard to Ted Hughes's poetry. It investigates the new postmodernist literary parameters that set Hughes's mythopoeia apart from the Romantics' and the modernists' tradition of mythmaking. With Hughes, this tradition comes to be challenged as it is now reintroduced through the poet's literary animals, and as these are deemed the correlative of the poetic process that is informed by the postmodernist poetics of meta-literature.
Keywords: Ted Hughes; mythopoeia; meta-literature; shamanism.

  In the vast arena of the modernist literature, and as an offshoot of the romantic concern with mythopoeia, the revival of the mythmaking in the modern times is yet to be revisited through the aesthetic lenses provided by the postmodern sensibilities. A retrospective view of this mythopoetic venture might thus be phrased: while the romantics revert to myths as part of their escapist, yet generative, philosophy and scheme, the modernist poets use them to mythologize their experience that is in accord with the make-it-new[1] aesthetics and sensibility in the modern age. The premise of mythologizing for them is to sort out the chaos that characterizes this experience, and to create a sense of order in the disorderly. The mythical component in modernist poetry might be traced back to, and be found poignantly resonant in, W. B. Yeats, the transitional poet who, during his poetic odyssey, makes a heavy use of the Irish folklore and legends until he lapses into the occult traditions, ending up mythologizing history.

  One important designation of the mythmaking in the modernist age is that made by the arch-figure of the modernist poetry, T. S. Eliot. In theory and practice, Eliot shows the uses mythopoeia could be put for. Commenting on James Joyce's use of myths in *Ulysses*, Eliot comes to dub this as the "mythic method," which he defines as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[2] Eliot's conception of the mythic method might be considered nothing more than an extension of his conception of the

objective correlative. This Eliotean understanding of mythopoeia has been the domineering thesis of the modernist poetry.

In the postmodernist version of the twentieth-century poetry, however, the conception of the mythic method suffers a significant change when distilled through the prism of the poet Ted Hughes. Hughes argues counter to Eliot's thesis on mythopoeia. In his interview with Ekbert Faas, he states that a poet must "develop inwardly," which means finding out the pattern to organize the "inner world." And this may lead to creating an "original mythology," or falling short of "recover[ing] the Cross as Eliot did."[3] As a result, Hughes develops his postmodernist thesis of the anti-myth, or meta-myth for that matter. This means for Hughes addressing myths directly by rewriting them and thus by questioning them. Hence, for him "myth is not a method, it is the target."[4] This stands in sharp contrast with the modernist Eliotean mythic method. However, given the notion of chaos and order, one might recall Laurence Coupe who posits that

> It would be naive to contrast modernist mythopoeia and postmodernist mythopoeia as simply synonymous with order and chaos, as if these were mutually exclusive principles. Myth, after all, is inseparable from the idea of totality; yet myth has only ever been a gesture towards it.[5]

In keeping with the question of totality gestured to by mythopoeia, it is apt to propose, however, that it seems that Hughes, and owing to his postmodernist leaning, has a predilection for the chaotic and destructive aspect of the very notion of totality. It follows then that the romantic remnants of mythopoeia in the modernist literary scene are revised by Hughes's introduction of his post-romantic view of meta-myth that "celebrates, renders more complex or more conscious, some of the generative insights of the romantic system of mythology."[6] Hence, Hughes's poetic project, and in tandem with his meta-mythic tenet, bends on working out some of these generative insights more self-consciously. Nuanced with this view of the mythic rendition is the poet's falling back on shamanism. Michael Sweeting states that Hughes

> regards shamanism as a force for equilibrium because it deals with the control and harnessing of energy expressed through ecstasy, energy which can revitalize and empower or bring to chaos and destruction.[7]

Shamanism, as it were, provides Hughes with the means whereby he comes to possess his mythical gear through animalism that serves as the poet's elemental, yet self-conscious, gesture to totality.

Early on in his poetic career Hughes betrays, in his *Hawk in the Rain*, earlier traces of his radical tenet of the "mythical poets" who "seem to be a distinct biological type,"[8] which is an attempt on his part to designate the kind of the poet he is. This is to be translated into the poem "The Thought-Fox" in which he ushers in his version of this new mythical sensibility and shamanistic tendency.

"The Thought-Fox" is Hughes's overture to what he deems to be the intermarriage of shamanism and the poetic creation. This goes in parallel with Sweeting who, commenting on Hughes's poetry, considers writing poetry "a metaphorical shamanic act."[9] Therefore, in this inaugurating poem one is met with the meta-mythical, the shamanic, and the meta-poetic all conjured up in the poet's scriptorium:

> I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
> Something else is alive
> Beside the clock's loneliness
> And this blank page where my fingers move.
>
> Through the window I see no star:
> Something more near
> Though deeper within darkness
> Is entering the loneliness:
>
> Cold, delicately as the dark snow
> A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
> Two eyes serve a movement, that now
> And again now, and now, and now
>
> Sets neat prints into the snow
> Between trees, and warily a lame
> Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
> Of a body that is bold to come
>
> Across clearings, an eye,
> A widening deepening greenness,
> Brilliantly, concentratedly,
> Coming about its own business
>
> Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
> It enters the dark hole of the head.
> The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
> The page is printed.[10]

This is a poem about the process of writing a poem; that is, a meta-poem. It critically addresses meta-literature's tenets of self-reflexivity as it draws attention to the very workings of its composition. But it is also a shamanic ritual performed by the poet-shaman. Hence, it is

quite evident that this not Aesop's fox nor Reynard the Fox despite the surface similarities holding between these and the kineto-cunning nature of Hughes's fox that moves so stealthily. Hughes's fox is a primitive animal soul, or energy, roving aimlessly in the dark night of the subconscious. The poet's role here is to play the shaman who conjures up this straying spirit that stands for the inspiration needed for the poetic-shamanic process of creation till it "concentratedly, / Com[es] about its own business". Intricately, the poet here combines the poetic process with the mystic ritual or the cult of animalism. Thus the poem is as much about the now self-conscious poet who has the poetic process shamanized as it is about the idea of the poem in the making that has animalism foregrounded as part of its meta-literary craft.

This goes harmonious with this reading of Hughes's poetry as a meta-mythical venture. Hughes himself "often described poetry as a magical shamanic journey undertaken to obtain some healing energies needed in our world."[11] In "The Thought-Fox", the poet seems to be in need of his poetic potential, and this is especially so as it has been a year and he never wrote poetry. Besides, this very poem is regarded as the first animal poem in the poet's mythopoetic and quasi-shamanic career. He is now sitting in a London hotel trying to summon his poetic subconscious, and it comes upon the scene of his conscious self in the form of his childhood memories about fox-hunting in Yorkshire, and this is when the fox takes grip on the poet's imagination. The thought is now embodied, or incarnated in the illusory image of the fox that is being drawn coaxingly to the realm of consciousness: to the poet's mind. That is why Faas calls the fox's moment and mechanism a "psycho-physiological process of imaginative projection."[12] This process is also rendered into a primitive ritual in which the poet-shaman is praying for his totem-fox (i-coo-coo-a) to fill in the hiatus in his magical board: "this blank page." To consult one of the shamanic experiences in connection with the fox-cult and symbolism, one may have recourse to one recounted by Margaret Stutley:

> Daurs kept small wooden shrines in their outhouses for the fox spirit, called Auli Barkan (mountain spirit). Auli Barakan was depicted as a fox with a human head, who protected against burglary but also caused insanity.[13]

By the same token, the poet-shaman in "The Thought-Fox" holds his shrine for the fox-thought or -spirit, or even the fox-poem, but this time, as a welcome burglar who might cause the poet to be insane—to be inspired for that matter.

Moreover, the fox-thought might be conceived of as a hybrid consisting of both the mythos and the logos, the legend and the word, or the signified and the signifier. The fleeting and cunning nature of the fox, and his being an animal of the between times and places, makes him a sign not easy to be underpinned. Hence, the poet and the fox are keeping the same distance from the mere thought. It is not only the poet who tries to summon the thought, but the fox, in retaliation, tries to summon the poet to this thought. The fox is a thought in need to be incarnated, and the thought is a fox in need to be dis-incarnated, and the meeting spot is the lacuna of the would-be poem, or here, the poem in the making.

From "this blank page" up to "The page is printed" there is "A widening deepening greenness / Brilliantly, concentratedly, / Coming about its business." In these lines, the meta-myth of the fox turns out to be a meta-poem, and vice versa. And here "the dark hole of the head" of the mythmaker is finally and infinitely transgressed by the agency of the creating thought, for him to produce the created word.

The smooth violence of the fox's intrusion into the poet's cognition is yet to be compared with the utterly violent intrusion into the world, or the Creation, by another shamanic symbol; namely, the crow.

In his *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970), Hughes ushers in the crow not just as bird but as a structural symbol. In a series of poems championed by the Crow, he makes use of numerous myths and legends about creation and birth to portray the predatory, mocking, indestructible crow. He combines these myths and legends to build a philosophical framework of his own, and again, he appears to be a mythmaker *par excellence*. In his mythopoeic rendition of animalism, Hughes, furthermore, "wanted to capture not just only live animalism, but the aliveness of animals in their natural state: their wildness, their quiddity, the fox-ness of the fox and the crow-ness of the crow."[14] Still, the crow as a mythical and shamanic symbol serves quite readily the meta-mythical design of Hughes's poetry. Apart from the crow-ness of the crow, Hughes, helped by his study of anthropology, draws upon a huge mythical and religious depository of the crow and the raven symbolism. Crow or the raven is one of the Celtic totem animals worshiped and feared for his tricky nature. It "is also symbolic of skill, cunning, and single-mindedness."[15] Hughes himself, talking of the genesis of his Crow, claims that "the omnivorous, untrustable Crow was England's first totem."[16] The mythical genealogy of the crow is also traced back to Waton and Odinism by John C. Witte. "The most important model for Crow," he states, "is the chief deity of Teutonic mythology, Wotan,

lord of battle and of poetry."[17] The structural principle of the Crow poems is further explicated by David Lodge:

> On its much smaller scale, *Crow* imitates the scope of the Bible, covering the history of the world from beginning to end, from Genesis to Apocalypse, and taking in on the way the universal human themes: birth, copulation and death; language, art, science; love and war; nature and city.[18]

Here it is tempting to say, along with Keith Sagar, and in accord with the thesis of the poet-shaman, that "Crow was to function to some extent as an alter ego for Hughes."[19] That said, these mythical and religious connotations of the crow render Hughes's creature or entity into a paragon of mythopoetic tradition, with the mythmaker now self-consciously addressing the question of totality, and the horrors of Creation.

The poet's Crow is here to be approached in one of the poems in the Crow sequence, "Crow Alights". It is the first poem in the series. It narrates the Crow's fall and his observations of a fallen and devastated world:

> Crow saw the herded mountain, steaming in the morning.
> And he saw the sea
> Dark-spined, with the whole earth in its coils.
> He saw the stars, fuming away into the black, mushrooms of the nothing forest, clouding their spores, the virus of God.
>
> And he shivered with the horror of Creation
>
> In the hallucination of the horror
> He saw this shoe, with no sole, rain-sodden,
> Lying on a moor.
> And there was this garbage can, bottom rusted away,
> A playing place for the wind, in a waste of puddles.
>
> There was this coat, in the dark cupboard, in the silent room in the silent house.
>
> There was his face, smoking its cigarette between the dusk window and the fire's embers.
>
> Near the face, this hand, motionless.
>
> Near the hand, this cup.
>
> Crow blinked. He blinked. Nothing faded.
>
> He stared at the evidence.
>
> Nothing escaped him. (Nothing could escape.)

In the background of this poem, there are the poet's memories of his father being gassed to death in the trenches of the First World War. These recollections have long been incorporated and become now part of the Creation's pastiche. With the intimations of a world overwhelmed by a nuclear holocaust, this poem depicts Crow's personal encounter with death, and the nihilistic universe where he flounders frightens him at first. Here Crow's fall retells the story of the Creation and of the fall of Adam and Eve in his own version, starting from the Apocalypse.

In this poem, the poet-shaman is taking his meta-mythical version of the crow to its extreme. The crow here is the alter ego, the doppelgänger, of both the poet and God. There are suggestions in the poem that the "face / smoking its cigarette between the dusk window and the fire's ambers," could be the poet's, sitting in the aftermath of his wife's suicide (his version of Eve), pondering the potential of committing suicide himself. Furthermore, behind the nexus of the Poet-Crow-God there lurks the nature and function of the crow being a trickster and a creature of the between times and places; it is the creature of the incomplete being, and the witness of this phantasmagoric world. Crow and the world he observes could be the projection of the poet's mind while hallucinating on the brink of destruction, pondering the paradox of the Creation. This reading is sustained by Jarold Ramsey who comments on the mythical bearings and the in-the-middle nature and function of the crow:

> In many traditions, he [the crow] has a major role in the primal creation of the world-as-it-now-is. More precisely, he serves as a Transformer: finding the world to be seriously incomplete, distorted, 'crude', the handiwork of a sleeping or abscond Creator, he steps in, takes over, sets mythic precedents large and small, does the best he can to give some shape and order to the available material of the world.[20]

This description of the crow's function and nature applies, in a larger part of it, to the agency of the poet, and more specifically, to the poet-shaman who plays the role of the witch-doctor of civilization. Yet, as an alter-ego of both the poet and God, Crow finds himself now in the middle of a chaotic world, an incomplete creation, or in a poem in the making. He has been exiled to this world which is inflicted by "the virus of God," the virus of becoming and unbecoming. The question set here is what this Wotan, this lord of war and poetry, shall do in the middle of this battlefield. He would rather mock at the Creation in the fashion of the meta-poet who self-consciously composes and decomposes his martial *ad infinitum*.

Finally, it is apt to say that Hughes's praxis of mythmaking has something utterly novel to it. He approaches mythopoeia through the keyhole of animalism. His animals are not mere shamanic creatures summoned to his magical circle. Rather, they serve as a reminder of the 'wer', the Old English linguistic as well as genetic version of 'man' who is in rapport with the sources of his animalistic creative power. The distorted *wer* or *man* is to be redeemed through the violence of the poetic act as this derives its energy and momentum from the visceral pure animalism. The fox-ness and crow-ness are only two faces of this animalism, among others. It only remains to say that the poet does not dwell on animalism as such, but as a generative principle that might be at the proposal of the new biological type of the poet who goes beyond the myth into the myth of the myth—the meta-myth—when this layers into the genesis of both man and poetry.

Notes

[1]Ezra Pound, *Make It New: Essays by Ezra Pound* (London: Faber & Faber, 1934), passim.

[2]T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, (ed.) Frank Kermode (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), p. 177.

[3]Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 204.

[4]Joanny Moulin, "Ted Hughes's Anti-Mythic Method," in *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons*, (ed.) Joanny Moulin (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 88.

[5]Laurence Coupe, *Myth*, The New Critical Idiom (London and New York. 1997), p. 51.

[6]Frank McConnell, "The Corpse of the Dragon: Notes on Postromantic Fiction," *TriQuarterly* 33 (spring 1975), p. 281.

[7]Michael Sweeting, "Hughes and Shamanism," in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, (ed.) Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 72.

[8]Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of the Complete Being* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 39.

[9]Michael Sweeting, "Patterns of Initiation in the Poetry of Ted Hughes from 1970 to 1980" (Ph. D. Diss., University of Durham, 1982), p. 3.

[10]Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, (ed.) Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber, 2003). All references to Hughes's poetry are to this edition.

[11]Ann Skea, "Poetry and Magic," in Joanny Moulin (ed.), *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 41.

[12]Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 60.

[13]Margaret Stutley, *Shamanism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 122.

[14]Poetry Foundation, *Ted Hughes*, accessed 4 November 2011; available from http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/ted-hughes; Internet.

[15]Christina Pratt, *Encyclopedia of Shamanism*, vol. 2 (N-Z) (New York: The Rosen Publishing Group, Inc., 2007), s. v. "Badb and Bran – Crow and Raven".

[16]Ted Hughes, "A Reply: A Reply to my Critics," *Books and Issues* 1.3-4 (1980), p. 4.

[17]John C. Witte, "Wotan and Ted Hughes's Crow," *Twentieth Century Literature* 26.1 (spring 1980), pp.38 & 39.

[18]David Lodge, quoted in Brian Cox, "Ted Hughes: A Personal Perspective," *The Hudson Review* 52.1 (spring 1999), p. 38.

[19]Keith Sagar, *The Laughter Fox: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p.171.

[20]Jarold Ramsey, "*Grow*, or the Trickster Transformed," in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, (ed.) Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 174.

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فعل الاسطرة المتجاوز لدى تّد هيوز

م. د. عامر رسول مهدي

جامعة بغداد – كلية التربية ابن رشد للعلوم الانسانية

قسم اللغة الانكليزية

خلاصة البحث

ترمي هذه الدراسة الى اعادة طرح مسألة الاسّطرة والخوض فيها بقدر تعلق الامر بشعر تّد هيوز. اذ تعمد الدراسة الى الخوض في الاشتراطات ما بعد الحداثية التي تجعل من فعل الاسطّرة لدى هيوز مغايرا لما سواه لدى الرومانسيين والحداثيين. ان فعل التجاوز لدى الشاعر يتمثل باقحامه لكائناته الادبية بوصف هذه الاخيرة معادلا للعملية الشعرية التي اخذت توسم بطابع الاشتراط ما بعد الحداثي لما وراء الادب.