Ted Hughes's Nature Poetry and the Reconfiguration of the Sublime

La naturaleza en la poesía de Ted Hughes y la reconfiguración de lo sublime

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Resumen

Los animales y la naturaleza ocupan un lugar destacado en la poesía de Ted Hughes, que con frecuencia recrea su lado más salvaje. Hay quien desestima sus versos debido a esa violencia, pero hay también quien propone analizar sus efectos desde una perspectiva estética. En esa línea, este artículo explora las distintas maneras en las que la poesía de Hughes proporciona una experiencia de lo sublime, cuya teorización ha evolucionado en paralelo a la manera de entender nuestra relación con la naturaleza. Christopher Hitt, en particular, propone un modelo de lo "sublime ecológico" que no descarta enteramente el modelo anterior, pero que modifica su carácter antropocéntrico. En el artículo, propongo utilizar la poesía de Hughes para mostrar las posibilidades que ofrece el enfoque de Hitt y este concepto alternativo de lo sublime basado en una experiencia más ecocéntrica de la disrupción y la transcendencia que definen dicha categoría estética.
Palabras clave: Ted Hughes, Christopher Hitt, lo sublime ecológico, poesía de la naturaleza

Abstract

Animals and nature figure prominently in Ted Hughes's poems, which often focus on the savagery of both. Some have dismissed his verse on account of this, while others suggest adopting an aesthetic perspective to consider the range of effects it produces. More specifically, this article explores the ways in which Hughes's poetry affords the reader an

experience of the sublime, a concept that has evolved in parallel with changes in the understanding of our relationship with the natural world. Christopher Hitt, in particular, has reconfigured the traditional version into an "ecological sublime" that rewrites the anthropocentrism of the conventional approach but does not dismiss the old theory entirely. Within this frame, I will use Hughes's nature poetry to illustrate the possibilities of Hitt's model of an "ecological sublime" for literary analysis, focusing on concrete poems and showing different ways in which they enhance an ecocentric experience of sublime disruption and transcendence.

Keywords: Ted Hughes; Christopher Hitt; nature poetry; ecological sublime

1. INTRODUCTION

When he was appointed Poet Laureate, a newspaper headline described Ted Hughes as a "poetic voice of blood and guts" (Skea, online). Animals and nature figure prominently in his poems, which often focus on the savagery of both. Since the publication of his first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), critical responses have been divided regarding his depiction of a natural world of dark forces and violent energies. For some, Hughes goes beyond describing violence, he rather celebrates it, as suggested by Calvin Bedient in his often-quoted description of Hughes as a "voyeur of violence" (107). To others, Hughes is just trying to mirror the world faithfully, without excluding anything, since to him what defines poetry is precisely what culture elides or represses. As Keith Sagar puts it, "[f]or Hughes, the poet cannot see too much or experience too much. He tries [...] to forge a vision which evades as little as possible and which the soul must learn to bear as best it can." (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 33)

These two critics represent a polarised debate that can be redressed by other approaches such as that of Michael Malay, who suggests considering "violence from an aesthetic perspective, rather than a straightforwardly literal one, asking what violent imagery might elicit or provoke at the level of psychological experience" (110-11). In line with this, this article approaches Hughes's fascination with what Tennyson called "nature red in tooth and claw" (Canto 56 of *In Memoriam A. H. H.*) by focusing on the ways in which his poetry affords the reader an experience of the sublime or, more specifically, of the sublime as reformulated by environmental literary critic Christopher Hitt (1999).

There is no denying, Hitt remarks, that the sublime has become the target of criticism. He mentions critics as diverse as (historically-oriented) Laura Doyle and Sara Sulei, (Marxist) Terry Eagleton, and (feminist) Patricia Yaeger, Anne Mellor, and Barbara Claire Freeman in

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order to illustrate his point that "it has been the overwhelming tendency of literary criticism over the past few decades to evaluate the aesthetic of the sublime primarily as an expression of asymmetrical power relationships: between the human and nature, self and other, reader and text, male and female, conqueror and oppressed" (603). Narrowing his focus to criticism emerging from a position of environmental advocacy, he distances himself from the predominant tendency to dismiss the aesthetic of sublimity we have inherited, all the more so since some of the critics that take this stand, as is the case with William Cronon, do concede that the Romantic aesthetic of the sublime still continues to inform our conceptions of the natural world in important respects (Hitt 604). Instead, Hitt proposes exploring the concept of the sublime in order to determine what should be rethought and what can be rescued from its old formulation so that we do not throw the baby out with the bath water. The title of his article —"Toward an Ecological Sublime"— thus announces the nature of his project and his main aim: rewriting the theory of the sublime so that the emerging model becomes more attuned with and relevant to our present-day ecological sensibilities.

Hitt begins by tracing back the notion of the sublime to Longinus, although he soon focuses on two most influential theorists of the sublime: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant.[1] Special attention is paid to the latter as the author of a theory of the sublime that links aesthetics and ethics, and that can therefore be useful when it comes to fostering an environmental ethic. Drawing on Thomas Weiskel's *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), Hitt elaborates on the structure of the sublime experience as mapped out by Kant, which can be seen as consisting of three "phases or economic stages": first, "a normal, essentially pre-sublime stage"; secondly, "a sort of rupture in which a disequilibrium between mind and object is introduced"; and, finally, a reaction to the previous phase, a third stage defined by the fact that "equilibrium is restored [...] by the triumphant emergence of reason", which eventually reveals to us our superiority over nature (608). This trajectory of the sublime in Kant can also be appreciated in nineteenth-century literary representations of sublimity, an assertion Hitt supports with examples from Wordsworth's *Prelude* (1850) and Emerson's *Nature* (1836). Traditionally, then, the sublime experience is depicted as a temporal movement that first diminishes and then aggrandises the subject. And yet, while this calls for a reformulation, it does not invalidate the Kantian sublime as an aesthetic model that can be reoriented and used to the advantage of environmentalism. Nature plays a relevant role in Kant's theory of the sublime and there is in it an element of transcendence, an

[1] Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, published in 1757, and Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (*Kritik der Urteilskraft*, also translated as *Critique of the Power of Judgment*), published in 1790.

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experience of revelation that Hitt sees as worth keeping. However, an ecological sublime should ideally "offer a new kind of transcendence which would resist the traditional reinscription of humankind's supremacy over nature" (609).

Although nature is important in Kant's formulation, he was an Enlightenment philosopher, and his focus was the human subject and the conflicting faculties within human consciousness. In his theory, the subject benefits from the disequilibrium brought about by the second phase of the sublime encounter in that it eventually reveals that reason can encompass what the senses cannot. Nature thus becomes a vehicle for the strengthening of human prowess, an aid to unveiling —in the third and final phase of the sublime experience— the superiority of reason, which becomes the basis of the Kantian moral law. It cannot come as a surprise that it should be the third stage of this sublime experience that Hitt is most critical with, the reactive phase ennobling the rational subject that returns to the centre position after the second, disruptive phase. Consequently, his proposal for an ecological sublime constitutes an attempt to reconfigure the Kantian structure by remaining relatively faithful to its first two stages, while proposing an alternative to the third: one that maintains the revelatory experience of the sublime without making it incompatible with a post-anthropocentric worldview (Hitt 608). Eu Jin Chua makes clear the significance of Hitt's reorientation of Kant's theory when he explains that:

> Instead of focusing on the internal conflict of the faculties, Hitt re-jigs the model so that the sublime becomes primarily about the encounter between the internal and the external, between human beings and non-human nature. Suddenly it is as if the drama of the sublime has been recast with new actors. Whereas previously the main players in Kant's account of the sublime were the human faculties of Imagination and Reason, now the main players are Human Subject and the Non-Human Object. […] In Kant's description of Imagination's rescue by Reason, it was the latter that was named as the transcendent party. Reason, however, no longer plays a role in Hitt's reconfigured version of the sublime. So in Hitt's description of an encounter between Human Subject and Non-Human Object, it is the latter—non-human nature—that is said to be transcendent. (55)

It is my contention that Hitt's project can throw light on certain literary works whose treatment of nature may instantiate his theoretical proposal for an ecological sublime[2]. In what follows, then, I will try to show how Hitt's model provides a perspective from which to approach Hughes's work, where nature and animals are at the centre of a vital, wild and often violent but also awesome poetic world.

[2] Hugh Dunkerley (2017) has seen the possibilities of Hitt's theory, which he considers in an article on Hughes that invites further exploration.

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2. WATCHING VIOLENCE

As Sagar explains, Hughes "watches, and makes us watch [...] violence", but he does so with a view to "estrangement. He wants to undermine our sense of the ordinary" (*The Art of Ted Hughes* 33). This estrangement is central to the sublime, to the experience of rupture that the subject feels in the face of overwhelming, raw and/or brutal natural forces. While nature was often opposed to war in the poetry of the First World War —the conflict that marked the life of Hughes's father and overshadowed his childhood— nature itself was a battlefield to Hughes. Even when nature seems peaceful and harmonious there is a war going on, as he conveys in "To Paint a Water Lily", a poem that does indeed defamiliarise the calm beauty of a flower traditionally associated with innocence and purity. Xoán Abeleira (32) explains that this piece was not among Hughes's favourites, and yet, he always included it in his selected poems because he saw it (together with "Pike") as a turning point in his poetic quest: it does indeed illustrate what would become Hughes's typical way of looking at nature, cold and scrutinising, conductive to a kind of beauty that may seem cruel, even terrifying, but that is truer and definitely more enlightening. What this poem demands is nothing but what many readers and critics welcomed and always admired about Hughes. As Derek Walcott puts it, although some may turn away from Hughes's poetry

> as a girl might from a dead frog [...], it was about time that a language which did not distance itself from nature by botanical pastoral catalogues thrust its vision through a cloud of flies and examined the carcasses with the disturbing casualness, the long, guttural offhand phrases in Hughes's rhythm [...]. But this is not the poetry of our day-to-day lives. These truths are too big and we think they will go away if we concentrate on small, consoling things. So, naturally, we wish Hughes would go away. (177)

In "To Paint a Water Lily" (Hughes, *New Selected Poems*[3] 31-32), the poetic speaker addresses a hypothetical painter and urges him/her not to turn away from the truths that the contemplation of the flower reveals to those that dare to watch and hear. The speaker thus gives advice on how to paint a water lily —an apparently idyllic theme— but also asks the painter to think of what the eye misses as a prerequisite to starting work on the painting. While studying the flower, the attentive ear can hear the insects over the water and under the trees. There are "battle-shouts/ And death-cries everywhere hereabouts" (9-10) as dragonflies are hunting for their next meal and flies are fighting for survival. The poem goes

[3] In what follows, the abbreviation *NSP* will be used to refer to this volume, followed by the page number(s) of each of the poems discussed. When lines are quoted (or paraphrased) from a specific poem, line numbers will be indicated between brackets after the quotation (or paraphrase).

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on to describe the even more truculent bed of the pond, another battlefield full of creatures with Latin names that crawl in the dark waters, "[j]aws for heads, the set stare/ Ignorant of age as of hour" (20). The water lily lives between air and water, and stands still between these two worlds of warfare. They must be part of the picture, too, as they reveal a deeper, though darker, kind of truth. In this light, the lily flower may be seen as the Western equivalent of the lotus in many Eastern cultures (Abeleira 32). With its roots latched in mud, the lotus submerges into river water at night and blooms again in the morning. It is a symbol of death, rebirth, and spiritual enlightenment; of the connection between the light of the rational mind and the darkness of the unconscious, which needs be explored and delved into in order to reach wisdom. Similarly in the poem, the speaker urges the addressee to study "the two minds of this lady" (4), which must be imaginatively apprehended by the painter and conveyed through the painting, as the poem does.

What at first escapes the eye while watching the water lily of the previous poem becomes a formidable force in other poems that depict the overwhelming power of nature and its ability to transform the world into a war-like, threatening place. This is the case with the unabatable storm described in "Wind" (*NSP* 14). As in the previous poem, the estrangement effect operates in "Wind" to show an entirely different aspect of the element, in this case not the beauty and the calm of a gentle breeze, but the godly strength of the wind that Hughes knew so well from stormy days on the Yorkshire moors, where he grew up. The opening line is simple but effective —"This house has been far out at see all night" (1). The house as epitome of what is safe and solid becomes, through metaphoric comparison, a flimsy boat that has barely survived the night, when a sea gale tossed it around for hours as if it was made of paper. The second line continues building the effect of chaos and thundering noise, with hills booming and fields running in stampede until the morning. The start of a new day (5) may suggest the end of the storm, while, in fact, the chaos that follows is almost more intense: a mad eye of green and black shows its terrifying look from above (7-8) and this oddly-coloured daylight reveals that "the hills had new places" (6), each like a tent that "drummed and strained its guyrope" (12). Personification, hyperbaton, enjambment, alliteration and onomatopoeia contribute to picturing the wind's demented onslaught. The poem closes by showing how the wind invades people's minds, just as it has already invaded the landscape, ultimately highlighting in this way the insignificance of man compared to such strength: "Now deep/In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip/Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,/Or each other" (17-20). The speaker and those with him feel as if the wind were about to blast the house itself, and so the poem ends at that climactic moment, with the rage of the wind pressing close and the people paralysed while "[h]earing

the stones cry in the horizons" (24). As La Cassagnère puts it, the text decentres the subject, gradually placing him/her in an ex-centric locus until there is nothing in the end "but a hearing, that of an unthinkable sound" (35). "Wind" affords an experience of the sublime brought about by a cold and powerful nature, an Other that refuses to be tamed and that imposes its voice. The poem builds on the phase of rupture typical of the sublime —the second stage according to the Kantian structure— but the restoration of the subject in a third stage never takes place, leaving us with an uncanny feeling.

Similarly uncanny are many of Hughes's animal poems, like his famous "Hawk Roosting" (*NSP* 29-30). From the previous poem, where a human subject observes and is diminished by the powerful wind, we move here to the disappearance of the subject, as the poetic speaker is the hawk itself —a hawk perching before a hunt, a predator in its true essence, a symbol of violence:

I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads–

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living. (14-19)

In Hughes's poetry, animals are usually presented as superior to men, with their lack of self-consciousness, free from inhibitions and fears, all courage and concentration. Animals are far from rules and social values, they are capable of fully adjusting their lives to their own true nature and that makes for their power and wisdom. In "Hawk Roosting" nature thinks through the hawk and declares its power, precluding any attempt to reinscribe human superiority, or even understanding. As Hughes declared in a 1971 interview:

> The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about the Hawk Roosting, this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist […]. The symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. (qtd. in Bentley 29-30)

The will to live for the hawk is a will to kill. Those that cannot stand the fear and awe of the sublime, unable to stand in front of this pure will that is pure freedom, may feel upset by such violence. But violence as depicted by Hughes is the principle of life in nature and his animals are embodiments of this energy, which modern man has distanced himself from. Even when the animal is caged, as in "The Jaguar" (*NSP* 4-5), its vitality endows it with an

awesome dignity. The jaguar in its zoo cell has more liberty and holds more power than the poetic speaker, a visitor to the zoo who is as mesmerised by the animal as other onlookers, and who soon concludes that "there's no cage to him/ more than to the visionary his cell" (16-17). The jaguar's stride is "wilderness of freedom" (18). The same goes for the hawk (as seen above), the pike ("Pike"), the otter ("An Otter"), the thrush ("Thrushes"), the fox ("The Thought Fox"), the wolf ("A Modest Proposal", "February") and other animals that crowd Hughes's poetry. Natural elements also bear witness to this relentless force and power, being as they are manifestations of that "wilderness of freedom" that Hughes's animals exhibit. In "Thistles" (*NSP* 55), for instance, the plants are angry warriors growing from dead Viking invaders. They "spike the summer air" (2), each of them "a revengeful burst" (4), and when they die, the new plants are "their sons" who appear "[s]tiff with weapons fighting back over the same ground" (11-12). Even when the feeling described is one of love, it is a love that may turn fatal due to its intensity, as in "Emily Brontë" (*NSP* 173). Here Hughes presents the Yorkshire moors as Emily's dangerous beloved in order to recreate a relationship between human and place that draws on Charlotte's well-known reflection on her sister's seeming inability to live away from home:

> Liberty was the breath of Emily's nostrils; without it, she perished. The change from her own home to a school [...] was what she failed in enduring. Her nature proved here too strong for her fortitude. Every morning when she woke, the vision of home and the moors rushed on her, and darkened and saddened the day that lay before her. (qtd. in Barker 236)

Hughes takes this love and longing for the moors one step further in his poem, where the famous Yorkshire writer first welcomes the wind's fierceness and fatal kiss (1-3) and then becomes one with the landscape: it returns her love with such craving that it eventually engulfs and consumes her. Consumption, the real cause of Emily's death, is given a twist here, as if the poem played with the word's etymological roots in *consumere*, Latin from *con* (altogether) plus *sumere* (take up). She is indeed entirely taken up in the poem, caught, filled and absorbed by the landscape. Her death, which resonates like a baby-cry on the moor (12), fuses her with nature and is also a birth.

Such natural forces —incarnated by animals, plants, the landscape, or natural elements like the wind— are the unabated and unabatable breath of the universe. As Walcott explains, nature poetry before Hughes was "a place of contemplation, not terror", but it is precisely because the poetry of Hughes is bright *and* brutal at the same time that it succeeds like no other in bringing us "closer to nature, its complete workings" (179). It also succeeds, I would say, in redefining the human by presenting a natural world that recalls Derrida's

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"divinanimality". The term refers to the "ahuman", to what is situated beyond the category of humanity, but it also designates "the quasi-transcendental referent, the [...] disavowed, tamed and sacrificed foundation of what it founds, namely, the symbolic order, the human order" (Derrida 132). The human has been understood in opposition to its Other, the ahuman, but Derrida's ahuman, his "divinanimality", purportedly collapses the distinction between the animal and the divine. If that against which the human was traditionally defined is reconfigured, then the category of the human must be redefined.

In all the poems discussed so far the human subject is overwhelmed in different ways by forces that produce estrangement, awe and fear. The rupture associated with the sublime experience is recreated, but it is never relieved. In the light of the three-part structure of the sublime as explained above, one could say that the second phase —disequilibrium between mind and object— is prolonged in the poems, made to last and even to stay with the reader beyond the end of the poem, thus erasing the third stage in the traditional configuration of the sublime —that in which equilibrium is regained and the subject reasserts him/herself. In Hughes's poems, by contrast, the human is displaced, diminished, and even obliterated or swallowed by the natural elements, never to be restored to a central position. This is not to be lamented, though, as what Hughes was proposing several decades ago was the decentring of the human subject necessary for the development of an ecological consciousness.

To Hughes, Western civilisation was sick, wounded. As he puts it in his review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution* (1970): "The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost." ("The Environmental Revolution" 130) He saw as his task to save man from the increasing tyranny of materialism and the intellect, which had led, by the time he started his career as a poet, to a belief in progress predicated on the exploitation of nature. To cure the spiritual malady afflicting man, his poetry sought reconnection with the natural world and with the life we share with other creatures. He saw the role of the poet as comparable with that of the shaman, an intermediary between material and spiritual realms. In ancient cultures, the shaman's acquisition of knowledge that can heal himself and the community is predicated on a journey where animals or some natural element act as guides. As Britain's current Poet Laureate explains:

> Hughes aligned himself with the ancient role of the poet. [...] He saw beyond the power to communicate, aiming instead for a kind of "contact", or sensual comprehension, where poem and reader took possession of each other through

> the medium of poetry, or through the poet as medium. And he saw language as one of the least understood powers in the universe, ranking alongside electrical, gravitational, atomic and magnetic energy as a force to be manipulated and controlled. His view of the poet as shaman was one he took seriously, and many of his poems are unembarrassed shamanic flights of fancy into the spirit world, excursions to the "other side", where he might properly inhabit the nature of his subject, be it animal, vegetable or mineral, be it jaguar, snowdrop or rocky crag. (Armitage, online)

In his passage, the shaman penetrates the supernatural, leaves ordinary reality behind, and also his conscious ego, in order to become one with the world. His visionary flight is a mystical-creative experience, and so, in some of his poems Hughes's imaginative efforts result in the recreation of that mystical moment, which is also one of transcendence of the self and fusion with what he called the "elemental power circuit of the universe" (qtd. in Bassnett 33). In line with this, I will deal in what follows with yet another way in which Hughes's poetry invites the reader to see the human and the non-human in terms that depart from the hierarchical binary opposition that underlies Cartesian thought and also the traditional configuration of the sublime. Specially in his river poetry, what does away with the hierarchy, what decentres the subject, is the latter's recognition of nature as an astonishing event that transcends thought and that has much in common with a religious experience. It is precisely this approach to nature, related to the notion of the "wholly other", that Hitt proposes as not only a way of imagining our relationship with the natural world, but also as "the crucial piece of the puzzle in our formulation of an ecological sublime" (613), something with which to replace the third phase of the traditional structure.

3. NATURE AND THE "WHOLLY OTHER"

The concept of the "wholly other" (with its pun on holy) can be traced back to the German theologian and philosopher Rudolf Otto, who proposed it in an attempt to understand the "otherness" of the numinous, the non-rational aspects of the sacred or the holy at the core of religious experience[4]. Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* became well-known in theological and religious studies circles and had a remarkable impact on the work of scholars like Carl Jung, Mircea Eliade and Ninian Smart (see Sarbacker on this). But, as has been the case with the sublime, later critics have also reconfigured the notion of the "wholly other" as a means to approaching man's experience of nature. For instance, in "Man Apart: An Alternative to the Self-Realization Approach" (1989), Peter Reed appeals to Otto's concept in order to rethink

[4] *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* was published in 1917, and translated into English in 1923 as *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational.*

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our conception of nature, stressing the numbness and awe generated by our encounter with nature as a unique event. It is this encounter with nature as "wholly other" that provides in Reed's view an ideal basis for deep ecology.[5] Rather than seeing nature as one with us, he highlights the mystery of nature as Other, which inspires wonder and astonishment, dwarfs us, and reveals to us our relative insignificance. In line with this, the strategy Reeds proposes to overcome the gap between man and nature has less to do with identification than with an experience of it as "wholly other". Regaining respect for nature depends as much on resisting its objectification and exploitation as on preserving its radical alterity and accepting its intrinsic value (Reeds 61-63). This line of argument, shared by other critics like Neil Evernden (1992), is incorporated by Hitt into his discussion of an ecological sublime because he finds in the connection of nature with the "wholly other" something radically different from the Kantian sublime: the notion of the "wholly other" departs from the kind of alienation dealt with by Kant in that it defines nature's "sublimity" as resulting from the fact that it only exists beyond conceptualization. That is, what Hitt sees as relevant here is "the incommensurability between actual 'nature' and that which *logos* would purport to define and contain", in contrast with the Kantian sublime, where the blockage in which the mind fails is temporary and its structure "depends, as a matter of course, on *logos* –on the emergence of what Kant calls 'reason'" (Hitt 614). The traditional sublime both humbles and ennobles the subject, but for a long time after the eighteenth century more emphasis was made on the latter than on the former. The recourse to Otto's "wholly other" as the basis for a third stage of the sublime experience allows Hitt to save the humility, the wonder and awe that are there in the Kantian theory, as well as to reformulate it by placing nature outside the mind of the observer, freeing it from conceptual categories. It is this experience of the holy/wholly other, of what radically escapes reason and language —in sum, of the numinous— that much of Hughes's river poetry illustrates.

Hughes's river poems draw on a lifetime of angling since, apart from writing, his greatest passion was fishing. He pursued this passion throughout his life and rivers, from those in Devon to those in Alaska,[6] inspired many poems, especially those in *River* (1983), which also includes photographs by Peter Keen. Hughes is at his best in the three volumes published between 1979 and 1983 —*Moortown, Remains of Elmet* and *River*— which Sagar (*Ted*

[5] Deep ecology is an environmental philosophy and social movement based in the belief that humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values it solely for its usefulness to human beings to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value. (Madsen, online)

[6] Hughes's son Nicholas moved to Alaska, where he worked as a fisheries biologist and pursued scientific research in the field. He also loved fishing, and father and son went on many a fishing trip together throughout their lives. Hughes visited Alaska with Nicholas in 1980.

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Hughes and Nature xiv) sees as the work for which previous books were a preparation: the poetry of the seventies and early eighties constitutes in this scholar's view the culmination of the poet-shaman's quest, as it definitely links the ecological crisis to the role of the poet and to the myth that stands for all myths, that of the quest. However, it is *River* more than any other, Sagar adds, that best conveys Hughes's quest for a remedy to heal Western man, the one that best contributes to his effort toward "the spiritualization of a fallen world" (xiv). Sagar is not alone in considering this work as Hughes's finest collection (see also West and Scigal), whose publication closely preceded his appointment as Poet Laureate.

Hughes's verse conveys something terrifying about rivers, which is there in *River* but also in earlier poems. In "Earth-Numb" (*NSP* 193), for instance, he writes: "Something terrified and terrifying/ Gleam-surges to and fro through me/ From the river to the sky, from the sky into the river" (23-25). But, though frightening, Hughes's rivers also afford a most powerful experience of reconnection. In an interview with Thomas Pero, he explained that his fascination with rivers and fishing had to do with something else, more than just fish: "It's something to do with the whole world [...], the fascination of flowing water and living things coming up out of it —to grab at you and be grabbed. Throughout the whole of religious tradition, rivers have been gods. Water has been the soul. And water is the ultimate life. [...] Somehow we make that connection" (56). In tune with this, Hughes's river poems revolve around the encounter with nature as "holy", as an astonishing Other that nonetheless runs through the poetic speaker, grabs him, lifts him, and connects him with that which is beyond the subject's ability to understand and put into words[7].

"The Gulkana" (*NSP* 250-55) is perhaps the most eerie of his river poems. In it, the sense of nature's mystifying otherness is recreated and intensified by the poet's ability to conjure up an alien landscape for this Alaskan river. It is so alien that it seems a prehistoric place evoking a primeval awe, and also a primeval fear that invades the poetic speaker from the very first lines. In the language spoken by Alaska's most widespread First Nation group, the Athabaskans, "Gulkana" means "tearing river" (Bright 159). And so the speaker is torn by one inside him, "a bodiless twin", "a doppelgänger other" (57-58) that can be seen as the poet's shamanic self who exultantly recognises the river as his home and grants the speaker access to the rituals of life and death by taking over his consciousness (Roberts 66). The river exerts its power through its "deranging cry" (29), a fearsome voice that possesses the

[7] In the above-mentioned interview, Hughes says to Pero that if he has to speak to somebody after he has been fishing alone, he finds it difficult, he cannot form words: "The words sort of come out backwards, tumbled. It takes time to readjust, as if I'd been into some part of myself that predates language" (56).

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fishermen, and the natives, and the fish. The salmon become sacrificial victims heading toward a certain death that is described in terms of "consummation" (99) and "ecstasy" (120). Like them, the speaker can be said to be "[d]evoured by revelation" (122), and is presented as emerging from his trance as "a spectre" (125) that has lost and found himself at the same time. He is welcomed by the enigmatic face of a native that smiles at his standing dumb (147-48), overcome by what has happened, as man's experience of the holy can be revived but never comprehended.

In "Go Fishing" (*NSP* 255-56), the poetic speaker invites the addressee/the reader to experience communion with nature and with the depths of his/her own being. Then, lost in the river, among the fish, s/he will feel words recede and the rational intellect cease:

Join water, wade in underbeing
Let brain mist into moist earth
Ghost loosen away downstream
Gulp river and gravity

Lose words
Cease (1-6)

In this poem, neither personal pronouns nor punctuation marks are used in order to better describe a process in which the subject divests him/herself of the ego, dissolves into nature and is reborn as a new being that emerges from the experience feeling, once again, humbled and ghostly. Human centrality and the sense of control conferred by language are replaced, to use Yvonne Reddick's words, by a powerful sense of "ecological interconnection" (224), as is also illustrated by "That Morning".

"That Morning" (*NSP* 265-66) similarly resorts to river symbolism and unfolds in almost the same way. Deep-waist in a river, the poetic speaker feels his body "[s]eparated, golden and imperishable,/from its doubting thought" (10-11). Soon the men are progressively lifted "toward some dazzle of blessing" (15) by throngs of salmon that act as "a spirit-beacon" (11). Fishing is presented here as a dramatization of a profound mystical experience. The light that inundates the scene as the poem advances stands for the harmony of body and spirit, human and animal, man and world: the sacral multidimensionality of nature. It is by merging with this whole that transcendence is reached by the poetic speaker, who tells about him and his companion: "So we found the end of our journey./ So we stood, alive in the river of light,/ Among the creatures of light, creatures of light" (28-30)[8]. And so the poem

[8] These lines are engraved onto Hughes's memorial stone in the Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.

ends, suspended in the sublimity of nature, in the radiance and the mystery of the "wholly other". The alliteration of sibilant, liquid and nasal sounds rounds off the effect and ultimately produces a feeling of softness, fluidity, and fusion that contributes to portraying the subject as astonished in the alterity of what paradoxically makes him feel part of a greater whole.

This unmediated experience of nature could be described in terms of entanglement, which Nowak-McNeice situates on the spectrum of possible human–non-human relations, and in opposition to classic humanist criteria that define the subject as distinct from other categories. As she puts it, it is the rejection of traditional anthropocentric positions that allows us to see the human and the non-human in the light of "proximity, contiguity and, ultimately, entanglement" (4). The subject's loss of ego in the three river poems discussed above —evoked in more radiant or more sinister terms— makes for the weaving of a poetic web of life where distance is precisely replaced by proximity, contiguity, and entanglement. Even the reader is directly addressed, in "Go Fishing", and asked to join the river and let him/herself get "[s]upplanted by mud and weed and pebbles" (10), "[d]issolved in earth-wave" (16), "[d]ismembered in sun-melt" (17), etc. This experience of closeness and entanglement in Hughes's river poems —which evokes a whole range of things, from the flow state of positive psychology to the dismemberment that precedes healing in the shamanic journey— does not devoid nature of its sacredness, nor does it reduce its grandiosity or its power to induce fear. Sagar is right, though, when he says that "such innegotiable realities as stone and blood, the inevitability of suffering and death" do not have in Hughes's later poetry the terrifying quality they have in previous poems (*Ted Hughes and Nature* 263). They do not seem oppressive and alienating, as in "Wind" and "Pibroch", for instance; they are rather recognised and translated into a language of the spirit, of the sacred, which is religious in the way poetry is religious for Hughes —at the opposite pole of organised religions. This modulation, I would say, is in tune with the experience of nature as "wholly other", which Hitt makes a key part of his proposal for an ecological sublime.

4. CONCLUSION

There is an ominous tone in Hughes's assertion that when something abandons (or is abandoned by) Nature one should see it as "an evolutionary dead-end" ("The Environmental Revolution" 129). The same sense of urgency is conveyed by his claim that "[t]he lost life must be captured dead-end" ("The Environmental Revolution" 129). The need to recover this "lost life" constitutes one of the main reasons for reconsidering the sublime, since, as

Hitt argues, "in an age of exploitation, commodification, and domination we need awe, envelopment, and transcendence." In other words, now more than ever it is crucial to be confronted with the wild otherness of nature and, at least occasionally, "to be astonished, enchanted, humbled by it" (620). Hitt's reconfiguration of the traditional model of the sublime maintains the disruption caused by something that surpasses and dwarfs the human, but then eschews the reinscription of the subject at the centre of the sublime experience. There is no reactive phase where control is regained, but rather an approach to nature as "wholly other". Hughes's poems illustrate well the consequences of this move, as they build upon a confrontation between the human and the non-human that may be disruptive, painful, frightening, but that is also transformative. The exposure to the unexplainable, indomitable, often violent forces at the core of his poetry serves a function, which is that of reconnecting us with the natural world in a way that subverts anthopocentrism and encourages a deeply ecocentric mindset.

Hughes's verse is informed by his belief that, to heal, we have to loose our grip on the world and the self. Only in that way we will be reawakened, woven into the fabric of life in a process where transcendence comes, as in Hitt's model of the sublime, from nature. The intellect becomes ineffectual as the subject plunges into the materiality of the natural world, which is what affords us transcendent moments. And because that reconnection does not deprive nature of its (wholly) otherness, but is rather grounded on it, the response elicited from the subject is one of humbleness and concern for the Other in all its manifestations, which ultimately reveals the ethical dimension of a far from outmoded aesthetic category. In Hughes's poems a powerful sense of the sublime persists, an ecological sublime that stops us from trying to rationalise or objectify nature, that enlivens our respect for it/for the Other, and that immerses us in feelings that range from terror to exhilaration and wonder[9].

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