

Irish Mythology and Modern Ecology: A Bio- Ecosophic Reading Of Selected Oak Poems by Ted Hughes

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Abstract

Ted Hughes (١٩٣٠-١٩٩٨) had great admiration for Irish mythology. One of his main sources on Irish folklore and mythology is Robert Graves's book, *The White Goddess*. In this book, Graves refers to the central place that the oak tree occupies in various mythologies and in particular the ancient Irish Tree Alphabet and Tree Calendar. Despite Hughes's acknowledgement of his fascination with Irish folklore and culture, very little has been written on the subject. Another element in Hughes that has lately gained great critical acclaim is his contribution to environmental and ecological issues. He has been called an "eco-warrior" and an "eco-worrier." Affinities of his works with Arne Naess's deep ecology and James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis have been pointed out. His poetry has also proved to be relevant to recent natural sciences such as biocommunication and biosemiotics, inspiring interdisciplinary studies in environmental sciences and humanities. This paper attempts to demonstrate how Hughes managed to blend old Irish mythology with modern ecology, through the study of the three oak poems: "My Own True Family" (١٩٧٣), "Gaudete" (١٩٧٧) and "Tales from Ovid" (١٩٩٧).

Ted Hughes (١٩٣٠-١٩٩٨) is one of the most versatile and influential literary figures of the second half of the twentieth century. His works still offer rich grounds for investigation not only in literary studies but also in other interdisciplinary fields. Relevance of Hughes's works to different cultures and literary theories is still open to research. In ٢٠١٤, Terry Gifford edited a book entitled *Ted Hughes*, which includes a collection of critical essays, all new, dedicated to areas in Hughes's work that had not received sufficient critical attention, such as his interest in mythology and ecological issues. A more recent book also edited by Gifford under the title *Ted Hughes in Context* (٢٠١٨), includes Mark Wormald's article "Hughes and Ireland," which tackles the little known Irish influence on Hughes's work and thought. This paper attempts to explore these less ventured areas, showing how Hughes managed to revisit old Irish mythology and at the same time to envision new insights in new-born nature sciences. The three poems selected for the study cover a wide range of Hughes's career. "My Own True Family" (١٩٧٣) was written in an early stage of his life. "Gaudete" (١٩٧٧) came later in the same decade. The work "Tales from Ovid" (١٩٩٧) belongs to a later stage of his life. Special attention is given to the earlier poem due to its richness in mythological reference as well as the evidence it provides for Hughes's early interest in ecological issues.

In his article "Hughes and Myth," Laurence Coup illustrates Hughes's deep knowledge of mythology through exploring the poet's critical essays on major figures such as Shakespeare, Milton and Coleridge. Coup shows how Hughes traces the mythological origins for the narratives of these writers. However, Hughes's interest in mythology is not limited to his criticism of other authors. His works, both poetry and prose, abound with evidence of his fascination with mythology. In his article "Myth and Education," Hughes argues that the only effective way to save the over-rationalized school education is through the reintroduction of myth in the syllabus. According to Hughes, the Enlightenment, which has taught people to distrust the imagination, has led to a sort of "mental paralysis" (٥٦). The "prohibition of imagination" has produced a "chronically sick society" (٦٠). In place of books that taught children to separate the "outer world" from their "inner world," "what they should have been taught was a mythology where all these things would have had a place and meaningful relationships one with another" (٦٣). By working on the children's imagination, mythological stories alter their views of themselves, of mankind and of the world at large (٦٢).

To set a model for effective education, Hughes refers to the poets of the Heroic Age in Ireland. In order to graduate, these poets had to complete a twenty-five-year course. "The qualifications then ranged from knowing many hundreds of stories, some of them several hours long and containing dozens of other little stories, or the ability to send a person mad with a glance, to travel, in spirit form over vast distances" (٥٨). In a letter to one

of his students, Hughes clearly states: “It so happened, my particular craze, in folklore and mythology, was the Irish (very rich, as you know)” (*Letters* ٦٢٥). He recalls how as a teenager, he “was swallowed alive by Yeats” who was his model in mixing together the worlds of mythology, folklore and the natural world “into one single thing” (٦٢٥-٦٢٦). Hughes’s infatuation with Ireland led him to explore his own Irish ancestry. Robert Jocelyn’s article “Tracing Ted Hughes’s Irish Roots” attests to the poet’s efforts to explore his Irish descent. In his article “Hughes and Ireland,” Wormald reports that Hughes visited Ireland several times, owned a house there, and was planning to stay there permanently, although he never managed to do that (١٧٢-١٧٣). It is worth noting that the date given for adding the poem “My Own True Family” (١٩٧٣) to the earlier version of his collection *Meet My Folks* coincides with his visit to Ireland during the seventies. “The elemental, ancient but flowing Ireland of freedom” in which Hughes was immersed “retained its seminal influence” on his work” (١٦٥). *Gaudete* also is immersed in Irish folklore and mythology. As Randall reports, it was written during one of Hughes’s extensive stays in Ireland “which became his spiritual home” (٧٤). The subtitle of the poem, as Hughes remarks in one of his letters, “has always been ‘An English Idyll,’- but the irony of that is a bit precious” (٣٧٧). In another letter, Hughes says that the shift which takes place in the setting of the poem “from the Anglican to something like a tenth century anchorite in the West of Ireland surely has its meaning” (٣٨٥). Randall explains that this tenth century anchorite “points to the wilderness of the world outside the empire and modern civilization itself.” According to Randall, Hughes believed that the entire Western world “was beyond hope, with one notable exception – Ireland” (٧٤).

Despite his resentment of the mechanization of mankind, Hughes makes it clear that he does not call for the total abandonment of rational, intellectual thinking. He does not seek to reverse the trend by “abandoning science” (“Myth and Education” ٦٠). What he advocates is a balance or marriage between contradictions. The only means to achieving this sacred union is the imagination which is not “merely a surplus mental department meant for entertainment, but the most essential piece of machinery we have if we are going to live the lives of human beings” (٥٧). Hughes laments the estrangement of modern man from nature. Describing Hughes’s view of the role of the literary imagination in re-establishing this union, Sagar says:

The language of the imagination is necessarily holistic and biocentric. It is grounded simultaneously in the depths of the artist’s being and in the external universe. It breaks down the walls of egotism, sexism, nationalism, racism, anthropocentrism. It expresses

relationships and wholes. Its language is metaphor and symbol. The literary imagination connects all the severed halves - inner and outer, self and other, male and female, life and death, man and Nature.” (٥) Sagar was one of the first critics to link Hughes to the new natural and ecological sciences. Ted Hughes’s attitude, therefore, is against reductionist and mechanistic science, not against science in general. In fact, as Terry Gifford remarks in his recent essay “Ted Hughes’s ‘Greening’ and the Environmental Humanities,” Hughes was one of the earliest advocates of the interdisciplinary dialogue between environmental sciences and the humanities. Commenting on Hughes’s review of Max Nicholson’s book, *The Environmental Revolution* (١٩٧٠), Gifford writes:

What is remarkable about this review is that it makes a call for what would now be called “the environmental humanities”, first in criticizing scientific over-specialisation and demanding a “total knowledge” in which scientific disciplines speak to each other, and secondly, by identifying the need for a publicly voiced debate about a vision for conservation. (١١)

The aim of this dialogue, according to Hughes, is to “redirect the attention of ‘Politicians, Sociologists, Economists, Theologians, Philosophers and the rest [who currently] pick over the stucco rubble of a collapsed civilisation’” (*Winter Pollen* ١٣٣-٣٤). Gifford argues against the segregation of the literary from the scientific, giving Hughes as an example. To prove his point, he refers to Hughes’s distinctive performance in English composition at school, which led to the false assumption that this “must be accompanied by an intrinsic ‘weakness in Physics.’” He elaborates that Hughes’s work proves contrary to this false expectation, since it

“eventually came to be a significant subject for the relatively recent multidisciplinary study of environmental humanities in which a wide range of humanities disciplines are informed by environmental science to produce the focus of new studies such as environmental ethics, environmental history, psychogeography and ecopoetry. (٢٠١٨، ٥-٦)

Hughes’s work, therefore, looks back to mythology for viable solutions that would help in re-establishing the lost connection with nature. In doing so, he blends mythology with natural sciences. He can therefore be regarded, as Gifford remarks, as a pioneer in the establishment of the new disciplines of environmental humanities.

As Gifford notes, Hughes’s relevance to environmental issues and ecological sciences has only rather recently come to focus. In September ٢٠٠٧, Ed Douglas wrote an article in *The Guardian* entitled “Portrait of a Poet as an Eco Warrior” where he says that “one aspect of Hughes’s life, which inspired his poetry and engaged his hunger for learning, is missing - his deep love of nature and concern for the environment... Hughes’s environmental activism and his prophetic insight into the consequences of

consumerism have been almost entirely overlooked.” Two years later, Simon Armitage wrote in the same newspaper that even ten years after the poet’s death, “it’s only recently that the full extent of his engagement with environmental causes has become clear.” Recently, however, Hughes’s relevance to contemporary ecological issues has come to recognition. After publishing his biography of Hughes, Jonathan Bate gave his lecture at the Department of English, University of Arizona, describing how the poet was “aware before our time of the environmental problems of our time,” and how he evolved throughout his career from an “eco-worrier” into an “eco-warrior” and an active environmentalist. On the page dedicated to Ted Hughes on the website for Cambridge Authors, Yvonne Reddick also agrees that “even before the inception of ecocriticism proper, Ted Hughes’s work anticipates this critical movement.” Referring to Hughes, Sam Solnick also writes in *Poetry and the Anthropocene: Ecology, Biology and Technology in Contemporary British and Irish poetry*: “No study of post-war British poetry and ecology can sensibly ignore its most influential and divisive figure” (11). This aspect, the writer claims, is lacking in the previous ecological studies of Hughes’s works (10-12). It was only in October 2017 that a full-length book about the subject was published, namely, Yvonne Reddick’s *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet*. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to link two of the major fields that have only recently received attention in Hughes criticism, namely, Irish mythology and modern ecology, through a reading of selected oak poems.

Trees occupy a central place in Irish mythology and folklore. In an article entitled “The Sacred Trees of Ireland,” A.T. Lucas contends that trees were always treated with certain reverence in Ireland that was once heavily forested. He explains that the old Irish word for sacred trees is “*bile*,” and gives a long list of examples of places in Ireland that carry *bile* names, noting that their distribution throughout the island demonstrates that “the ‘cult’ of the sacred tree was a countrywide phenomenon” (16). Niall Mac Coitir also stresses the importance of trees to ancient Ireland in his book *Irish Trees: Myths, Legends & Folklore*. He also points to the fact that the letters of the oldest Irish ogham, that is, alphabet, were named after trees, which is a further “testament to the regard with which trees were held” (vii). He adds that the oak was “particularly favoured by the gods due to its many valuable attributes” (9). “The oak provides excellent timber and a plentiful crop of acorns which provides food for many animals. This, together with stately bearing and long life, makes it a symbol of strength, fertility, kingship and endurance” (98). Robert Graves’s work *The White Goddess*, besides being one of the major references on the Irish tree

alphabet and calendar, is of particular relevance to this study since Hughes himself acknowledges its great influence on his mind. He refers to it as “the chief holy book” of his “poetic consciousness” (*Letters*, ٩٦). Jonathan Bate states that on graduating from high school, Hughes was awarded a copy of Graves’s book by his English teacher. Bate contends that the growing poet “saw in Graves a mature mirror of his own youthful self” (*Unauthorized* ٦٥). In this book, Graves explains that the old Irish tree alphabet “consists of five vowels and thirteen consonants. Each letter is named after the tree or shrub of which it is the initial.” He adds that he “noticed almost at once that the consonants of this alphabet form a calendar of seasonal tree-magic, and that all the trees figure prominently in European folklore” (١٦٥). Graves also writes about the “royalty of the oak-tree.” “Its roots,” he explains, “are believed to extend as deep underground as its branches rise in the air—Virgil mentions this—which makes it emblematic of a god whose law runs both in Heaven and in the Underworld” (١٧٦). Graves also refers to the central place that the oak tree occupies in various mythologies, and in the old Irish alphabet and calendar. The letter D for *Duir*, which means “door,” refers to the seventh tree, the oak. The seventh month, which extends from the tenth of June to the seventh of July, is the door that links the two halves of the year and is dedicated to Jupiter, the oak-king (١٧٦-١٧٧). This sacred Druidic oak which rules the waxing part of the year is twin to the “T,” the evergreen oak which rules the waning part. It was on a T-shaped cross that the oak-king was crucified (١٨٠-١).

Despite the evident importance of the oak to the study of Ted Hughes, there is very little mention of it in Hughes studies. Central to the study of Hughes’s oak symbolism is the little known poem “My Own True Family.” This poem first appeared in the American edition of the collection entitled *Meet My Folks*, published in ١٩٧٢. The earlier British publication included only eight poems, to which were added three more poems in the later edition. The collection contains poems entitled “Sister Jane”; “My Grandpa”; “My Grandma”; “Brother Bert”; “My Aunt”; and “My Father.” The final poem introduces the poet’s “own true family.” This “true” family is a “tribe” of oaks who ask the child, the main character of the poem, to swear that for each oak tree that is felled down, two would be planted instead. The reference here is to Hughes’s project: “Children Plant Trees for Tomorrow”, in which he encouraged schools to involve pupils in tree-growing projects (Reddick ١٧٩). The poem, however, is more than a record of Hughes’s environmental project for school children. Despite its brevity, it is rich in oak symbolism as well as ecological significance.

The poem opens with the scene of a child creeping into an oakwood, looking for a deer. There, he meets an old woman in rags:

Then she began to cackle and I began to quake.
She opened up her little bag and I came twice awake –
Surrounded by a staring tribe and me tied to a stake.

The “staring tribe” are surprisingly, not human, but rather a community of oaks. Significantly, the boy finds himself tied to a stake, which brings to mind the figure of the oak-king who was tied to a T-shaped cross. The oaks address him as follows:

'We are the oak-trees and your own true family.
We are chopped down, we are torn up, you do not blink an eye.
Unless you make a promise now – now you are going to die.
'Whenever you see an oak-tree felled, swear now you will plant two.
Unless you swear the black oak bark will wrinkle over you
And root you among the oaks where you were born but never grew.'
(*Meet My Folks*, ٦١-٦٢)

The oaks inform the child that they are his “own true family.” He was born in that oakwood but never had the chance to grow there. If he fails to swear that he would plant two oak trees in place of each one that is chopped down, he is told that the bark of the black oak would “wrinkle” over him, rooting him back where he belonged in the first place. At the end of the poem, the reader is informed that this was the boy’s dream underneath the boughs of an oakwood. Paradoxically, however, early on in the dream, the child says that he becomes “twice awake.” Though in a dreamlike state, the child’s consciousness is heightened by the revelation of his affinity with the oak trees. By the time the child left the woods, his walk “was the walk of a human child,” but his “heart was a tree.”

The phrase “heart of Oak” was used by Coleridge in one of his Notebook entries where he laments the loss of his creative imagination. He says:

My strength is small in proportion to my Power— ...this important distinction, between Strength and Power - the Oak, and the tropic Annual... which grows nearly as high & spreads as large, as the Oak — but the wood, the heart of Oak is wanting. (١٠٦)

Hughes was an admirer of Coleridge and in particular his three visionary poems: “Kubla Khan,” “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” and “Christabel.” In his article on Coleridge entitled “The Snake in the Oak,” Hughes argues that Coleridge’s main dilemma was his struggle between his “intellectual self” and the “unleavened” female creative self as depicted in the female characters of the three poems: the Abyssinian maid, the nightmarish woman and the character of Christabel respectively. Christabel prays for strength beneath the oak tree, but unknowingly takes home the poisonous snake, Geraldine, as a symbol of Coleridge himself who seeks the heart of the oak but finally gives in to his deceiving intellectual self (*Winter Pollen* ٤٦٣-٤٦٦). This article is not just a study of Coleridge’s works but

also a revelation of Hughes's frame of mind. As Bate remarks, Hughes owes a lot of his Coleridge criticism to Graves's *The White Goddess* (*Unauthorized* ٤٦٩). This reflects his conviction that in the process of creation, the poet needs the heart of oak in order to resolve the inner struggle between the intellectual self and the natural self.

Another work that throws light on the importance of the oak symbolism for Hughes is the poetic novel *Gaudete* (١٩٧٧). The narrative revolves around Lumb, an Anglican clergyman, who was abducted by spirits into the other world. These spirits create a duplicate that would take his place during his absence (٩). In order to do that, they order him to choose a tree so that they can give it his figure:

He is ordered to choose a tree. So now, he thinks, they will hang me... He straightens from the pain and moves uphill and stops at the top, pointing to a young oak tree growing there on the summit between the rocks... At least he has picked a tree of distinction. (١٥)

Two men cut the tree down and start trimming it "till the lopped trunk lies like a mutilated man." Lumb is forced down on his chest and his wrists are tied to the two stumps so that they seemed "as if holding hands, their bodies stretched opposite." The two men start whipping the trunk until "stroke by stroke, he and the tree-bole are flogged, tied together." After an interval of unconsciousness, a hand unties the cords. "Through distorting water, Lumb sees that this other is himself. He stares at him, in every detail, as if he stared into a mirror" (١٥-١٦). Significantly, the oak is the tree that Hughes chooses to be the duplicate. The original Lumb is transported to the spirit world in order to aid an ailing woman. In his *Letters*, Hughes explains that "the healing refers to the task for which living men were carried away by the spirits in various Scots and Irish tales: sometimes to cure a sick person, usually to work some recovery on a woman, or deliver a child" (٣٨٤). However, Lumb fails in his mission. Commenting on the structure of the narrative, Troupes points out that there is a tension between the changeling's efforts to transfer his natural instincts to the English parish, and the original Lumb's efforts to transfer his restraints to the "world of nature-as-it-really-works." He elaborates that if the story is viewed as a psychological allegory, then the two Lumb characters can be seen as two sides of the same man, "the primitive and the evolved" (٤٥). The tension displays an "inner conflict experienced as physical violence" (٤٦). At one point, in a nightmarish encounter, the two versions struggle in a lake:

Lumb brings him down in the shallows, and the two wrestle in
knee-deep water
On the painful irregular rocks.
And now Lumb realises
That his antagonist is his double
And that he's horribly strong. (٨١)

The incident describes a moment of deep self-realization for the real Lumb. The fact that the fight takes place in a lake relates the incident to the trope of death and rebirth by water in mythology (Troupes ୧୦). Eventually, when Lumb returns to his hometown, he is a changed man and he starts writing poetry to the Goddess of nature. The sacred oak tree of the beginning of the poem reappears in the final two poems of the Epilogue. The oak is described as “the Goddess’s tree.” Addressing the Goddess who, together with the changeling, represents “a procreative earthiness” (Troupes ୧୬), Lumb says:

Your tree, your oak,
A glare

Of black upward lightning, a wriggling grab
Momentary
Under the crumbling of stars.

A guard, a dancer
At the pure well of the leaf. (୧୧୧-୧୦୦)

Through these incantations, the “half man,” Lumb, is healed and becomes whole, and his failures are forgiven. As Randall remarks, these final poems blend the Eastern and the Western religious rites; they carry the spirit of the Indian *vacanas* and the Irish praise songs (୧୦). The oak, again, is the means through which the main figure in the poem achieves wholeness and harmony between the two conflicting selves, the natural and the intellectual, the primitive and the evolved, the inner and the outer.

In *Tales from Ovid* (୧୧୧୧) again, the oak plays a central role. Though a translation, the work fits into Hughes’s literary project which is the exploration of the connections between human inner nature and the outer natural world. The poem recounts how in the beginning of creation, the Creator “Sculpted man from his own ectoplasm, / Or earth” (୧). “Listening deeply,” during that Gold age, “man kept faith with the source” (୧). At that time,

Men needed no weapons.
Nations loved one another.
And the earth, unbroken by plough or by hoe,
Piled the table high. Mankind
Was content to gather the abundance
Of whatever ripened. (୧୦-୧୧)

Man lived in harmony with himself, with the gods and with other humans as long as he listened to the voice of nature. Later on in the poem, all this is

disrupted. Erisychthon, whose name means “earth-tearer” in Greek, cuts down every tree in the sacred grove of Ceres, one of Rome’s agricultural deities. One of those trees is an outstanding oak tree that has never to that day been exposed to the axe’s vile stroke:

Among those trees
 One prodigious oak was all to itself
 A tangled forest. Its boughs were bedecked with wreaths
 And votive tributes---each for a prayer
 Ceres had some time granted. Dryads there
 Danced a holy circle around its bole
 Or joined hands to embrace it---
 A circumference of twenty paces.
 Erisychthon ignores all this as
 He assesses the volume of its timber,
 Then orders his men to fell it. (٨٧)

The oak is sacred, but all that Erisychthon cares for is the commercial value of its timber. Finding that his men are reluctant to carry on his order, he takes the axe himself and cuts it down:

But in that moment, as the blade hangs
 Poised for the first downstroke, shudderings
 Swarm through the whole tree, to its outermost twigs
 And a groan bursts out of the deep grain. (٨٧-٨٨)

The oak turns out to be more than a mere tree. It is a goddess that “pronounces, / In a clear voice... ‘With my last breath, I curse you’” (٨٨). Erisychthon is condemned to “infinite, insatiable Hunger” as he is separated “far from the goddess of abundance” (٨٩). When man stops listening to nature that teaches harmony and love, he is punished with unappeasable hunger. The more he eats, the deeper his emptiness becomes.

The poems, therefore, are closely related to the concept of the oak deity in Irish mythology. However, they carry another vital element, which is their ecological bearing. The poem “My Own True Family” is more than a simple children’s fable invoking the White Goddess to promote reforestation. The message of the trees to the child, as a representative of the human race, that deforestation would cost him his life, is not a threat but an ecological fact. As Reddick remarks, Hughes’s concern with deforestation informed his campaign for tree planting in ١٩٧٢ (١٧٩-١٧٨). The figure of the woman that awakens the boy to his link to nature is a symbol of Mother Earth, or the goddess that gives new birth to the boy, granting him the heart of an oak. The same applies to *Gaudete*. In his article “Gaining the Poetic Voice: Ted Hughes’s *Gaudete*,” Pietrzak argues that for Hughes, the White Goddess, or in other words, the Earth Goddess, or Mother Nature represents the natural, instinctive side of man that has been subjugated by the rational Western civilization, causing the schism between the inner and the outer worlds (٨١). The poem, therefore, is not

merely a revised version of an old myth. As Reddick observes, “it illustrates how the Hughes of the 1940s, fascinated by non-Western views of nature, strives towards complete unity with the non-human (36). Hughes distinctly lamented Western man’s exile from Nature. The story of *Gaudete* is a mythologized version of the story of civilized man’s estrangement from Nature:

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 basic myth for the ideal Westerner’s life is the Quest... It is a story of decline. When something abandons Nature, or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end. (*Winter Pollen* 129)

Reading Hughes’s poems within the context of his ecological concerns, Troupes contends that for Hughes, modern man’s Fall away from Nature is equivalent to the story of the loss of Paradise. Troupes calls this a “biological Fall” (34). He sees the struggle between the primeval Lumb and the evolved one as a representation of “the unfallen and the fallen, fighting for supremacy” (35). Roberts agrees that “The idea of a Fall is the template for a crucial aspect of Hughes’s world view,” and equates it to the cumulative alienation of humanity from nature caused by rationalism, the Reformation, and the industrial revolution (36). This reading of *Gaudete* is validated by the paradisiacal description of the scene before the transgressive act against the oak tree takes place in *Tales from Ovid*. The harmony among all forms of creation is comparable to the blissful state before the Fall. Bate remarks that Hughes ‘ecologises’ Ovid (*Song of the Earth* 29). He calls Hughes’s version of Ovid “his mythic paradigm for the crisis of Western Man’s self-exile from Nature” (38). Bate states that this work illustrates Hughes’s conviction that man’s only road towards restoring the original harmonious dwelling with nature is through lending the “inward ear” to the messages that the earth is trying to convey to man (29). Reddick agrees that in retelling Ovid’s *Tales*, Hughes “chooses” the ones “that resonate in our age of habitat destruction and human-caused extinction.” She describes it as “his most successful translation for keeping faith with the source-text while deploying a Hughesian poetic voice, and for drawing out Ovid’s relevance to contemporary concerns” (10).

Besides bearing witness to Hughes’s ecological awareness, the three poems in question, therefore, include some of the major prophetic views that make Hughes relevant to a number of current ecological and biological theories. Firstly, the fact that the trees convey a specific message that has a

transforming effect on the child establishes a link between the ancient tree alphabet and the new concept of biocommunication among living organisms. Secondly, stressing man's close affinity with the trees rather than giving exclusive attention to the environmental issue of deforestation can be regarded as an early version of Naess's deep ecology and "ecsophy," that is, ecological wisdom.

The first issue deals with the communication of plants, or biocommunication. It is not uncommon to find talking trees in fables and children's stories, but surprisingly, scientists have found out that trees actually communicate. Recently, new integrative sciences have been trying to study and examine the phenomenon of communication in creatures and species other than the human. In a very recent article entitled "Communication as the Main Characteristic of Life" Guenther Witzany, scientist and philosopher, says:

If communication is the main characteristic of life, it must be possible to identify communicative actions throughout all domains of life. Until the middle of the last century, language and communication were thought to be special tools of only humans. Meanwhile, we know an abundance of examples of non-human languages and communication processes. (٩١)

In their preface to the book *Biocommunication of Plants*, Witzany and Baluska give the following definition of the term:

Biocommunication is defined as meaningful interaction between at least two living agents, which share a repertoire of signs (representing a kind of natural language) that are combined (according to syntactic rules) in varying contexts (according to pragmatic rules) to transfer content (according to semantic rules). (v)

To understand this, one needs to bear in mind, as Marcello Barbieri argues in the article "Biosemiotics: A New Understanding of Life," the distinction between meaning as a mental code shared by mental objects, and organic meaning shared by living organisms (n. p.). Witzany divides this latter kind into "intraorganismic" communication processes within the plant, "interorganismic" communication between same and different plant species, and "transorganismic" communication between plants and other living organisms ("Communication" ٩٥). He argues that plants are highly sensitive organisms that can process, memorize and compare information. Their response to such information is highly complex and involves decision making, signaling and coordination in the "root zone and in root-stem communication." Plants can also "perceive themselves and can distinguish between self and nonself. This capability allows them to protect their territory and promote kinship. They process and evaluate information and then modify their behavior accordingly" (*Biocommunication* ٢). This hypothesis, he explains, can be regarded as "scientific" on the grounds that it is "empirically based, experimentally testable, and theoretically

formalizable” (“Communication 91). Thanks to modern technology, biological semiosis has become a “scientific reality.” A sister science to biocommunication is the new science of biosemiotics that can be defined “as the study of signs in living systems.” Barbieri stresses the fact that “it is not a philosophy. It is a new scientific paradigm that is rigorously based on experimental facts” (n. p.). Gagliano et. al., among others, has conducted several researches and provided evidence for the validity of this hypothesis. The researchers testify that “the notion of communication in plants has long been regarded as a controversial fringe idea, which has only recently begun to attract more widespread attention.” They write:

Indeed, research findings over the last decades have demonstrated that plants process and evaluate information about their neighbours both above and below ground, as well as about the resources available in their surroundings, and modify their behaviour accordingly. For example, plants use information to recognize and even prevent costly competitive interactions with relatives by favouring them over strangers, and hence facilitating kin selection processes such as cooperation and altruism, similar to what is seen in animal social systems. (n. p.)

Gagliano and his fellow researchers contend that “plant communication by means of chemicals, contact or light wavelengths is now well recognized.” To these methods, they give evidence that “plants communicate through emitting and detecting magnetic waves and sound waves.” New 3D technologies have made it possible to record what Monacchi and Farina call “ecoacoustic events” or “EE” in forests (329). These are new scientific trends that open up areas for new interdisciplinary approaches. Sciences and humanities are joining hands in an attempt to resolve life’s mysteries and understand the ecosystem of which man is part.

Therefore, it is no figment of the imagination that trees can recognize their kin and convey their intent. Scientists from different biological and ecological disciplines can now share poets in listening to the songs of the trees and finding great wisdom in what they say. David George Haskell, Professor of biology at The University of the South, in Sewanee, Tennessee, Pulitzer Prize finalist and specialist in bioacoustics shares Ted Hughes in his belief that trees and humans are kin and that they speak great wisdom to those who learn to listen. He writes in his book *The Songs of Trees: Stories from Nature’s Great Connectors*:

I turned my ear to trees seeking ecological *kleos* [Greek for fame]. I found no heroes, no individuals around whom history pivots. Instead living memories of trees, manifest in their songs, tell of life’s

community, a net of relations. We humans belong within this conversation, *as blood kin and incarnate members*. To listen is therefore to hear our voices and those of *our family*. (ix, my italics)

Visiting Haskell's website is like going to a natural concert. Using an accelerometer run through a sound digitizer, he records the sounds of trees in various situations and different weather conditions. Trees teach him that "life is a network" and that we are "part of the community of life, composed of relationships with others." He comes to the conclusion that human/nature duality is illusory. "Our bodies and minds, our "Science and Art," are as natural and wild as they ever were" (x). "To listen to trees, nature's great connectors, is therefore to learn how to inhabit the relationships that give life its source, substance, and beauty" (xi).

Trees, therefore, as described by Hughes, have families, form tribes and are capable of communication. Also like humans, as described in "My Own True Family," their skin, or bark, wrinkles by age. Their leaves, as in *Tales from Ovid*, grow grey, and they bleed when they are wounded:

Every bough goes grey---every leaf
Whitens, and every acorn whitens.
Then the blade bites and the blood leaps
As from the neck of a great bull when it drops
Under the axe at the altar. (^^)

This shows, as Dr. Nalini Nadkarni, Professor of Biology at the University of Utah, says in her book *Between Earth and Sky: Our Intimate Connections to Trees*, that "trees can be as familiar to us as our own bodies." She explains that the outer bark of a tree, like human skin, "acts as a first line of defense against insects, disease, storms and extreme temperatures" (٢٤). The vascular system of the human body is very similar to that of trees (٢٠). Like humans, trees also have "long-term memories." "The form of a tree is a frozen expression of its past environment and traumas." The structure of a tree discloses the different kinds of loads and pressures placed upon it by external forces. When a tree is wounded, the layer under the bark "immediately begins to reduce the stress by growing callus tissue (new wood over the wound)." Like the human body, the tree has the ability to heal its wounds, sometimes leaving scars (٣٠-٣١). Dr. Nadkarni also notes that we also think in a treelike manner: "Tree forms even shape the way we think. Neurons are called "dendrites," from *dendron*, the Greek word for tree, and they convert outside stimuli into our awareness, our thoughts, and our memories" (٢١). Like humans, trees "respire" (٢٢). Trees also have dignity. Like humans, they are "upright in form, with a crown on top and mobile limbs stemming from a central trunk" (١٩). Humans, therefore, have great affinity with trees, and can learn to communicate with them if they lend them their ears.

The second issue is concerned with the relevance of Hughes's poems to Arne Naess's concepts of deep "ecology" and "ecosophy." Naess gives

the definition and founding rules of deep ecology in his article “The Shallow and the Deep” (1973). He differentiates between the “shallow” mainstream environmentalism and “deep” ecology. The main concern of the former is the “health and affluence of people,” and, therefore, it is basically as anthropocentric as the scientific approach to nature. Deep ecology, on the other hand, is concerned with “diversity, complexity, autonomy, decentralization, symbiosis, egalitarianism and classlessness” (2263). Naess prefers the term “*ecosophy*” to “ecology,” as the former involves a kind of wisdom that works as “prescription, not just scientific description and prediction” (2267). Furthermore, as the title of the article “Deep Ecology and Life style” suggests, deep ecology is more than a worldview. It is a way of life. Naess advocates “anticonsumerism,” not just for the environmental threat that it entails, but also out of deep conviction of the “intrinsic value” of all life-forms and the interconnectedness of all the elements that comprise the ecosystem” (2367).

Deep ecology, as opposed to other ecological movements, does not regard nature as “other.” In the article “Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World,” Naess explains that the notion of altruism comes from the Latin word “alter” which means “other” as opposed to “ego” (2792). Deep ecology, on the other hand, uses the term “*ecological self*” that broadens and deepens the sense of self through a “process of identification” that goes beyond mere moral obligation towards an “other.” The motive behind mainstream conservationism is self-interest. According to deep ecology, on the other hand, the “self” is not to be confused with the narrow concept of “ego.” Through identification, we “see ourselves in others.” Consequently, “self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others, with whom we identify, is hindered.” This “comprehensive (all-sided) maturity,” unlike Descartes’s immaturity, includes “all living beings: beautiful or ugly, big or small, scientific or not” (2792-3). It embraces the principles of diversity and symbiosis. Potentials are “never exactly the same for any two living beings” (2782). However, everything is “interrelated.” This “maxim of ecology applies to the self and its relation to other living beings, ecosystems, the ecosphere, and the Earth itself” (2787).

Critics disagree on Naess’s relevance to Hughes. In the article “Ecocritical Readings,” Richard Kerridge finds great similarities between Naess and Hughes. He writes:

Hughes’s environmentalism is clearly a variant of the kind known as Deep Ecology. Soon after [‘The Environmental Revolution’], that term was introduced to environmental debate by the Norwegian

philosopher Arne Naess, who defined Deep Ecology against what he saw as the 'shallow' environmentalism concerned only with pollution, damage and depletion as specific problems... Hughes comes at environmentalism from a particular set of literary and anthropological preoccupations, but his vision is one of the same radical kind. (١٨٧-١٨٨)

Reddick argues against this view on the grounds that Naess's essay was published three years after Hughes's aforementioned article and that there are no books by Naess in Hughes's library at the Emory archive (٢٣). She finds a more viable link between Hughes's work and James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis, especially that she provides evidence that Hughes owned and read several of Lovelock's books (٥٥). Reddick, however, admits that Hughes derives his early views of the "idea of the Earth as a single, self-regulating organism" from mythology before he was exposed to Lovelock (١٦٨). She also focuses more on Hughes's references to Gaia in the ٨٠s and after. Furthermore, she presumes that "Naess would no doubt dismiss societal and political engagement as 'shallow environmentalism.'" However, she admits that the "similarities are pertinent" (٢٣). Moreover, she notes that Hughes's environmental practices show his concern with social and political issues, but at the same time, she acknowledges that his philosophical thought and "desire for a fundamental change in values" are "profoundly radical" (٢٣-٢٤). Hughes, therefore, proves that there is no contradiction between environmental activism and deep ecological philosophy. In fact, his ecological convictions motivated his environmental activism. Thus, Hughes precedes Naess's views and validates them in his environmental practices. Unlike Naess, Hughes finds no contradiction between deep philosophical thinking and pragmatic activities.

Before Naess, Hughes has set the identification with other forms of life in opposition to the rational self-contained "ego" that precludes an "other." In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes expresses his belief in the oneness of Being. Like the deep ecologists, Hughes professes that all nature, human and non-human, is linked together. The law of Being is the law of love, as opposed to the isolation of the ego. He explains that man has to choose between the extreme alternatives: either to reject this law of love and "live an independent, rational, secular life" or to accept the call and "abnegate the ego" with "total, unconditional love", which means to become a saint, a holy idiot, possessed by the Divine Love." However, there is a third possibility, which is to live "in some degree of self-anaesthesia, some kind of living death." The tragedy in Shakespeare's plays, according to Hughes, lies in the fact that "man will always choose the former, simply because once he is free of a natural, creaturely awareness of the divine indulgence which permits him to exist at all, he wants to live his own life, and he has never invented a society of saints that was tolerable" (٣٩٢-٣).

The affinity with deep ecology sheds more light to the poems in question. In the poem “My Own True family,” the child’s consciousness is heightened by the revelation of his affinity with the oak trees. The awakening is not just a realization that the oak trees are kin; it is also a Self-realization in the ecological sense. Only a few choose to wake up to the fact that man is part of nature, and that the choice of alienation from nature is a choice of death, or rather, living death. By the end of the poem, the child says that the dream that he had underneath the boughs of the oak trees has “altered” him. He went back to human company carrying the heart of a tree. His sense of self is broadened and deepened by the process of identification. Nature is not treated as an “other,” but rather a broader “Self.” *Gaudete* also reveals the poet’s longing for union between human and non-human:

I watched a wise beetle
Walking about inside my body.

I saw a tree
Grow inward from my navel.

Hawks clashed their courtship
Between my ears.

Slowly I filled up the whole world. (119)

These lines illustrate the concreteness of the union of the whole world, whether insects, trees, birds or human. The tree, in particular, grows out of his own belly. Nature is no longer other. The “I” in the poem is not the speaker’s ego, but rather the integral ecological Self. Hughes retains this conviction in the later work *Tales from Ovid*. It is significant that by violating nature and cutting down the tree, Erisychton turns upon himself, eating his own limbs:

Whatever he ate,
Maddened and tormented that hunger
To angrier, uglier life. The life

Of a monster, no longer a man. And so
At last, the inevitable.
He began to savage his own limbs.

And there, at a final feast, devoured himself. (120).

By damaging the trees, man loses his human nature which cannot be separated from the non-human. Reddick notes that this section of the poem illustrates Hughes’s skill in the “mythic fusion of nature and the human,

with elements of ecological elegy.” This ecological awareness, as she notes, is not found in the original Ovid tales (Reddick ٢٨٤).

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to demonstrate how Ted Hughes managed to blend ancient mythology with contemporary natural sciences. He has often lamented the alienation of modern Western man from the natural world. As a remedy for this rift, he resorted to mythology which, through activating the imagination, has the power to establish a balanced relationship between the inner world and the outer world. Hughes was particularly enamoured of Irish mythology and folklore. Special focus has been given to the oak symbolism in Irish mythology and how it was employed in the three poems “My Own True Family,” “Gaudete” and *Tales from Ovid*. These poems emphasize the kinship between man and nature and the consequences of violating this bond. They also offer the cure through the openness to the messages that the trees try to communicate to humankind. Through referring back to mythology in an attempt to re-establish the connection between man and nature, Hughes also was a forerunner of the new trends in environmental sciences. In fact, he was a pioneer in advocating a dialogue between the humanities and the sciences. In this respect, Hughes’s work has proven to be relevant to the new theories of biocommunication and biosemiotics. He has also succeeded in resolving the conflict between environmental activism and the philosophical convictions of deep ecology. This opens the grounds for further investigation and collaborative work in the fields of environmental humanities and environmental sciences.

الميثولوجيا الأيرلندية و الأيكولوجيا الحديثة: قراءة بيوايكزوفيه لقصائد مختارة

لتيد هيوز

سيلفيا فام

المستخلص

لقد كان الشاعر تيد هيوز (١٩٣٠ - ١٩٩٨) يكن إعجابا شديدا للميثولوجيا الأيرلندية القديمة. و من أهم المصادر للأساطير و الأدب الشعبي الأيرلندي القديم التي استعان بها هيوز هي كتاب لروبرت جريفز بعنوان "الإلهة البيضاء"، ففي هذا الكتاب يشير جريفز الى المكانة الكبيرة التي كانت تتصدرها شجرة البلوط في هذه التراث الأدبي و الميثولوجي لكثير من الشعوب و خاصة في الأبجدية الأيرلندية القديمة و التقويم الأيرلندي حيث كان كل شهر يحمل اسم الشجرة التي ترمز اليه. و بالرغم من شغف هيوز بهذه الأساطير، الا أن الأعمال النقدية التي تتناول هذا الموضوع قليلة جدا. وقد بدأ أيضا بعض النقاد مؤخرا في إلقاء الضوء على جانب آخر من السمات المميزة لأعمال هيوز و هو اسهاماته و اهتمامه الشديد بالقضايا البيئية و العلوم البيئية. فقد اشار البعض الى التشابه الكبير بين كتابات هيوز و النظريات البيئية الحديثة لأرنى نيس و جيمز لافلوك. و كذلك هناك صلة كبيرة بين كتابات هيوز و الإكتشفات الحديثة في علم الإتصال الحيوي بين الكائنات المختلفة و علم البيوسيميوتيقا. و يتناول هذا البحث ثلاث قصائد عن شجرة البلوط تتجلى فيها مهارة الشاعر هيوز في المزج بين الأساطير القديمة و العلوم الحديثة و هي: "عائلتي الحقيقية" و "جوديت" و "حكايات من أوفيد".

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