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Ted Hughes and the Poetry of the Four Seasons

“Poetry is the voice of spirit and imagination and all that is potential, as well as of the healing benevolence that used to be the privilege of the gods” (Ted Hughes). These words were declared by the poet whom Marjorie Perloff described once as “a British poet of nature in the raw, of primitivism, pessimism, and natural destruction.”¹ In what follows I shall discuss some rather mild (which rhymes with ‘wild’) pieces of Hughes’s poetic excerpts (from the volume *Season Songs*), the ones which have been exempt from “horrid imagination” and far from the “terror and fascination at the brutality of nature.” My attempt will be to show and focus on the change of the image of Nature/nature that occurred in the transition from Romanticism to (post)romantic times in which nature is seen as less mysterious, enigmatic and sublime and more in terms of the brutal natural environment that man wishes to subdue in order to submit it to himself. As Ehor Bayanowsky puts it, Hughes’s poetry is “not a pure ghost story” that it seems to typify, but a presentation of the view “that nature is neither completely knowable nor completely sinister.”² Hence the choice of two contrasting poetic examples, of the Romantic William Wordsworth (but also William Blake, or later on Thomas Hardy) and the modernist Hughes, the latter seemingly obsessed with Wordsworthian images which he attempts to distort in his surrealistic visions of the world. Hughes, contrary to Wordsworth and other Romantics, holds a more “ecological” approach to nature, “a renewed respect for the mysteries of nature combined with empirical evidence of how our commercial

¹ Marjorie Perloff, *Ted Hughes 1930*, accessed 23 November 2012, <http://www.enotes.com/ted-hughes-criticism/hughes-ted-vol-2/hughes-ted-1930>.

² Ehor Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts; in the Wild with Ted Hughes* (Vancouver, Toronto, Berkeley: Douglas & McIntyre, 2010), Kindle edition, p. 39.

practices [...] are destroying the natural healing qualities of the earth.”³ To adduce Perloff’s words again, Hughes’s poetry is described as lacking in Romantic epiphanies and sublime ecstasies in favour of visions of animalistic brutalities which help man preserve a kind of natural balance in the world: “No romantic flights for English Poet Ted Hughes. Let others waft upward in attenuated dawns and high-blown rhetoric. Hughes stays below, foraging over a gritty landscape, battening onto whatever is starkly elemental. For him, poetry is ‘the record of how the forces of the universe try to redress some balance disturbed by man.’”⁴ How different is Hughes’s thistle as “a grasped fistful of splintered weapons” (an example provided by Perloff), a kind of military image of natural “grim beauty” if compared for instance with Blake’s thistle-old man image which becomes a creative enactment of the progression and metamorphosis of life presented as a figment of the poet’s imagination. In fact, the old man in the poet’s imagination looks like a “bush wrinkling actually into flesh,” as Jack Lindsay justly remarks, “which leaves patching the mind with dirty cloths.”⁵ Unlike Hughes, Blake has always seen life as a re-creation, a gesture of “change, chance, intention, disintegration, and rebirth which for ever precipitates the universe anew, the dynamic symbol of form.”⁶ In fact, the natural thistle has been symbolic of the “absolute Thistle” in Blake’s mythological act of the world’s (man’s) creation with death as a gate to a new life via imagination. Hughes’s imagery, on the contrary, is more a fruit of his own experience of the world which has been “for the first time, as though he, its first experiencer, were its first poet [...]. Therefore his myths do not ordinarily invoke old names from vanished pantheons, but reveal intrinsic patterns of actions, of realization, which the old myths, too, expressed.”⁷

In *Season Songs* Hughes did not show “the healing benevolence” of nature, but its rather “savage” side, different from the epiphanies of the sublime often sensed in the poetry of the Lake Poets. Hughes, contrary to the Romantics, was groping around “in the wild” and the response to his poems has always been such that the “listener [has been] thrilled to be privy to the creative process.”⁸ While Wordsworth sanctifies Nature, creating a “host of golden daffodils” to make it a “host”

³ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, p. 122.

⁴ Marjorie Perloff, *Poetry Chronicle*, pp. 97–131, accessed 23 November 2012, <http://www.enotes.com/ted-hughes-criticism/hughes-ted-vol-2/hughes-ted-1930>.

⁵ Jack Lindsay, *William Blake: Creative Will and the Poetic Image* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), p. 6.

⁶ Lindsay, *William Blake: Creative Will*, p. 7.

⁷ Perloff, *Poetry Chronicle*.

⁸ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, p. 8.

of angels dancing in the air, Hughes walks in the garden to watch, in the “rain-drenched wilderness newly planted flowers and bushes, late-blooming rhododendrons and hydrangeas and magnolias in honour of Thea and Sam’s impending nuptials.”⁹ Wordsworth’s is the language of metaphor, Hughes’s is the “story in the wild,” the “experience of actual wilderness [...], a wilderness idyll or a nightmare fraught with anxiety and peril.”¹⁰ In Robert Frost’s famous essay “Education by Poetry,” poetic language is shown as synonymous with the language of metaphor as it gives access to “metaphorical thought, its operations and dynamic.”¹¹ Frost demonstrates that language is organic, one of lived experience since “poets inevitably create patterns in language that replicate forms of experience.”¹² Another point which is also crucial in the debate on poetic language is that it is “intimately connected to natural objects,” as “poets always seek inspiration in nature,”¹³ sending us back to the natural world, which is otherwise threatened by all global phenomena that are inimical to poetic art. While for Hughes poetry is the voice of “spirit and imagination” in the wilderness, for Jay Parini poetry is a “form of religious thought”¹⁴ as it inquires into some fundamental matters which demand the reader’s reflection and response. Poetry not only gives us “spiritual direction” but also helps us move through the world, provides inspiration, teaches man how to live and shape his “power of taste.” The poet is one who lives in communion with Nature and can express, by way of Imagination, “the things unknown” which his pen “turns into shapes to give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name.”¹⁵ In *Season Songs*, Hughes’s language becomes less and less metaphorical and more anchored in the “wilderness settings” which he finds healing and psychotherapeutic, as he himself admits.¹⁶ It is the “season songs” which make Hughes’s language reverberate with the sounds of milder tones and expressions less “animalistic” in imagery than in other poems, some of which strike the reader with their brutality, horror and aggressive surrealism.

Divided into four parts, the chronology of the *Season Songs* collection, imitates the sequence of the seasons of the year and, as such, can be

⁹ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, p. 165.

¹⁰ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, pp. 11 and 19.

¹¹ Robert Frost, “Education by Poetry,” accessed 16 March 2013, <http://www.en.utexas.edu/amlit/amlitprivate/scans/edbypo.html>.

¹² Frost, “Education by Poetry.”

¹³ Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. XIV.

¹⁴ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, p. XIV.

¹⁵ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, act V, sc. 1.

¹⁶ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, pp. 182–183.

reminiscent of musical works that have been recorded in musical history: *The Four Seasons* by Antonio Vivaldi, *Die Jahreszeiten* by Joseph Haydn and also *The Seasons* by the Scottish poet James Thomson (1700–1748). It was in Thomson's poems that Haydn (one of the most prominent Austrian classic composers) found inspiration to compose his monumental oratorio about the seasons. But Hughes's poems differ from those written in the times of the classical Enlightenment; they conduct the reader into modernist times and the life of the 20th century in which classical principles of harmony are no longer relevant to modernist modes of expression. If one recalls Wordsworth's homage to the "host of golden daffodils," a sanctified vision of Nature worshipped in tranquility and Hughes's parodying of such a vision later on in his daffodils poem, one can be struck by the difference of poetic approaches. Hughes sees the flowers in a military way, but also anthropomorphic and ceremonial:

plumes, blades, creases, Guardsmen
 At attention
 Like sentinels at the tomb of a great queen.... ("Spring Nature Notes")¹⁷

The poet finds the natural images more realistic, more anchored in the contemporary world in which nature appears less friendly (perhaps even more aggressive, often zoomorphic, brutal and ominous) to man who contributes to a brutal destruction of it. In Hughes, nature guards her resources against man's attempts to penetrate them, to explore them and submit them to his own use. Hughes's reader does not enjoy the silence of nature, as did the reader of James Thomson's poems, who contemplated the beauty of the changing seasons in tranquility; Hughes's reader is disturbed by creaking voices, buzzing sounds that "thrill[ed] to the core" ("Spring Nature Notes," part 6) and the world's turmoil. Even if presented in winter, Nature is celebrated with respect and shown with her parental generosity, care, profoundness, and silent dignity:

Nature! great parent! whose unceasing hand
 Rolls round the seasons of the changeful year,
 How mighty, how majestic are thy works!
 With what a pleasing dread they swell the soul,
 That sees astonish'd, and astonish'd sings!
 Ye too, ye winds! that now begin to blow
 With boisterous sweep, I raise my voice to you.

¹⁷ Hughes, *Season Songs*, p. 21.

Where are your stores, ye powerful beings! say,
 Where your aerial magazines reserv'd,
 To swell the brooding terrors of the storm?
 In what far-distant region of the sky,
 Hush'd in deep silence, sleep you when 'tis calm?¹⁸

Thomson's attitude to nature is similar to that of Wordsworth's, both poets being observers of Nature in the state of blessed felicity, worshipers who experience the sense of the mysterious that sanctifies them and allows them to contemplate "a mystical quality" via symbol.¹⁹ For Wordsworth, Nature has always been "a garment of God," a symbol that bears a mysterious meaning and allows for the "mystical encounter" with the divine.²⁰ The reception of the romantic poetry of nature and its interpretation is a consequence of the community between the poet and Nature similar to an ideal symbiosis between poetry and its reader, which Paul Ricoeur thus describes: "[...] never in fact does the interpreter get near to what his text says unless he lives in the *aura* of the meaning he is inquiring after."²¹ Such an attitude reflects a participative or creative involvement of Romantic poets in the life of things, their response to the challenge of Nature and their reading "into the workings of external nature the features of the very mind which they possess within themselves. As a result of this, nature is thought by the Romantics to be something akin to the universal mind of God (of which the poet's and, by extension, every human being's mind is the analogue)."²² Wordsworth's and, later on, Thomas Hardy's poetic auras are symbolic, but Hughes's, articulated decades later, is no longer; his is a more physical, realistic, and surrealistic vision of nature, one that exceeds the physical and natural world and transports the reader into a linguistic meaning and existence.

Hughes's approach is rarely that of a "mystical encounter" with Nature which, as Eugenio Trias puts it, is a "symbolic event"; Hughes's are secular (existential) experiences, ones that have been faced by the "buffered self," the self that is no longer emotionally involved in the world of natural

¹⁸ James Thomson, *The Seasons*, "Winter," accessed 19 March 2013, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/174673>.

¹⁹ Eugenio Trias, "Thinking of Religion, Symbol and Sacrum," in: *Religion, Cultural Memory in the Present*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 73.

²⁰ Trias, "Thinking of Religion," p. 73.

²¹ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1967), p. 351.

²² Richard L.W. Clarke, "Romantic Poetics: the Romantic Revolution" (a lecture), accessed 19 March 2013, <http://www.rlwclarke.net/Courses/LITS2002/2001-2002/LN01D RomanticPoetics.htm>.

beauty because living in “the disenchanting world,” the natural world after it had lost all that made it “porous, vulnerable and open.”²³ The new self that faces the natural world is of the “disengaged subjectivity,” more bound by time, affected by, as it were, the “malaise of immanence,” the latter so alien to Wordsworth who was a worshipper of Nature and whose sight has never been blinded by the “eclipse of transcendence.”²⁴ Hughes’s is the vision shaped to a greater extent by the quotidian and the wild in which he still finds the remains of the “mystical dust” (Trias). The 20th-century poet tries to find the way out for his dis-alienation by a recovery of contact with the “sublime” but he finds it in the natural reality no matter how brutal, destructive and aggressive. Thus, Hughes’s poem “Evening Thrush,” despite the fact that it celebrates the summer time (part “Summer” of his *Season Songs*), remains still miserable, compared with Thomas Hardy’s joyful but almost mystical poem “The Darkling Thrush.” Hughes’s thrush unlike Hardy’s bird which allows man to share its “blessed Hope” even if unaware of it is stranger, “flame-naked,” limping over cobbles, “hurling javelins of dew,” and “cool-eyed” “with his sword through his throat, the thrush of clay” that “goes on arguing / Over the graves.” Hardy’s “darkling thrush” is a bird (creature) that sings “a full-hearted evensong / Of joy illimited, frail, gaunt and small” and “flings his soul / Upon the growing gloom.”²⁵ “The Darkling Thrush” is free, only sheltered among the trees of the coppice from behind of which his hymns are heard. Hughes’s “Evening Thrush,” “humped, voiceless, turdus, imprisoned as a long-distance lorry-driver,” looks like “dazed with the pop” and greedy of “worms and wife and kids.” The latter bird, though a figment of the poet’s imagination, seems to be struck by the monstrosity of nature and, like a human being, is scarred by some “existential fragility” or inflicted by the “malaise of civilization” (Taylor). The “evening thrush” seeks the “ways of filling the lack” of his lost (or abandoned) shelter in Nature (which Hardy’s bird so much enjoys), “encaged” somewhere on the motorway like a lorry-driver who yearns to find its place back in the natural order (universe). Hughes finds in the thrush (metaphor) the “buffered self,” disciplined, tense, more powerful but alienated, one without the sense of beauty, depth, and feeling, as was the self of a Romantic Wordsworth, Hardy or Hopkins. The “self steeped and pashed” (cf. Hopkins’s famous sonnet “The Windhover”), immersed in “nature [that is] never spent” gives way to the modernist

²³ Charles Taylor, “Introduction,” in: *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 2–6.

²⁴ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, pp. 304, 309.

²⁵ Thomas Hardy, *55 wierszy*, trans. Stanisław Barańczak, bilingual edition (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Znak, 1993), p. 44.

poet's "fragile sense of self-worth" that rarely looks "beyond one's narrow self-interest."²⁶

Hughes laments the destruction of nature executed by man and, consequently, the loss of the world of meaning, which reminds us of Hopkins's mourning over the "Goldengrove unleaving" in his poem "Spring and Fall." In Victorian times the industrial revolution exercised a pernicious destruction on the natural environment, which Hopkins lamented in a number of poems. A girl, Margaret, is grieving "over Goldengrove unleaving," missing the glorious past when the world was "charged with the grandeur of God" and the natural world abounded in "freshness deep down things" (sonnet "God's Grandeur"). In Hughes's more mature "Spring Nature Notes," unlike in Hopkins's elegiac but still innocent "Spring and Fall," there is no time to grieve over the past season, because man must hurry to hail the new time of change "that thunders down in brilliant silence" to celebrate the natural re-birth: crocuses, "buds bursting in tatters / Like firework stubs," buzzing flies and "hares hobbling on their square wheels." Everything Hughes discerns in the (re)-generated nature is different from what the Romantics had seen before him; his visions have been, as it were, "contaminated" by the progression of the brutal world in which man serves as a "guardsman" of nature, which ceased to be a generous Mother-Nature (as in Romanticism) bestowing her gifts on man. The shift of focus is from the poet who was once a worshipper of Nature (as Wordsworth) to the one who is her consumer, from the creator to the mourner over what passed away and is no longer celebrated as her beauty, from the one who sang from imagination and spirit to the one who encounters the natural degeneration. The modernist poet's autumnal elegies (Hughes's "The Seven Sorrows") are the ones about the "brown poppy heads," the "stalk of a lily," "the catacombs / Of the dragonfly," which were once joys with fullness and profusion of the garden and remain only "the good-bye / Of the face with its wrinkles that looks through the window as the year packs up" (from "The Seven Sorrows"). What the romantics regard as the fullness of life, modernist poets see as its twilight, the advent of man's old age which is awaited in a rather passive repose, the state so aptly described by Shakespeare (Hughes was a great aficionado of Shakespeare and his ardent reader): the old man in his pantaloons sits back and contemplates, sans teeth, whistling, loses his former charm, both physical and mental, and is brutally exposed to joking. Interestingly, Hughes's number of "sorrows" is the same as Shakespeare's seven stages of man's life ending up with stillness and the solitude of twilight. Number "seven" can also

²⁶ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, pp. 49, 91 and 121.

indicate the medieval symbolism of seven deadly sins which harkens back to the imagery of *Everyman*.

Hughes's play with or indulgence in the seasons is far from the *jubilare Deo* the Romantic poets celebrated in their hymns to Nature and the sublime. The Modernist poet "sees all his hopes bustling" despite the fact that he attempts to still enjoy nature in her "real" shape and sources; in Hughes's words:

Now the river is rich, collecting shawls and minerals.
Rain brought fatness, but she takes ninety-nine percent
Leaving the fields just one percent to survive on.... ("The River
in March")

The image is almost genuine, a piece of landscape with the river filled with the rainfall water and even the arithmetic of fields flooded with it is described very precisely to make it reverberate with sounds and let it look realistic. Also the jumps of the glittering salmon, "a sow of solid silver" which "bulges to glimpse it" are alive to make an impression of a living organism, far from the imaginative blurring typical of the sublime poetics. The river (as in the poem "The River in March") has no "soul" and no "majesty," as is the case of the mysterious and silent Thames in Wordsworth's poem "Upon Westminster Bridge." It does not "glide at his [the poet's] own sweet will," is not so soporific as the Thames but "rich" and sonorous ("her voice is low"), changing her moods and wealth (now rich and another time poor) according to the chronology of the seasons (of the year). It bears anthropomorphic (almost female) features and when the "brassy sun gives her a headache," "she shivers" (the erotic undertones are also meaningful at this point). The river in Hughes's poem is anonymous, "traveling among the villages incognito," whispering, "viewing her lands" in silence, while the romantic river (the Thames in Wordsworth) is identified by its name and so is the bridge under which it flows.

Hughes's season songs are held more in the key of baroque music (which inspired modernist music) of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* than Haydn's oratorio *Die Jahreszeiten* with harmony and traditional counterpoint of consonance so characteristic for the latter. Though deprived of Vivaldi's pastoral and rustic background typical of baroque iconography, Hughes's is the music/songs of arbor with the "birds bustling their voices / Squibby-damp, echoless, but not daunted / Out in the nodding, dripping, flickering, blue garden" ("He Gets up in the Dark Dawn") and a swallow that "snips the string that holds the world in..." ("April Birthday"). Elsewhere, in "Autumn Nature Notes," the almost *pizzicato* effects of the goldfinch's

“chitterings, and a tremor of wings, and trillings” become parts of the poetic *divertimenti* whose music recalls baroque violin concertos. Vivaldi’s winter sonnets, correspondent with the fourth part of *Le Quattro Stagione*, can bring to mind Hughes’s winter songs, though a soft and delicate sound of Italian music can hardly harmonize with more severe in looks, and perhaps more grave in tones, Yorkshire dales in “near darkness” and “frost close to Christmas.” In his “Winter” sonnet, which was written to illustrate the music of the season, Vivaldi seems to listen to the sounds of winter: “Walking on ice, and moving cautiously, with slow steps, for fear of falling, spinning around, slipping, falling down, again walking on ice and running fast until the ice cracks and splits; hearing Sirocco, Boreas, and all the winds at war burst forth from the bolted doors – this is winter, but it also brings joy!”²⁷ In Hughes’s “Winter,” nature remains silent as it goes to sleep and all is sheltered in the closed warmed space, in fear of “the Cold” outdoors:

Freezing dusk is closing [...]
 And the badger in its bedding
 Like a loaf in the oven.
 And the butterfly in its mummy
 Like a viol in its case.
 And the owl in its feathers
 Like a doll in its lace

The baroque in Hughes’s poem is marked only by the surplus, the bounty world of nature’s offerings, the collection of things the poet finds around to show the fullness and richness of nature indifferent, as it were, to the decline and degeneration of the outside life. It is also Hughes’s fascination with “a wild civility” (cf. Robert Herrick’s poem “Delight in Disorder”) of nature by which he is more “bewitched” than by classical “art [which] is too precise in every part,” too rigid in principles, as for instance Haydn’s music, which was composed in homage to all rules of counterpoint and harmony.

Last but not least, Hughes’s voice of (natural) “spirit and imagination” is also heard as the cry of a fisherman and an angler, the theme of angling being ubiquitous in his poetry, including *Season Songs*. Starting from *Spring’s* “River in March” through the *Summer’s* “Mackerel Song” and *Autumn’s* “Seven Sorrows,” the melody of season songs dies out in *Winter’s*

²⁷ The comment by Vivaldi himself found in: Aaron Green, “Antonio Vivaldi’s Four Seasons: Notes, Historical Information, and Sonnets,” accessed 23 November 2012, http://classicalmusic.about.com/od/baroqueperiod/ss/fourseasons_5.htm.

“December River” with such miserable images as the “lobster-claw grab” and “dead salmon.” That Hughes had been a poet and a fisherman has often met with a smile but the metaphor of fishing has been ubiquitous in his writings and relevant to describe the poet’s creative capturing and gathering. As we learn from numerous recollections about him, among others those published in English newspapers after the poet had passed away, he had been fishing for nearly forty years and his favourite rivers were the Taw and the Torridge.²⁸ His experience in fishing trout, salmon and pike had been so rich that it appears evident why we find in his poems every single nuance concerning the structure of fish and the details about their appearance and the way they behave in various circumstances. In *Spring’s* “Icecrust and Snowflake,” the poet shows the salmon which is “weightless / In the flag of depth / Green as engine oil” and looks with “its eager eye.” In *Summer’s* part, “Mackerel Song” is sung about the fish’s armour, swagger, fury, acquaintance and, finally, demise, and the poem is to show the way of the fish from the organic food to its culinary end, the cooked fish to be eaten. All descriptions of the stages of fishing and catching correspond well with man’s physiological responses to the view of fish as a natural animal and a culinary temptation; in the poems we find such sensations as hunger, (in)satiation, a final catch, the taste of fish and the pleasure of fishing itself. Summer is made rich by the very activity of fishing, “a million times richer / with the gift of his millions” but the December river mortifies the fish which is shown by the example of the “dead salmon” that the poet can hardly bear looking at when he sees it thrown out with “backwater mill rubbish.”

Fishing is an art of recreation, as Izaak Walton wrote in his baroque essay *The Compleat Angler* (1653), in which he shows his interest in the various kinds of fish that he angled. In his rich ichtiological collection one finds salmon, trout, minnow, pike and many others, their locations, habits, and the way one can bait and catch them. Like Hughes three centuries later, Walton describes his fishing passion in a straightforward way. Though narrated in the language of prose, the descriptions are almost poetic and show all the nuances of angling and the pleasure derived from it. Angling, in Walton’s view, is an art which can be compared with poetry, the philosophy he launches through the words of one of the protagonists, Piscator (an angler), who thus teaches Venator (a hunter): “He that hopes to be a good Angler must not only bring an inquiring, searching, observing wit; but he must bring a large measure of hope and

²⁸ Annalisa Barbieri, “Remembering Ted Hughes: the fisherman,” *The Independent*, accessed 23 Nov. 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/sport/general/remembering-ted-hughes-the-fisherman-739790.html>.

patience, and a love and propensity to the Art itself; but having once got and practis'd it, then doubt not but what Angling will prove to be so pleasant, that it will prove to be like Virtue, a reward to itself.”²⁹ The poet as an angler knows well how to inquire into the “secrets of nature;” both are patient and alert in watching the species to be able to enjoy their catch in due time. Hughes’s poetic descriptions of fish prove as well that the poet takes pleasure in an alert watching of natural beings to be able to transform them into art in his creative imagination that “refreshes the spirit.” His poetic images of fish can be as “healing” as those of Venator’s at the end of Walton’s essay: “So when I would beget content, and increase confidence in the Power, and Wisdom, and Providence of Almighty God, I will walk the Meadows by some gliding Stream, and there contemplate the Lillies [sic] that take no care, and those very many other various little living creatures that are not only created but fed (man knows not how) by the goodness of the God of Nature, and therefore trust in him.”³⁰ For the poet, fishing is not only a sport and recreation but, over and above all, a “spiritual” regeneration, not in the sense of the return to belief but a recollection of England’s pristine natural beauty which has been contaminated by past generations, the idea addressed in Hopkins’s famous poem (cf. “God’s Grandeur”):

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

Yet, poetry is the voice of “spirit and imagination” (Hughes) except that this voice is often shunned and drowned out by the clamour of the contemporary world in which it can hardly be heard and followed. Walton, like Hughes, draws abundantly from nature to show that it is the “living organism” that bounds in excess; Hughes, however, shows that the poet can “waken us to reality [which] inheres in the language” and that the poet cannot “ignore the world around” but read it and “respond to it viscerally.”³¹ His language of poetry consists of his “private vocabulary,” his own “way of moving through the world,” as is the case of each poet fully conscious of his “emotional and intellectual possibilities.”³²

²⁹ Izaak Walton, *The Compleat Angler*, Project Gutenberg, accessed 24 November 2012, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/683/pg683.txt>.

³⁰ Walton, *The Compleat Angler*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/683/pg683.txt>.

³¹ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, p. XIII.

³² Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, p. XV.

Coda

Can there be a better tribute to the poet(s) than the one paid by Seamus Heaney when he stood over Hughes's grave at the latter's funeral in 1998? The poet of nature (and Nature, too, because dedicated to "the voice of spirit and imagination") was farewelled by another poet of nature/ Nature, the Irish bard, whose words of *adieu* sounded as the most moving epitaphium: "No death outside my immediate family has left me feeling more bereft. No death in my lifetime has hurt poets more. He was a tower of tenderness and strength, a great arch under which the least of poetry's children could enter and feel secure. His creative powers were, as Shakespeare said, still crescent. By his death, the veil of poetry is rent and the walls of learning broken."³³ It seems as if nature hibernated with the poet's death which marked the end of all seasons without any possibility of regeneration. The words have been adduced by Ehor Boyanowsky in his book on Hughes written in 2010 to show not only how tight the "umbilical core" has always been between the poets (the Romantic and post-Romantic) but also how delicate and "tender" the poetic gossamer has been, "rent" only by the death of one poet or the other. Hughes has been portrayed as a tower (to climb to see more from the top) and an arch (to pass under to find shelter and security), the collapse of which has been a "sorrow (of autumn)." As George Steiner writes in his seminal work *Language and Silence*, the power of the Word (and Nature) degenerated into silence. Language (like Nature) undergoes the stages of birth, re-birth and decline to finally collapse into the "suicidal rhetoric of silence." Steiner's recourse to Zbigniew Herbert's poem "Marsyas and Apollo" is not fortuitous in his essay as it best illustrates the falling of Language into silence (much as the degeneration of Nature into its destructive state has been shown in Hughes); from a howling cry of Marsyas (a symbol of the Romantic poet, in fact the pipe-player) there can one day emerge a new kind of art, "concrete" (symbolized by the ignorant attitude of Apollo, a god of beauty and a lyre-player, towards Marsyas flayed off and suffering when defeated in the contest with Apollo).³⁴ A new art is born from the cruelty committed on nature, the "brilliant luminosity of Apollonian high glamour"³⁵ emerges from nature's "chthonian bosom," as Camille Paglia puts it. Nature, that "seething excess of being" gives birth to a new kind of art which would begin "by rendering [...] 'quiddity' [Hopkins,

³³ Boyanowsky, *Savage Gods*, p. 195.

³⁴ George Steiner, *Language and Silence, Essays on Language, Literature, and the Inhuman* (New York: Atheneum, 1967), pp. 36–54.

³⁵ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae. Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), p. 15.

Hughes] in terms of not abstractions but of concrete particulars.”³⁶ Hughes’s “nature poems” have been addressed as “extremist art,” the one whose concern is with “non-human behavior or ‘manners’” and therefore “almost totally lacking in Romantic nature poetry”³⁷; but his art has been allied with the Romantics by the poetic voice which has been universal due to its vibrating with “spirit and imagination.”

³⁶ Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry. Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982), p. 243.

³⁷ Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry*, p. 282.

Ewa Borkowska

Ted Hughes i poezja czterech pór roku

Streszczenie

Artykuł *Ted Hughes i poezja czterech pór roku* jest próbą ukazania poety natury, związanego z najbardziej pierwotnym obrazem przyrody, który ukazany zostaje przez poezję w sposób fizyczny, lecz również metaforyczny. Hughes jest poetą „dzikiej natury” i wszystkich jej symptomów. Szczególnie w tomie *Cztery pory roku* poeta stara się zaprowadzić czytelnika na łono dzikiej przyrody, by pokazać „doświadczenie z rzeczywistą dzikością”. Zestawienie tej poezji z muzyką *La Quarto Stagioni* Antonio Vivaldiego oraz poetyckiej wizji pór roku Jamesa Thomsona pokazuje, że Hughes jest malarzem modernizmu bardziej niż pozostali artyści, barokowy Vivaldi i romantyczny Thomson. Hughes potrafi obudzić to, co rzeczywiste w przyrodzie, ale i w języku, ukazać, że język poetycki może wydobyć to, co przenika wewnątrz człowieka, sięga do najgłębszych stanów emocjonalnych, lecz również pobudza wyobraźnię i wszelkie możliwości emocjonalne odbiorcy-czytelnika.

Ewa Borkowska

Ted Hughes und die Poesie der Vierjahreszeiten

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel ist ein Versuch, den Dichter von der Natur vorzustellen, der mit dem Urbild der Natur verbunden die Natur in seiner Poesie auf körperliche und auch metaphorische Weise darstellt. Hughes ist ein Dichter von der „wilden Natur“ und deren allen Symptomen. Besonders in dem Band *Vierjahreszeiten* versucht der Dichter, seinen Leser an den Busen der wilden Natur zu bringen, um „Erfahrung mit wirklicher Wildheit“ zu schildern. Die Zusammensetzung der Dichtung mit der Musik *La Quarto Stagioni* von Antonio Vivaldi und der poetischen Vorstellung von den Jahreszeiten James Thomson zeigt, dass Hughes viel mehr als andere Künstler: der barocke Vivaldi und der romanti-

sche Thomson, zu dem Maler des Modernismus geworden ist. Er ist imstande, das Wirkliche in der Natur zu erwecken, aber auch mittels der Sprache, dass was menschliches Innenleben erfüllt, ans Tageslicht zu bringen. Der Dichter greift auf tiefste emotionale Zustände zurück, aber auch regt die Vorstellungskraft und emotionale Fähigkeiten des Lesers an.