

TED HUGHES' ART OF HEALING

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DANIEL XERRI

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To Stephanie

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>HR</i>	<i>The Hawk in the Rain</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>Lupercal</i>
<i>W</i>	<i>Wodwo</i>
<i>CB</i>	<i>Cave Birds</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>Moortown</i>
<i>MD</i>	<i>Moortown Diary</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>River</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Three Books</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Collected Poems</i>
<i>PM</i>	<i>Poetry in the Making</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>Winter Pollen</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>Oedipus</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>Alcestis</i>

FOREWORD

In a letter to Marina Warner written two months before his death, Ted Hughes speculated about whether writing prose, at the neglect of poetry, had made him ill. There is an inherent levity, even jocularity, about such an idea that even knowledge that Hughes was aware that he was dying of cancer fails to dispel, though it does give it a certain gallows grimness. But it is apparent from Hughes' *oeuvre* that the notion that poetry possesses a restorative power was not at all a lightly held belief. It might even be said that it is only through an understanding of the affective force of poetry as a form of healing that one can gain admittance to the heart of Hughes' poetic imagination.

That, at least, is the provocative and far-reaching contention underlying Daniel Xerri's study: *Ted Hughes' Art of Healing*. With particular reference to the collections *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960), *Cave Birds* (1978), *Moortown* (1979), and *River* (1983), Xerri draws out the idea of Hughes' poetry as a kind of spiritual curative, and explores the particular nature of that cure by reconstructing out of a rich selection of primary material Hughes' diagnosis of what it was he thought ailed modern man. Indeed, the range of reference in Xerri's study is significant, incorporating, apart from the expected critical intertext stemming from established critiques on Hughes, reference to canonical precursor figures like Blake and Lawrence; considerations involving mythography (particularly in relation to Graves' *The White Goddess*); broad-ranging reference to shamanistic traditions, animism, Eastern religion, Egyptian and Greek mythology and even, not incongruously, to subatomic physics; and comparisons with the work of a number of Eastern European poets who, in some instances, Hughes translated: Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, Miroslav Holub, Marin Sorescu, Janos Pilinszky, and, above all, Vasko Popa.

The picture that emerges from Xerri's persuasively argued book is of a conception of poetry as a form of ritualised mythopoesis capable of tapping into an unindividuated wholeness that, though forgotten by modern man, continues to subtend the fragmentation of contemporary society. Healing is thereby reconceived as an unrealizable but nevertheless essential quest to achieve oneness with elemental energies and spiritualities that are glimpsed in various cultures according to different but complementary symbolologies. This cure, never completely won, involves a certain almost sacrificial loss of self that opens the reader to the sort of otherness that can perhaps only occasionally be glimpsed residing in nature and in the animal world in particular. Xerri suggests that it is to this mysterious and perhaps sacred realm that the shamanic poet of Hughes' poetic imagination is able to reconnect us. This experience, though, is fleeting, and the consequences of redemption never being fully realised difficult, such that poetic healing for Hughes must be understood as a process, a quest to which we have to submit ourselves. We might foreknow it to be singularly lacking in any pragmatism, but a different and not unproductive energy plays itself out there, for, as Xerri quotes Hughes arguing in *Winter Pollen*, 'the sufferer suffers till *mana* can't hold off any longer – and so surrenders and heals the sufferer – and remains...at his, or her, disposal'. The associated submission of poet and reader to *el duende*, which, as Xerri reminds us, 'is a demonic earth spirit, a manifestation of earthiness and non-rationality, as well as an intense awareness of death', is also what opens up healing's potential. For healing, as Xerri reminds us, carries connotations deriving from Germanic and Old English that suggest senses of haleness and wholeness, and through poetry the apparently contrary effects of *duende* and *haelan* can somehow cohere, mysteriously but curatively. To this effect Xerri quotes Lorca – 'The magical property of a poem is to remain possessed by *duende* that can baptize in dark water all who look at it, for with *duende* it is easier to love and understand, and one can be *sure* of being loved and understood', since *duende* is 'the subtle bridge that unites the five senses with the

raw wound, that living cloud, the stormy ocean of timeless Love', such that (and the conclusion is Xerri's) 'healing and the wound are almost indistinguishable'.

We are clearly displaced, here, from a Shelleyan defence of poetry on the grounds of poets being the unacknowledged legislators of the world, or on any special faculty of approximation that the poet has in regard to the beautiful, through the establishing of a relation between the highest pleasure and its causes and of a thousand unapprehended combinations of thought. It is also more vital and elemental than the conception of I.A. Richards in *Principles of Literary Criticism* that poetry can satisfy an appetency, and that it is valuable on the grounds that anything is valuable which satisfies an appetency. Hughes' approach to the appetency which poetic healing can, as it were, satisfy without satisfying is rawer, earthier, essentialist, and more mythopoetic. It revisits for the twentieth century conceptions of the poet as vates and shaman, and finds in Nature not so a prompt for art 'making things either better than Nature bringeth forth, or, quite anew, forms such as never were in Nature', as Sidney had it, but the possibility for a *temenos* in which the alienation and ablepsy of contemporary utilitarian rationality can be tumultuously (for this, after all, is still Hughes we are speaking about) eased.

It is for the reader to discover Xerri's exploration of the above ideas through his careful tracing of their defensibility over a number of cogent close readings of Hughes' poetry, readings which range from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) to *River* (1983), and, indeed, to the poem 'Go Fishing' from the latter collection, which provides the line that supplies the study's shaping vision of a questing quiescence, a quiescent questing, where the loss of words might lead to an assumption into 'glistenings of lymph / As if creation were a wound / As if this flow were all plasm healing', but in which one must still 'Try to speak and nearly succeed / Heal into time and other people'. Admittedly, the reader may well feel that conceptions of healing in Hughes' poetry are difficult or differently considered in two quite different signature collections, *Crow* (1979) and *The*

Birthday Letters (1998): the one, as Xerri himself points out at the end of his Introduction, dominated by resistance to expiation and by the need for perpetuation of a jaundiced self, the other tracing an altogether quite different process of confessional healing to the stage where the poetry can say 'But then I sat, stilled'. But there remains much in *Ted Hughes' Art of Healing* to remind us of the uniqueness of Hughes' art, vision, and voice, and of its courage in reminding us that it is neither fatuous nor fanciful to continue to uphold poetry's restorative energies. And in the end as a reader one need be equal only to that courage, and not necessarily to the vision to which it tends, to find in Hughes' poetry and in Xerri's commentary a prompt to openness to healing, however one might wish to define that.

Prof. Ivan Callus

Dr. James Corby

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PREFACE

The main concern of this book is Ted Hughes' conception of poetry as a healing device. This study is geared towards interpretatively unveiling this healing quality in Hughes' poetic work and of evaluating the poet's notion of its significance for human civilisation.

Hughes is first of all viewed as a member of the immediate post-war generation and this serves as a platform from which to investigate Hughes' relationship with literary tradition. From this stems a discussion dealing with Hughes' refusal to comply with the prosaic poetic mode of the Movement poets and his willingness to work with those elements that were somewhat disregarded by the Movement. This study attempts to demonstrate how Hughes' vision is that of a cultural critic who perceives himself and his poetic talent as possessing a redemptive function. It attempts to trace the evolution of this mystical vision from its initial heavy concern with violence as a manifestation of the energy lacking in human beings to its ultimate celebration of human unity with 'the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe'.¹

Hughes' conception of poetry as ritual is intrinsically bound to his critique of the rational mode of being and its efforts to repress intrinsic elements of the human psyche. This discussion is conducted in the light of Hughes' reliance upon psychoanalytic ideas and his conception of the poet as some kind of shamanic figure. Ingrained in this is an elucidation of how Hughes' reading and translation of such poets as Janos Pilinszky and Vasko Popa among others made him aware of poetry's potential to act as a tool by means of which one can address the subconscious through myth. Hughes' adoption of alchemical motifs and his

¹ Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow*', *London Magazine*, January 1971, p. 9.

frequent references to different areas of the arcana also form part of this discussion, as does an inquiry of the uses of symbolism and literary allusions.

An investigation of the mythopoeic quality of Hughes' work is tied to an analysis of the influence exerted by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* upon Hughes' poetic method. This is partly comprised of a review of the intertextual echoes yielded by the poet's reworking of the myths of ancient civilisations and primitive religions for his own specific purposes. This study gives special importance to the quest motif Hughes adopted from literary tradition and it seeks to show how Hughes does not fully believe in the possibility of absolute healing, but suppresses his scepticism to focus on the beneficent aspects of the quest itself as a psychic and spiritual activity.

Even though this study attempts to be as comprehensive as possible in its efforts to understand Hughes' poetic healing method, it focuses primarily on the following volumes as indicative of the vision infusing his entire oeuvre:

- *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957)
- *Lupercal* (1960)
- *Cave Birds* (1978)
- *Moortown* (1979)
- *River* (1983)

The title of this monograph is partly a nod to the first book of criticism I ever read on Hughes' poetry and in fact I admit that the work of the many critics who throughout the years have contributed to the act of cultivating a better understanding and a deeper appreciation of this highly significant poet was for me immensely instructive. It is only with profound respect and admiration for their many accomplishments that I set out to augment what has already been written about Hughes' poetry by shedding light on an aspect of his work that I consider to be of crucial importance.

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INTRODUCTION

Ritualising in Words

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

.....

Every phrase and every sentence is an end and a beginning,
Every poem an epitaph.

T.S. Eliot – ‘Little Gidding’¹

Ted Hughes conceives of poetry as a magical medium by means of which we can communicate with our deeper selves, a magical tool that allows us to fully experience our emotions and to dig deeply into a psychic and spiritual underworld, in which are buried the forces that make us part of the natural world. A poem stirs the imagination and injects life and energy into the individual. A poem heals because like a ritual it is geared towards creating unity and wholeness out of fragmentation.

Hughes’ poetry is one that manifests both the negative impact created by the spiritual crisis in the contemporary world, as well as a healing energy that springs out of a vision of the sacredness and mystery of nature and the depths of the psyche. The quest motif is of fundamental importance in Hughes’ work since he is concerned with the human individual’s journey from self-imposed exile to wholeness and fulfilment. His major sequences deal with an archetypal male individual, guilty of crimes against nature and the female, who suffers intensely and in due course undergoes a transformation or individuation process that bestows him with redemption and salvation. For Hughes all art is ‘the psychological component of the autoimmune system... It consoles and heals

something in us... Poetry does it more intensely'.² Hughes believes that poetry has the power to make us relinquish our ordinary stances and make manifest psychic energies. This helps the individual to develop psychologically, spiritually and socially in a holistic manner. Art liberates mana energy and activates its healing properties. Throughout his career, Hughes' major preoccupation has been the issue of how art, and more specifically poetry, can serve a social and psychological function. The fact that since millennia before the advent of Christianity, song and poetry have been appreciated on the grounds that they in some way are therapeutic, is for Hughes evidential of those spiritual and psychic exigencies that poetry is fully able to appease. Hence this makes of poetry an inexorable necessity since it is a fundamental force working towards human and social health and welfare.

Among all possible approaches, it is an analysis of Hughes' critical writings that best provides us with the bedrock for a thorough understanding of the idea of art's healing function. A seminal text in this regard is that comprised by his introduction to *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*. Many of the things Hughes says about Baskin's drawings and sculptures can be applied to his own work as is attested by the following:

These images...place us within a sacred building, as if we were looking out through these icons and seeing the world's common light changed by them. Or else they place us outside looking in. Then we see through their symbols still further mysterious business going on round an altar. That deeper life...is not just deeper than ordinary life, or just more universal. It is elect and consecrated. One hesitates to call it religious. It is rather something that survives in the afterglow of collapsed religion (*WP* 84).

Here Hughes is not only speaking about the defamiliarisation devices of true artistic work, but also about the fact that these works act as portals leading us to the sacred realm. Art's ability to transport us to this extraordinary realm is closely related to its healing quality because it is there that we discover the laws by which we can sustain equilibrium in all our existential domains. Such artistic

compositions act as 'A passport between worlds usually kept closed to each other' (WP 86). Hughes is interested in Baskin's work because first and foremost it shows itself to possess 'real content', that is, the quality that makes a work of art a reflection of collective humanity and thus something evolving out of 'that plane of *participation mystique* which has produced the baffling records of natural man's parapsychological gifts' (WP 86-87). Hughes says that all Baskin's images flow out of the same source, to some extent a repository of archetypal wisdom; images that when assimilated by the viewer communicate to him something forgotten perhaps, but all the same something intrinsically his own: 'Once absorbed through the eye into the nervous system they dissolve back into the real knowledge and presence of it' (WP 88).

Hughes says that Baskin's images are germinated by the common suffering of humanity, 'they are drawn from the hard core of human pain' (WP 88). Both Baskin and Hughes present violence and horror in their work, both of them exhibit a fascination with that kind of horror Joseph Conrad and T.S. Eliot recognised as existing at the very centre of man's being, a horror whose acknowledgement is the first step in a process that culminates with the all too real possibility of glory. In Hughes and Baskin (or Baskin as Hughes reads him) the horror is inseparable from the source of glory: 'The balm of great art is desirable and might even be necessary, but it seems to be drawn from the depths of an elemental grisliness, a ground of echoless cosmic horror' (WP 91). Even though the Romantics forged Hughes' poetic sensibility, his merging of the sublime and the brutal finds its genuine source in Greek and Latin poetry and drama. This is why Hughes was so keen to work on versions and adaptations of Euripides and Seneca amongst others. The coalescence of horror and beauty is apprehended in something like Baskin's six-foot woodcut *The Hanged Man* (see Figure 1) and in Hughes' violently energetic creatures. This amalgamation of opposites, an 'ambiguous substance, simultaneously holy and anathema', forms an entity which Hughes claims to be synonymous with Federico Garcia Lorca's notion of the

duende, an entity that 'is the core of life, like the black, ultimate resource of the organism' (WP 92). This entity manifests itself most potently in moments of historical crisis, in works of art that are responding to the crisis; the implication being that for Hughes and Baskin the contemporary crisis is the state of civilisation's dispiritment. Hughes claims that this 'ectoplasmic essence...has a more familiar role as *mana*' (WP 93) and that the regenerative, healing quality of art is to a large extent identifiable with it. According to Hughes just as the artist is a wounded healer, civilisation, too, must acknowledge its wound and undergo a period of suffering that will be compensated with the attainment of exaltation:

Mana comes to the sufferer... Maybe *mana* is the body's natural response to grave hurt – a healing. Which would make it, more than metaphorically, redemption incarnate. And all historical cultures agree, it is purchased by suffering... The sufferer suffers till *mana* can't hold off any longer – and so surrenders and heals the sufferer – and remains...at his, or her, disposal (WP 93).

Hughes makes it quite explicit that art has taken on the qualities of a religion, in that it is concerned with aiding man to re-establish contact with the sacred realm and with healing his wound, which happens to be his divine essence and which was 'formerly the responsibility of religion' (WP 96). Hughes praises Baskin for the achievement of having 'salvaged that responsibility for the human form divine, and bestowed it again – on art' (WP 96). The wound can never be absolutely healed for it is what gives us our special identity, given our condition of perpetually walking the tightrope between the human and the divine. What can be healed is the malady of not acknowledging this wound and thus of having no sense of existential equilibrium. For Hughes any kind of 'healing is miraculous' and he claims that

The operation of art comes to the same thing, whichever way we describe it. Whether we say that it enacts...the most important event of all – the birth, in "hard and bitter agony", of the creative, healing spirit, the nativity of the redemptive divine gift, or that it demonstrates

the biological inevitability of art, as the psychological component of the body's own system of immunity and self-repair (*WP* 98).

It is easy to see why the concept of the *duende* played such an influential role in the formulation of Hughes' ideas on the issue of art's healing qualities. In 'The Play and Theory of the *Duende*' we find that for Lorca, the *duende* is a demonic earth spirit, a manifestation of earthiness and non-rationality, as well as an intense awareness of death. When a work of art is possessed by it, healing is possible. According to Lorca the mysterious, scientifically unexplainable *duende* 'is a power, not a work. It is a struggle, not a thought'.³ Both the artist and the receiver must engage in this 'struggle'. Lorca underlines the stipulation that for an individual to experience the *duende* that individual must be open to death. For him death is not mere termination, but is more significantly a phenomenon that allows a proper valuation of life to take place. The healing accorded by the *duende* is only possible once this fundamental tenet is fully grasped. Robert Graves' conception of the threefold muse, which also was highly influential on Hughes, contains such an awareness. Art is a product of the attempt to heal the manifold wounds inflicted by the *duende*. However, in no single artefact infused by the *duende* is denouement attainable and that is why healing is always possible:

In the healing of that wound, which never closes, lie the strange, invented qualities of a man's work. The magical property of a poem is to remain possessed by *duende* that can baptize in dark water all who look at it, for with *duende* it is easier to love and understand, and one can be *sure* of being loved and understood.⁴

The resilience of the wound guarantees the persistence of healing energies, for the *duende* is 'the subtle bridge that unites the five senses with the raw wound, that living cloud, the stormy ocean of timeless Love'.⁵ In this sense healing and the wound are almost indistinguishable.

At this point it is apposite to make a note of the etymology of a term central to Hughes' vision of poetry. The verb 'heal' derives from the Old English

'haelan', which comes from the Germanic, from the base represented also by 'whole'. The Old English meanings of 'heal' are those of restoring back to health by a variety of means and of making whole. Its Middle English meaning is that of repairing an unpleasant condition or set of relations. In late Middle English 'heal' refers to the activity of becoming whole once more by means of growth. From the times of Old English up to the first thirty years of the seventeenth century 'heal' as a noun meant welfare and prosperity, whereas up to the end of the sixteenth century the word connoted spiritual health or healing. The noun corresponds to the adjectives 'hale' and 'whole'. The former is the Northern dialectical representation of the Old English 'hal' which means 'whole'. 'Hale' means healthy, entire, unbroken. It is interesting to point out that 'holy' as a noun and an adjective derives from the Germanic base of 'whole'. The sense given to 'holy' in Old English was that of moral and spiritual perfection, freedom from contamination and in the last thirty years of the sixteenth century the word was given the sub-senses of absolute and complete. Our association of 'heal' with 'holy' is prompted by the fact that both to some degree denote wholeness, whose restoration Hughes recognises as the ultimate aim of poetry. Moreover, Hughes sees himself as the inheritor of such ancient British bards as the Celtic sixth century poet Taliesin who shared many of the characteristics that belong to the shaman. These bards fully believed in the sacredness of poetry and in the poet's magical abilities.

Since Hughes recognises the magical aspect of poetry, he sees it as the duty of any serious poet to set free those internal energies that allow us to survive as fulfilled men and women. The poet is thus akin to a tribal medicine man or shaman, who symbolically journeys to a psychic, natural and spiritual underworld and retrieves the energies needed to cure the sick. Like the shaman's magical drum, the poet's words, images, rhythms and symbols are the means by which this journey to the sacred world of the spirits is made possible, during which are derived the wisdom and energy required for the community's healing: 'The

results, when the shaman returns to the living, are some display of healing power, or a clairvoyant piece of information' (*WP* 57). In a way shamanism emphasises the idea that we are all part of the same spirit, our lives are intertwined together and not distinct from each other. Much like William Blake, W.B. Yeats and D.H. Lawrence, Hughes is a critic of the utilitarian rationalism he sees as being the main ideology of Western culture, among whose offspring is unconscientious industrialisation, which he blames for the destruction of his natal place. Early in his career Hughes showed an interest in animism, which he came to think of as an ideal curative alternative to the Western practical approach to the environment. It is widely recognised that shamanism grew out of animism, the belief that all natural things are living since they exist, and that all of them possess a spiritual reality. The shaman is thus an intermediary between the different levels of being that all natural things exist within and which should not be kept separate. When a shaman undertakes a spirit-journey he always has a specific target in mind and this is usually that of mending the internal balance of the community by providing proper guidance and strengthening the bonds with the spirit world or the natural energies. The spirit-journey is enacted either by means of dreams or a trance. Dreams, for Hughes as for C.G. Jung, are a therapeutic instrument utilised by the psyche to repair itself, and the symbol-producing function of dreams is a means by which our original mind can come back to consciousness in order for us to better understand it, given that it was rejected before we had a chance to do so. Jung was allured by the universal symbolism of shamanism, recognising in it the shaman's ability to tap the other world of the collective unconscious and exhume the wisdom of this archetypal universe hidden from ordinary perception. Both the Jungian collective unconscious and the shamanistic world of the spirits, realms replete with contents or beings that are considered to be subjectively real, are the inner world to which analytical psychologists, shamans and such poets as Seamus Heaney and Hughes believe they have recourse to. When consciously sought the wealth of wisdom, values and traditions rejected by modern civilisation and

allowed to sink into the psychic underworld makes itself manifest once more. Hughes believes that the poet like the shaman is the community's point of contact with the sacred. The shaman restores wellbeing to his patients and in this Jung saw a parallel to the psychoanalyst's ability to promote the individuation process in one's patients. Mircea Eliade emphasises the idea that shamans are 'those who experience the sacred with greater intensity than the rest of the community – those who, as it were, incarnate the sacred, because they live it abundantly, or rather "are lived" by the religious "form" that has chosen them'.⁶ In his 1964 review of Eliade's *Shamanism*, 'Regenerations', Hughes shows himself to be intrigued by the fact that shamanic practices and experiences are to a large extent universal. For him it is 'as if the whole activity were something closer to biological inevitability than to any merely cultural tradition' (*WP* 56). He uses this idea of fatality – 'once you've been chosen by the spirits, and dreamed the dreams, there is no other life for you, you must shamanize or die' (*WP* 58) – in relation to the poet's calling. For Hughes, the poet, like the shaman, is chosen by numinous forces and his role in the community can never be separated from the higher order he represents. However, this does not mean that the shamanic experiences proffered by Hughes' poetry are in some way intrinsically tied to the poet himself. To give too much emphasis to the poet as a shamanic figure is somewhat to make the mistake, made by many critics writing about Hughes' poetry, of assuming that what Hughes wrote can never exist independently of the dead poet who wrote it. Hughes' poetry presents the reader with shamanic experiences of renewal that obviously possess an autonomous existence and are available to all those open to the process of revitalising their being.

Hughes believes that a poet's foremost ambition should be that of curing the spiritual maladies afflicting the contemporary wasteland and in this he sees himself following in the footsteps of such poets as Blake, Yeats and Eliot. Hughes draws parallels between poetry and shamanism, saying that many shamanistic elements are 'the basic experience of the poetic temperament we call "romantic"'

and that the shamanic experience is basically 'one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event' (*WP* 58). In 'The Poetic Self', Hughes asserts that Yeats is a shamanic figure and this is because 'The classic moment for the advent of the messianic shaman, the Saviour, arrives...where the material hopes and resources of a people truly do fail' (*WP* 271). In Yeats, Hughes recognises the fundamental shamanic idea of the spiritual regeneration of the community. This is something he finds in Eliot, too, who 'is an even more extreme and characteristic example of the [shamanic] type' (*WP* 272). In this essay Hughes parallels the human unconscious with the divine infinity around which religions grew up and the poetic self for him is a product of the subliminal realm. The shaman's initiatory experience is similar to the death of one self and the birth of another. In a poet this experience is marked by the take-over of the ordinary self by the poet's true self, which in his case is the poetic self. The most significant idea that emerges out of all this is that for Hughes this process of death and rebirth is not the exclusive domain of shamans and poets only, but is open to everyone who wants to regenerate his being: 'any communion with that other personality, especially when it does incorporate some form of the true self, is healing, and redeems the suffering of life, and releases joy' (*WP* 275). All of the Everyman-protagonists of Hughes' major sequences embark on some form of journey of transformation, incorporating motifs associated with analytical psychology, shamanism and alchemy. For Hughes the most imperative notion is that the individual's death and rebirth pattern serves as a prelude to the same process of renewal that civilisation as a whole needs to embark upon for the amelioration of the human race.

In order to achieve his healing purpose the shaman devises symbols and myths associated with the cultural context he hails from and this is highly significant if one takes into account what Jung says in regard to the realm in which the transformation process takes place: 'The place or the medium of realization is neither mind nor matter, but that intermediate realm of subtle reality

which can be adequately only expressed by the symbol. The symbol is neither abstract nor concrete, neither rational nor irrational, neither real nor unreal. It is always both'.⁷ This speaks about the fundamental importance myths and symbols have for the realisation of human fulfilment. A careful interpretation of such material boosts the individuation process since myths and symbols are ultimately rooted in the objective unconscious. Dreams are one means by which unconscious material is made manifest; art is another. The ego is confronted by the subliminal and the necessary symbols are yielded thus aiding the healing of the psyche. For Jung the language of the unconscious is a symbolical one. He says that 'The true symbol...should be understood as an expression of an intuitive idea that cannot yet be formulated in any other or better way'; it 'is the intimation of a meaning beyond the level of our present powers of comprehension'.⁸ For Jung the poet possesses the role of an intermediary between the conscious world and the subliminal. His work gives form to the archetypal heritage of the objective psyche and 'Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking'.⁹ Poetry and art in general manage to heal the ailments of civilisation because 'the manifestations of the collective unconscious are compensatory to the conscious attitude, so that they have the effect of bringing a one-sided, unadapted, or dangerous state of consciousness back into equilibrium'.¹⁰

Rituals are symbolic of events taking place in an individual's inner reality. Exercitants in a ritual believe that during a ceremony they take leave of ordinary reality in order to sojourn to a mystical dimension and communicate with a sacred power more potent than themselves and which is capable of infusing them with its transcendent energy. For Hughes poetry possesses a ritualistic dimension and is akin to a religious experience. During a shamanic ritual both physical and magical realities are explored, the two distinct realms are conjoined and the ceremony celebrates this unity. Myths are a means of harnessing energy and for both the shaman and the poet energy manifests itself in song, which thus has a ritualistic

aspect. According to Michael Sweeting 'The shaman's song is based upon three factors; the energy, or ecstasy; the myth, expressed in some form of ritual; and a resulting catharsis or abreaction. These three components combine to produce healing, reintegration and answers to spiritual questions'.¹¹ Drumming and chanting are the means by which an extra-sensitive consciousness is entered and the exercitant is transported into the transcendent. In shamanic communities songs are regarded to be a manifestation of the spiritual world, while drumming allows the shaman to focus on his spirit journey, helps him to achieve a state of trance and to broaden his perception to the unfamiliar. The metrical structure of poetry can be seen as being somewhat parallel to the shaman's drumming activity especially since rhythm is a manifestation of the rhythmical nature of the human experience. In his review of C.M. Bowra's *Primitive Song*, Hughes admirably claims that these songs are an act of 'ritualizing in words' since they function as 'power-charms, tools and practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends, or deflecting the spirits of misfortune from planting their larvae in the psyche' (*WP* 34).

Eliade saw shamanism as the practice through which primitive tribesmen attempted to experience life *in illo tempore*, that is, the origin, a moment that took place in sacred time. Humanity knows that this happened in the past and that it is a lost paradise. It also knows that the present is profane time. For Eliade myths and rituals are a means of re-creating or re-experiencing sacred time. He says that 'The sacred is qualitatively different from the profane, yet it may manifest itself no matter how or where in the profane world because of its power of turning any natural object into a paradox by means of a hierophany'.¹² It is quite evident from Hughes' poetry that he sees the natural world as the manifestation of the sacred realm, harbouring primordial archetypes which must be retrieved in order for the ordinary world to be infused with new energy and meaning. This explains his mythopoeic proclivities towards nature and its creatures and his identification with the chaotic, mysterious, non-rational realm they constitute. Hughes' primary

allegiance is to the physical world of the senses, to the earth inseparable from its numinosity. In this he is similar to the Portuguese poet Eugenio de Andrade, with whom he shares a number of telluric and pagan qualities, as well as the idea that the vertex of poetry is a poetry 'trembling with light, coarse with earth, / murmuring with waters and with wind'.¹³ Eliade believes that the sacred and the profane form a kind of dialectic that gives meaning to both through complementarity. According to him myth is the plane on which sacred time and profane time are reconciled, while ritual is the means by which the profane is transcended and placed in synthesis with the sacred. In Hughes' poetry we witness a drive towards hierophany, which is usually achieved by means of natural and human referents acting in a ritualistic fashion and described in mythic terms.

Hughes' work is often discussed in terms of its mythopoeic qualities and a proper comprehension of what the poet understands by myth and why he values it so much is necessary for a thorough appreciation of what his poetry is communicating to the reader. In general, the creation and reading of myths is prompted by the human urge for perfectionism. One tends to value myths because one needs absolute answers, a vision of existence imbued with totality. This relates to the human urge to understand and order the universe, to feel secure and escape absurdity. Myth is necessarily symbolic and this feature opens up wide areas of possibility for humankind, since myth not only explains the physical world and human life, but it also provides a link to worlds otherwise inaccessible to us. Myth takes us to worlds beyond the confines of the human earth; it sustains worlds man needs to believe in. In this sense myth is transcendental and liberating. In the essay 'Myth and Education', Hughes concurs with Plato's notion that myths are ideal educational material since they serve the function of bridging what Hughes calls the inner and outer worlds. Myths are imaginative devices that help people to extend their existential boundaries and to acknowledge 'the holiness and seriousness of existence', as well as to foster 'a bright, manifold perception of universal and human truths' (*WP* 138). Myths are a necessary

possession for all members of a particular community and this is because they unite the people into a single collective mind; myths are shared knowledge and thus promote shared values and beliefs. Hughes makes the point that the possession of shared myths is equal to the possession of a shared consciousness. Stories 'are little factories of understanding'; they help us grow and they reveal to us wisdom about the world and ourselves; they 'light up everything relevant in our own experience' (*WP* 141). This is because no matter how old it is 'every story is still the original cauldron of wisdom, full of new visions and new life' (*WP* 142). According to the poet, myths are a binding element and the repository of a community's cultural and spiritual wealth. Myths and mythic elements transfer meanings from one member of the group to another and the area of understanding they cover is broader than that of any other communicative device. Hughes also implies that when a writer or any other kind of artist possesses the ability to communicate by means of mythic material then 'complete communication' is possible since every 'signal illuminates' every group member 'with the voltage of the whole group's awareness and energy' (*WP* 310). A perennial issue in Hughes' work is man's detachment from nature and the cosmic pattern that man tries to set himself up against. The present ecological crisis is fruit of this alienation and Hughes' way of counteracting the damage is by entrusting us with myths and the paradigms that constitute them, which show us how we can reinstate ourselves within nature's sacred pattern, a pattern hubristically rejected to our own loss and misfortune. The poet believes that being nature's offspring, wisdom and healing can be found within ourselves. His mythic poetry is meant as a guide on this inward journey.

Hughes mentions the fact of 'how uncannily similar...myths are all over the world' (*WP* 152). For him this implies that the artist possesses the ability of tapping an inner world, a world available to all those who will themselves to explore it. Some distinctly recognisable works of art are one means by which this is made possible since they are vested with the energy of the inner world. The

reader of such a text is affronted by a doorway that leads him into an inner realm, in which place he learns how to maintain equilibrium in all existential spheres. Hughes makes it quite clear that once myths are learnt they take a life of their own, they work in the imagination and extend the possibilities of understanding: 'New revelations of meaning open out of their images and patterns continually, stirred into reach by our own growth and changing circumstances' (*WP* 141). A work of art allows us to creatively investigate multiple dimensions of being, to fish in the chaos and retrieve further potential: 'A simple tale, told at the right moment, transforms a person's life with the order its pattern brings to incoherent energies' (*WP* 153).

The inner world speaks a language very much different from our own verbal one. It is a spiritual language that Hughes feels we are losing the ability to comprehend and communicate in. It was exactly this kind of language that he tried to utilise in the 1971 dramatic production of *Orghast*. The ineffable entity within us is for Hughes 'a truth under all truths. Far beyond human words' (*WP* 125). Some singular works of art put us in contact with it and that, for Hughes, is their primary function: the extension of our being beyond the constraints of the outer world. Such works are woven with something akin to magic and it seems that for Hughes part of the true value of something like a poem is its ability to signpost the way to this extraordinary realm. In 'Keats on the Difference between the Poet and the Dreamer', Hughes zealously maintains that true art is not so much valued for its content and subject matter as for its healing energies, which derive 'from a source in the biological core of an individual' (*WP* 250). The materials of poetry have to be 'selected by the healing energy itself', for if not 'the proper power and beauty of the "healing" substance will be that far vitiated' (*WP* 250). In the BBC radio programme 'Words and Experience', Hughes says that the majority of people are alienated from their inner experience, which in some ways they share with the collective. For Hughes 'to live removed from this inner universe of experience is also to live removed from oneself, banished from

ourself and our real life' (PM 123-124). He is of the opinion that since man's evolution of an 'enormous surplus of brain' he has been marked by 'The struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self' (PM 124). Religion has been one means towards this end, but the one that is truly rewarding is art and most especially poetry. Hughes acknowledges the fact that it is sometimes possible to find the 'Words that will express something of the deep complexity that makes us precisely the way we are... And when words can manage something of this, and manage it in a moment of time, and in that same moment make out of it all the vital signature of a human being...we call it poetry' (PM 124). Even though by means of most of these ideas, Hughes bolsters further his mystification of art's healing qualities, they come as no surprise given that Hughes regards his own work as a return to the main tenets of magical poetry as expounded by Graves in *The White Goddess*.

In the 1993 essay 'Myths, Metres, Rhythms', Hughes maintains that mythic communication is harder to achieve nowadays since the kind of intimacy once shared by a community is now no longer existent. Contemporary urban citizens are becoming ever more alienated from what was previously universal. Half of the predicament is due to the context they live in and the other half is a question of will. The 'atomization of shared "mythologies"...reflects the atomization of the deeper shared understandings' and this weakens or annihilates the healing potential of 'symbolic works' (WP 316). The problems Hughes mentions are presently becoming increasingly more onerous. They are the same problems tackled in Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor*, in which is exhibited a fear of the possibility of a colossal communication breakdown in a society made up of many insular subcultures that do not share an adequate mythical language. Both Lessing and Hughes are concerned with the artist's and every individual's role and responsibility in holding in abeyance such a scenario. In her novel, Lessing proposes a straightforward yet strenuous solution Hughes is fully concordant with: people must find the strength and means by which to

conciliate their personal realm and the collective realm that unifies all human beings.

Hughes believes that human beings live in the inner and outer world simultaneously. These two worlds are 'intricately interdependent' and 'we can't ignore one and concentrate on the other without accidents. Probably fatal accidents' (*WP* 143-144). For Hughes the inner world is 'a region of events' (*WP* 144) that we cannot perceive objectively. The modern attempt to do so has resulted in its complete estrangement from us. Hughes argues that since 'the eye of the objective imagination is blind' in regard to the inner world, contemporary culture has 'solve[d] the problem by never looking inward' (*WP* 145). This attitude, for Hughes, is akin to a spiritual suicide. It has become 'a modern ideal' that has grown out of all proportion with 'the lowering prestige of religious awareness' (*WP* 146). Hughes' arguments are an attack on the dehumanisation process triggered off by the Industrial Revolution and his frustration is fuelled by the idea that 'the prevailing morality of our time...is a morality utterly devoid of any awareness of the requirements of the inner world. It is contemptuous of the "human element"' (*WP* 146). The only hope lies in the possibility that after the death of religion the inner world is allowed to be wholly embodied by art. For Hughes myths are the voice of the imagination, which as a faculty conjoins the inner and the outer world. Myths give form to the former and connect it to the latter. The imagination is a divine faculty and it makes us human. For Hughes art possesses the religious function of giving us salvation, healing our spirit and liberating the inner world. The laws that constitute 'the formula that reconciles everything, and balances every imbalance' (*WP* 151) are discovered by means of art:

The character of great works is exactly this: that in them the full presence of the inner world combines with and is reconciled to the full presence of the outer world. And in them we see that the laws of these two worlds are not contradictory at all; they are one all-inclusive system; they are laws that somehow we find it all but impossible to

keep... They are the laws, simply, of human nature. And men have recognized all through history that the restating of these laws, in one medium or another, in great works of art, are the greatest human acts... We recognize these works because we are all struggling to find those laws, as a man on a tightrope struggles for balance... So it comes about that once we recognize their terms, these works seem to heal us (*WP* 150-151).

In a number of essays, foremost amongst which is 'Inner Music', Hughes identifies poetry with religious or mystical rituals. In this he echoes Lawrence's idea that "The man who has lost his religious response *cannot* respond to literature or to any form of art, fully: because the call of every work of art, spiritual or physical, is religious, and demands a religious response'.¹⁴

Perhaps for Hughes the most enriching aspect of shamanism is the idea that the universe is a holistic phenomenon infused with life and energy, within which every individual has a role. This idea of wholeness is something Hughes also encountered in Eastern mysticism, which has been shown to be close to the main discoveries of subatomic physics. The basic world-view of Eastern mysticism is one based on the idea of the intertwinement of all things, everything being a manifestation of the cosmic wholeness that in Hinduism is called Brahman, in Buddhism Dharmakaya and in Taoism Tao. According to the theoretical physicist Fritjof Capra, particle physics pushes forward the same idea, 'that the constituents of matter and the basic phenomena involving them are all interconnected, interrelated and interdependent; that they cannot be understood as isolated entities, but only as integrated parts of the whole'.¹⁵ Whereas Newtonian physics is a science based on the idea of the predictability of effects, subatomic physics refutes this, saying that chance is the only law of the particles that make up the universe, which can only be observed when in interaction. An elementary particle is not distinguishable from its relationships, and different fluctuating connections are what determine the overall texture. These particles, with their tendencies to exist, challenge our notions of life and death since everything forms part of nature's organic energy. Interdependence and interconnectedness are the

reality of the subatomic level and the Cartesian differentiation between mind and matter is disproved. Unlike Isaac Newton's and Rene Descartes' world-view, subatomic physics, like Eastern philosophy, promulgates a holistic, ecological world-view. Hence the Eastern law of alternating opposites and complementarity is given credence over the Western law of non-contradiction. The new physics teaches us that many of our clearly defined concepts are nothing more than intellectual constructs which have little validity at the subatomic level. In Eastern thought this idea was always of seminal importance and thus an awareness of cosmic wholeness has long been given homologation, an awareness that undermines such rampant practices as materialism, fear of death and xenophobia.

For the theoretical physicist and scientific thinker David Bohm 'the widespread and pervasive distinctions between people...which are now preventing mankind from working together for the common good, and...for survival, have one of the key factors of their origin in a kind of thought that treats *things* as inherently divided, disconnected, and "broken up" into yet smaller constituent parts. Each part is considered to be essentially independent and self-existent'.¹⁶ According to him 'wholeness is what is real, and...fragmentation is the response of this whole to man's action, guided by illusory perception, which is shaped by fragmentary thought'.¹⁷ What he proposes is that man learns to think of the totality as a whole and not continue to perceive it as a fragmented totality. He calls this new mode of viewing the world '*Undivided Wholeness in Flowing Movement*',¹⁸ hence taking into account both the unity and dynamism of reality. If man 'can include everything coherently and harmoniously in an overall whole that is undivided, unbroken, and without a border...then his mind will tend to move in a similar way, and from this will flow an orderly action within the whole'.¹⁹

In Hughes' early collections nature is described as being somewhat malevolent, but this intrinsically is a perception projected by a human consciousness that seeks a means of justifying its exploitation of nature. This human consciousness is terrified of nature's admirable violence, judging it in

terms of its own destructive violence. It is here that the Gravesian concept of the three-fold muse comes into play, this for Hughes being partly a representation of nature. Nature, just like the goddess, possesses different aspects to it, but which particular aspect manifests itself depends on the mode of perception of the person standing in relation to it. Humanity, through the hubristic acts of detaching itself from the patterns of nature and of refusing to acknowledge the latter's sacredness, has lamed itself and it can never regain its health unless reconciliation is effected with the true cosmic forces it cannot hope to eclipse. Hughes concurs with the majority of Bohm's concepts and in his work he calls for a biocentric vision as opposed to an anthropocentric one, given that the intellectual tendency to compartmentalise everything and refuse to perceive connections, patterns and holistic truths is detrimental to the general health of humanity and the only habitable place it knows. For Hughes art and the imagination have the role of healing divisions, uniting opposites and restoring balance and harmony. Part of this endeavour can be achieved if human beings cease to embrace a schizophrenic mode of perception that distances them not only from their outer world but even from their inner one.

Hughes' and Bohm's ideas are to a large extent corroborated by the fact that both relativity theory and quantum theory are 'demanding a new, non-fragmentary world view'.²⁰ The theory of relativity, for example, shows that the previously differentiated concepts of space and time in fact form the four-dimensional space-time. According to Capra, the latter is comparable to the mystics' higher plane since it occurs 'in a higher dimension, and like that experienced by the mystics it is a dynamic unity, because the relativistic space-time reality is an intrinsically dynamic reality where objects are also processes and forms are dynamic patterns'.²¹ During meditation the mystic is able to go beyond the three-dimensional world in which 'language and thought patterns have evolved...and experience a totally different reality where all opposites are unified into an organic whole'.²² Both quantum theory and Eastern mysticism 'force...us

to see the universe not as a collection of physical objects, but rather as a complicated web of relations between the various parts of a unified whole'.²³ In particle physics it is not valid to speak of observer and observed, much more apposite to use the term 'participator'. For Eastern philosophers the mystical experience is unattainable unless the boundaries between observer and observed disintegrate and subject and object coalesce into an indissoluble oneness. The latter state is attained when the individual ego is allowed to merge with an undifferentiated whole. In the light of all this we are better able to understand Hughes' act of bidding us to 'Join water', 'Lose words' and 'Heal into time and other people' (R 42).

Throughout his career Hughes edited or translated the works of many influential writers and some Eastern European poets who to some extent served an instrumental role in the moulding of Hughes' work were Zbigniew Herbert, Czeslaw Milosz, Miroslav Holub, Marin Sorescu and Janos Pilinszky. However, the one who truly marked his verse and to whom Hughes is most similar is the Serbian poet Vasko Popa. Many of the themes Hughes frequently plumps for – death, futility, survival, endurance and regeneration – he encountered in the compassionate, horror-laden poetry of these poets. Their austere, direct verse is infused with what Herbert calls 'a sense of responsibility for the human conscience'.²⁴ Even though these poets give voice to their respective nations' sufferings and struggle for survival, yet their vision is very much a universal one and with this Hughes, the poet of English rural life as it had never been described before, felt a strong sense of kinship. In his 1969 introduction to Popa's *Collected Poems*, Hughes restates the idea that poetry's purpose is a regenerative one, and he applauds Popa for staying true to this: 'There is no sense of surrender to the dream flow for its own sake or of relaxation from the outer battle. In the world of metamorphoses and flights the problems are dismantled and solved, and the solution is always a practical one.'²⁵ In his poetry Hughes battles the same ever-mutating opponent Popa, Pilinszky and other post-Auschwitz poets confront over

and over again, for as Michael Parker points out Eastern European poets and a writer like Sylvia Plath underscore the fact that 'Nazism...is not a phenomenon neatly located in the historical past, but a permanent feature of the human identity'.²⁶

Hughes like Pilinszky is given to frequently allude to Christ's passion. Both poets use the crucifixion as a metaphor for the self-annihilating ordeals of life that must be endured if regeneration is to ensue. Pilinszky's poems 'with their "terrible beauty"', redeem the experience, become incarnate offerings, acts of atonement to the crucified dead'.²⁷ The dead are not only the victims of the concentration camps, but all those who die metaphorically, as is the case with the protagonists of Hughes' sequences; experience moments of extinction that then regale them with moments of creative life, that is, if they are up to the challenge of death and rebirth. The paradox of Pilinszky's poetry, as that of Hughes violent nature poems, Baskin's *The Hanged Man* and Heaney's bog poems, is that while presenting a brutal, horrific order, a humanity stripped of value and significance, we encounter all this in poems made of 'an eerie glowing depth of hieratic beauty'.²⁸ As Hughes makes clear in his 1976 introduction to Pilinszky's *The Desert of Love*, even though 'All words seem obsolete or inadequate' in face of the human potential for destruction, we cannot but feel possessed by the 'religious activity' of the poetry itself: 'Yet out of this apparently final reality rise the poems whose language seems to redeem it, a language in which the symbols of the horror become the sacred symbols of a kind of worship'.²⁹ Art grants humanity with the desired absolution through 'a feat of homely consecration: a provisional, last ditch "miracle" achieved by means which seem to be never other than "poetic"'.³⁰

Even though Hughes is an essentialist who regards language as a healing tool that can mediate binary opposites and integrate psychic energies shared by all human beings, ideas rejected by post-structuralism and deconstructionism, with their emphasis upon the arbitrary relationship between signified and signifier and the idea that the text takes on significance only during the free interaction between

it and the reader; still, as Leonard M. Scigaj points out, 'One of the most striking postmodern qualities about this very structuralist poet is his working axiom that any achieved integration and harmony is a very fragile and temporary state, always subject to being undermined by change and further experience'.³¹ Our discussion begins and ends with an inquiry of Hughes' idea that healing is the end of poetry, something that he feels certain to be unattainable in its absolute manifestations. Hence every poem is an act of closure that hints at the actuality of continuation, an epitaph indicating the presence of the great beyond. Healing is an ongoing process with no definite denouement. Its absolute manifestation is well nigh impossible and Hughes' poems repeatedly point out the absence of this quality even while providing temporary compensation and the impetus for the quest, which in itself is therapeutic since it promotes transformation. A single poem is symbolic of a healing process that is practically unending; it provides something powerful but which is not consummately satiating:

...every poem that works is like a metaphor of the whole mind writing, the solution of all the oppositions and imbalances going on at that time. When the mind finds the balance of all those things and projects it, that's a poem. It's a kind of hologram of the mental condition at that moment, which then immediately changes and moves on to some other sort of balance and rearrangement. What counts is that it be a symbol of that momentary wholeness.³²

A short poem is not able to do more than tap a mythic paradigm, but for that mythic paradigm to be fully exhibited something more extensive and holistic like a poetic sequence is required. In fact, most of Hughes' collections are not mere groupings of disparate poems, but each single part finds its fullest scope in conjunction with the rest, all of which is usually informed by the same constant vision that threads through all his work. In the following chapters we investigate how the ideas explored above are put to work in Hughes' poetry and our choice of texts is governed by the impetus to disclose and understand Hughes' healing vision. An exposition of Hughes' poetics of allusion, symbolism and

intertextuality is of paramount significance to this investigation. *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960), which are dealt with in the next chapter, strike a balance between Thanatos and Eros whereas *Wodwo's* (1967) emphasis is upon destruction with no possibility of regeneration. In the unfinished sequence that goes into the making of *Crow* (1972) the need to survive and perpetuate a jaundiced self annihilates all possibility of renewal. Crow does not desire expiation because he refuses to transform himself through death's powers of transfiguration. Crow's egocentricity exhibits a lack of faith, which together with courage is a pre-requisite to any transformation process. Hughes' first two volumes give an indication of the route to follow, whereas from *Cave Birds* (1978) onwards Hughes mostly portrays one quest after another concluding with the promise or the actual achievement of success. In all these volumes the universe and nature are depicted as constituted of both creative and destructive forces working in complementarity. In *Wodwo*, *Crow* and *Gaudete* (1977) the emphasis falls predominantly on the destructive facet even though this must be understood to be a by-product of the narrow-minded mode of perception Hughes chastises throughout all his work. It is for this lack of affinity that the aforementioned books have been to a large extent omitted from our inquiry. Those sequences that form the backbone of our discussion are specifically concerned with the issue of healing and are united by the motifs of quest and regeneration through self-sacrifice, as experienced by the individual and the community. It is for this reason and other expeditious motives that we do not go into such collections as *Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Flowers and Insects* (1986) and *Wolfwatching* (1989), and even though *Birthday Letters* (1998) is very much concerned with catharsis its highly personal constitution is seen to be at variance with the relatively collective one of the majority of the work discussed. This can facilely lead to the accusation that we are tackling an aspect of Hughes' work that is somewhat static in nature, however, in deflating this argument we must

inchoately remark that this kind of stasis is as refreshingly dynamic as no other kind of stasis.

Notes

- ¹ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 221.
- ² Drew Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry', *Paris Review*, 134 (1995), 55-94 (p. 82).
- ³ Federico Garcia Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, ed. and trans. by Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998), p. 49.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, p. 58.
- ⁵ *Ibid*.
- ⁶ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Bollingen Series LXXVI (1964; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 32.
- ⁷ C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works: Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, ed. by Herbert Read and others, 2nd edn, vol. 12 (1953; London: Routledge, 2000), p. 283.
- ⁸ C.G. Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art and Literature*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull (1966; London: Ark Paperbacks – Routledge, 1993), pp. 70-76.
- ⁹ *Ibid*, p. 82.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 97-98.
- ¹¹ Michael Sweeting, 'Hughes and Shamanism', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 70-89 (p. 76).
- ¹² Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. by Rosemary Sheed (1958; London: Sheed and Ward, 1993), p. 30.
- ¹³ Eugenio de Andrade, *Forbidden Words: Selected Poetry of Eugenio de Andrade*, trans. by Alexis Levitin (New York: New Directions, 2003), p. iii.
- ¹⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*, ed. by Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 155.
- ¹⁵ Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*, 3rd edn (1975; London: Flamingo – Harper Collins, 1992), p. 142.
- ¹⁶ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order* (1980; London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p. xi.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 11.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. xi.
- ²⁰ *Ibid*.
- ²¹ Capra, p. 162.
- ²² *Ibid*, p. 163.
- ²³ *Ibid*, p. 150.

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- ²⁴ Quoted in Michael Parker, 'Hughes and the Poets of Eastern Europe', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 35-51 (pp. 41-42).
- ²⁵ Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (1997; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2003), p. xxvi.
- ²⁶ Parker, p. 43.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 43-44.
- ²⁸ Janos Pilinszky, *The Desert of Love*, trans. Janos Csokits and Ted Hughes (1976; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1989), p. 11.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 11-12.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 12.
- ³¹ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers – G. K. Hall, 1991), p. 24.
- ³² Heinz, p. 81.



Figure 1 – Baskin's *The Hanged Man*
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CHAPTER 1

The Voyeur's Prayer:

The Hawk in the Rain (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960)¹

The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea,
and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of
man.

William Blake – 'Proverbs of Hell'²

Those messengers of love whom your father sends,
Do you not know those winds breathing life at you?
Does not that word strike home which, bright, the
Vigilant god from above dispatches?

Friedrich Holderlin – 'The Fettered River'³

Hughes' first two collections of poetry are an apposite demonstration of his ideas about poetry's healing function. The two collections move hand in hand in laying out an exposition of the maladies the poet perceives in contemporary civilisation, and in enacting a kind of ritual that is meant to amend the lack of equilibrium between many factors that once operating harmoniously between themselves lead to a beneficent mode of being. Hughes' vision in these first two books is at times tinged with the kind of bleakness that finds its utmost manifestation in some of his later volumes. However, when one contrasts *The Hawk in the Rain* and *Lupercal* with *Wodwo*, *Crow* and *Gaudete* one immediately notices that the main difference lies in the fact that the poetry of the earliest collections is ultimately geared towards effecting psychic, natural and spiritual unity and concord, even though Hughes rarely deludes himself with the idea that these qualities can be achieved in their absolute manifestations.

When *The Hawk* first appeared in the late 1950s the heavy influence of such poets as Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Lawrence and Yeats was immediately apparent. The vision of the latter two poets, in adjunction to that of Blake, was seen to particularly inform Hughes' own. In these predecessors, Hughes encountered the exact patterns of thought he found himself conceiving over and over again. As Scigaj points out, Hughes is most similar to Blake, Yeats and Lawrence 'in their critique of the empirical tradition of [John] Locke and Newton that led to the Industrial Revolution, their critique of Protestant Christianity, and their advocacy of unitive states of being and visionary perception to repair the divorce of the perceiving subject from its object'.⁴ All three poets, as well as Hughes himself, make strong demands for a holistic vision in their works, a merging of opposites and polarities, and the maintenance of harmony between all the elements that go into the making of a human being. The nightmare of all four poets is the analytical, utilitarian, rational, destructive Crow. Through all four poets runs the basic idea that when non-rational psychic energies are repressed into the subconscious for too long the consequences of this act are terribly destructive. Violence (which in Hughes can either be of the positive or the negative kind) is one direct result of repression and nature's violence in Hughes' poems is a manifestation of the energy human beings have alienated themselves from and thus have grown to fear and loath. Like Crow, human beings have exiled themselves from both the nature outside them and that within them.

The cure for the contemporary ailment, Hughes implies, is that of confrontation and ultimate embrace. Stuart Hirschberg remarks that 'although the universe revealed by Hughes is an alien and terrifying one characterized by incessant violence and sinister permanence, he calls upon the reader to face the hellish nature of existence without faltering'.⁵ Healing comes about through the confrontation of non-identical forces that have mistakenly been set up as antagonists, but which are in reality of a complementary nature. Hughes' poems present us with the confrontation between a human subject and his Other, a

confrontation that the reader is involved in either through his identification with the poem's speaker or else by virtue of the fact that he represents one of the sides in this redemptive struggle. If the Other is not repressed but confronted and accepted then healing ensues. Hughes believes that poetry is therapeutic because a poem is capable of immersing us within the confrontation or else of opening up a door leading into the numinous, which is both an inner and an outer reality. He firmly believes in the idea that poetry is a medium for mystical and atavistic energies that reside within the heart of the cosmos, however, a careful scrutiny of Hughes' work yields us with the counter idea that in spite of this conception of poetry, there still runs through his poems a kind of postmodernist awareness of the inadequacy of language to fully manifest its anagogic referent. In 'Phaetons' (HR 36), a literary work's ability to capture us and take us beyond the ordinary is depicted quite grotesquely:

The gentle reader in his silent room
Loses the words in mid-sentence –

The world has burned away beneath his book
A tossing upside-down team drags him on fire
Among the monsters of the zodiac.

Besides being a continuation of tradition, Hughes' poetry also betokens a break with tradition. Robert Conquest's 1956 anthology *New Lines* marked an explicit reaction to the kind of poetry that preceded that of the Movement poets. Eliot, Thomas and Graves, all highly influential on Hughes' poetic germination though very much different from each other, shared the idea of tackling big thematic issues and of resorting to myth and symbolism in their work. Many of the leading poets of the 1950s rebelled against such a poetic method, seeing it as resulting in intentionally obscure and complex poetry, a pretentious kind of verse that is derided by the cynical, down-to-earth works of such poets as Philip Larkin, Donald Davie, Kingsley Amis and D.J. Enright. Even though Hughes was one of the contributors to Conquest's book it was immediately apparent that his kind of

poetry was out of tune with that of the other contributors, with the probable exception of Thom Gunn. If we really had to find someone aesthetically and spiritually akin to Hughes it would have to be the poet Peter Redgrove. Both artists express the idea that poetry may be used as a tool to bring about human unity with nature and the feminine and both of them tend to regard the poet as a shaman. Hughes also shares an affinity with the Angry Young Men movement, who like him satirically and parodically predate upon post-war urbanites intent solely upon shutting their minds to further violence. The latter attitude is the main sin of the Movement poets according to Hughes, who in an interview with Ekbert Faas in 1971 said the following:

All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park... Now I came a bit later. I hadn't had enough. I was all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there.⁶

Even though from the above comments we notice that Hughes is sympathetic in regard to those post-war poets who wanted to preserve the ordinariness of life in face of war's monstrous interference, we know that Hughes does not embrace their 'sceptical commonsensical mode of expression'.⁷ John Redmond and Alan Sillitoe point out that 'While the Movement could blame the rampant phantasmagoria of the unconscious for the war, phantoms which now ought to be repressed, Hughes saw the war as a consequence of the inner warps and wounds of the western mind, damage he felt ought to be faced and healed'.⁸

According to Laurence Coupe such a Movement poet as Larkin superficially exhibits an aptitude for demythologisation. His disgust for the 'myth-kitty',⁹ however, fails to hide 'a mood of extreme yearning for some saving paradigm'.¹⁰ Coupe maintains that the myths of regeneration, creation and deliverance all find their echoes in Larkin's poetry of absence. Such poems as 'The Whitsun Weddings', 'The Trees' and 'Dockery and Son' accentuate the kind of emptiness the poet's subconscious can only fill up through recourse to myths.

Myth for Hughes is one of the means by which the poet can bridge the antagonistic forces he observes around him and within him. The need to attach one particular structure to the ones preceding it and the ones following it evolves out of a recognition of the fact that one can never arrive at a fulfilling and satisfactory end, only journey to it. Hughes' poems seek to symbolically represent the phenomena of the pre-symbolic realm, always conveying forward the notion that no single poem can adequately and appropriately manage to do so. So the idea is that one poem must always be followed by or latched onto another and another still. The process is unending but that process is regenerative, for the imagination (and the self it inhabits) is given room in which to expand beyond the constraints of an empirical mind. Door, window and eye images stand as symbols for the idea that the rational self must either allow the entry of the non-rational or else must seek to pass through that aperture into the non-rational. A harmonious confluence of the two antagonistic forces results in a healthy self. In this manner Hughes' poems act as doorways transcending the reader beyond language into the 'real', which for Hughes is the world of truth and authentic being.

Besides his derivativeness, Hughes in his first two collections exhibits the distinct characteristics of a new voice. This is quite apparent from even a very casual reading of his animal poems in *The Hawk* and *Lupercal*. Hughes' descriptions of the non-human world are not carried out in a Romantic or Georgian manner; Hughes speaks about nature in what he believes is nature's own voice. The sinewy language we are confronted with is one meant to exude all the energy resident in nature's very core. Hughes' use of language can be seen as an art dedicated 'to presenting the existence of something unrepresentable'.¹¹ The content of Hughes' poetry is not altogether that innovative, but the formal aspect of his work marks a challenge to established conventions. When *The Hawk* first appeared it was immediately apparent to literary critics and the poetry-reading public at large that what they were witnessing was an event of seminal significance. In fact, Hughes' influence upon later generations of poets was of

considerable proportions considering that one of his major followers is undoubtedly the Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney. The exuberance of Hughes' employment of language is partly due to the fact that his poetry to a large extent 'refuses the consolation of correct forms...and inquires into new presentations' in order 'to invent allusions to what is conceivable but not presentable'.¹² It is this that allows us to define Hughes as a postmodernist artist in Jean-Francois Lyotard's conception of the term. Hughes' opinion is that 'New art awakens our resistance in so far as it proposes changes and inversions, some new order, liberates what has been repressed, lets in too early whiffs of an unwelcome future' (*WP* 91). Those critics who reacted negatively to Hughes' early poems did so because they felt called upon to defend an outlook and style of life from the threat posed particularly, but not exclusively, by the violence of Hughes' verse. They launched themselves into an indictment of the latter because they felt certain as to what poetry ought to be. Hughes' work was undermining their standards of what is acceptable in poetry, but basically they were muddling up a number of his ideas, most especially mixing up Hughes' sense of violence with 'the ordinary violence of our psychotic democracy...our materialist, non-organic democracy'.¹³ Hughes could foretell that quite soon the controversy would fizzle out and he admits to his ambition that what he wants his poetry to do is not merely to be temporarily radical, but to supply something everlasting: 'But when this incidental novelty has been overtaken or canonized, some other unease remains. At least, where the art is serious and real...it remains' (*WP* 91). This 'unease' is one of the conditions of the healing process, which necessitates an overhaul of our being.

For Hughes nature is an essentially numinous phenomenon and the modern human individual is the prodigal son alienated from the divine cosmos he formerly belonged to; nature is a divine power that is perceived as feminine by the poet. The vicious kind of poetry we find in Hughes' early period stems from the idea laid down by Graves in *The White Goddess* that the three-fold goddess will appear as particularly malevolent to all those who shun her and deliberately set

themselves at an extreme pole from her. In Graves' study we are told that 'The poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth: his heart breaks with longing and love for her'.¹⁴ In the early poem 'Song' (*HR* 20), Hughes presents us with the complementary, antipodal facets of the White Goddess, which are by extension those of Mother Nature too. In the poem we find a portrait of the poet's difficult relationship with the goddess, who is capable both of merciless destructiveness and loving creativeness:

O lady, when the tipped cup of the moon blessed you
You became soft fire with a cloud's grace;
The difficult stars swam for eyes in your face;
You stood, and your shadow was my place:
You turned, your shadow turned to ice
O my lady.

What is important to note in 'Song' is the last stanza's portrayal of the goddess' revenge, anticipated by the speaker on those guilty of sidelining the importance of an ecological and psychic balance. Hughes concurs with Graves' idea that poetry's application 'was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born' and that now this same application acts as 'a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down...and brought ruin upon himself and his family'.¹⁵ However, more than a mere reminder, Hughes' poetry is an attempt to revivify the creature whose ailments it describes. This is effected through the act of evoking an energy the poem's speaker (and its reader) is meant to feel in awe of and which energy he is compelled to acknowledge as a suppressed or missing element of his psyche or spirit. For Scigaj, Hughes' depiction of violence 'is really an invitation to explore one's repressed demonic energies within an organized structure that ultimately integrates these energies into a coherent whole'.¹⁶ Scigaj suggests that Hughes' poems and the sequences in which they are organised are similar to Buddhist and Hinduist mandalas, which are meant to engender wholeness in the person contemplating their intricate structures. A poem, just like a ritual, brings

together opposite forces and infuses them with unity and harmony and this to some extent heals the person participating in the poem, or ritual.

Keith Sagar claims that 'Hughes is a master of hyperbole'¹⁷ and he applauds him for managing to achieve something that has not happened since Andrew Marvell's day. In 'The Hawk in the Rain' (HR 11), Hughes' depiction of nature is close to terrible. Nature is a hungry beast pursuing the trudging man, battling all his efforts at survival, hampering his movements forward, chaining him to her even though he struggles to be free of her sucking grasp. Man is described as a creature thirsty for independence from the very womb that bore him, which is also his repulsed tomb. The poem is written in the first person and through this Hughes emphasises the idea that the speaker's negative perception of the external world arises out of his warped mental framework, a product of social and cultural forces. The hawk is at the extreme pole from the speaker; it possesses freedom while being a thread in nature's pattern. Living in harmony with the anagogical forces, living within them, fills the hawk with energy and power, makes 'him' their representative. In a sense Hughes is pointing out that nature as a divine entity is theriomorphic. The speaker yearns for 'the master- / Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still' and he envies its 'diamond point of will'. He is a 'Morsel in the earth's mouth' while the hawk's 'wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet, / Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air'. The word 'hallucination' is not meant to deflate the hawk's centrality, as Sagar and Dennis Walder seem to suggest. It alludes to the shaman's hallucination when he embarks on his magical flight, his most intense act of communication with the numinous. The word 'hallucination' is part of the technique employed by Hughes to stress the idea that in dreams everything assumes the guise of the extraordinary and that it is perhaps only in the surrealistic landscape of dreams that we perceive the truth. The language of 'The Hawk in the Rain', with its strong alliteration and powerful verbs and images, serves the purpose of creating a hallucinatory effect that is experienced by both speaker and reader.

Hughes' animals are the embodiment of primordial energies that cannot be appropriated by human consciousness and language in the sense that they cannot be properly represented by the symbolic order. Hughes' animals are hallucinatory, dream-like, larger-than-life; they act as pointers towards a subconscious or spiritual store of energy that cannot be fully captured by language. Paradoxically, what such a poem as 'The Hawk in the Rain' attempts to do is symbolically represent the phenomena of the pre-symbolic realm. Confronted by an otherness that resists the self's attempts to assimilate it, the speaker (and the reader) is made to acknowledge the existence of a similar primal, non-linguistic reality within his own psyche, within the infinite depths of the unconscious, an unconscious which for Hughes is not (as for Jacques Lacan) linguistically structured. The man trudging through the mud is the man unwilling to go beyond consciousness and immerse himself in the subconscious. In the poem, the eye of the bird confronts the speaker and sets itself as an ideal, however, the poem ends immediately after the challenge has been put forward. The reader is left to contemplate the outcome of the meeting between what Thomas West distinguishes as a superior self and an inferior self. West sees in nature and the subconscious self an 'accusing eye' that 'sets in motion' a 'psychodrama'¹⁸ that recurs over and over again in Hughes' major poems. In 'The Hawk in the Rain', the bird represents the 'I' repressed in the subconscious, and therefore the struggle we witness is not solely that between man and external nature, but also that between a surface self and an inner self, or rational consciousness versus the non-rational unconscious, which Hughes seems to suggest is the inner nature binding us to outer nature. The inner self acknowledges the vitality the hawk stands for and wants its hawk-like nature to become manifest, however, it must first deal with the surface self, which feels threatened by the hawk and seeks to maintain its distance from the creature.

The hawk's interaction with the anagogic is denied to the speaker, as is the hawk's perfect death, which is part of a cycle and not a firm end, as the sceptic prefers to conceive of death. The hawk yields to death willingly and when 'the

ponderous shires crash on him' the hawk achieves further union with the earth. The hawk's eye/I challenges the speaker's self, one harbouring an anthropocentric vision. The hawk's eye 'hangs still' in the ecological pattern and when the hawk 'Fall[s] from his eye' and we see 'the round angelic eye / Smashed', we cannot think of this as the creature's failure, but as his utmost victory since now he can 'mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land' and achieve true oneness. Scigaj believes that embedded within this poem is the idea that 'Nature seems to attain an ecological balance effortlessly, without reflection. Humans must attain this same balance through conscious reflection and goal-directed action'.¹⁹ The person who refuses to accept the fact that death may come at any moment is a person unwilling to see in death the means by which to take stock of his life and of his potential. Wholeness and a recognition of his life's uniqueness is missing from that person's life because no end is anticipated. That person is living an inauthentic life in the Heideggerian sense of the term. The speaker in the poem is at fault because his goal is that of cutting himself off from nature, of creating a polarity between himself and the energy outside and within him. The speaker seeks to futilely overmaster a reality that is too powerful for him to even deny.

The poem's last few lines can be read both as the hawk's ultimate exultation in being reunited with the source it represents, as well as the speaker's desperate wish for the destruction of all that is superior to him. The speaker like the drowning man is constantly looking for some point of reference that will help him fight off the nothingness swallowing him, the fate he has loaded himself with. However, he fails to perceive the polestar right in front of him and while he acknowledges the superior power of the hawk he tries to belittle its strength by anticipating its death, completely misunderstanding the mysteries of nature:

That maybe in his own time meets the weather

Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down....

Here the speaker's tone is a quasi-vindictive one. His envy of the hawk's mythic stillness leads him to refute it as an extension of nature's immanent power. Like him the hawk will become a deserter and suffer nature's punishment. Like him the hawk will be destroyed while 'The horizons trap him'.

Hughes' poem owes something to Thomas' 'Over Sir John's Hill', in which 'The hawk on fire hangs still'.²⁰ Thomas' hawk like Hughes' is "at rest in the law" (*WP* 260) and this is because both creatures are an embodiment of nature. In Thomas' poem, language and imagery emphasise the idea that the hawk is equal to legal law, judging others with the same necessary harshness as that practised by a court of law. Nature's law and legal law are analogous because both maintain the all-needed balance. However, the speaker in Thomas' poem identifies himself with the heron, preferring this 'elegiac fisherbird' to 'the loft hawk' who calls others to "Come and be killed...".²¹ In a way 'The Hawk in the Rain' is also similar to Hopkins' 'The Windhover'. However, in the latter poem, Hopkins implies the idea that just as the falcon is symbolic of God so is the speaker, who fears God but is not repulsed by the falcon's magnificence and wants to make that quality his own: 'My heart in hiding / Stirred for a bird, — the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!'²² The graceful freedom of Hopkins' kestrel is that embodied by Christ himself to whom the poem is dedicated; it is a gracefulness that infuses the speaker himself through his act of admiration. The speaker of Hughes' poem is not similarly converted; he keeps on plodding through the mud, futilely evading death, in awe of the hawk but fearing it and probably even hating it. Even though Hughes' hawk is an incarnation of the numinous, it is hostile in regard to the speaker and this is probably because the God in Hughes' poem is the Old Testament God who will not easily suffer rejection, while the God in Hopkins' 'The Windhover' is the tolerance-preaching Christ. The speaker of Hughes' poem cannot believe in resurrection following one's death, either in the form of a Christian afterlife or, as is given to the hawk, one's reunification with the sacred realm out of which one sprang out.

In 'The Jaguar' (*HR* 12) the creature evoked is entirely symbolic of the energy within the heart of nature, which human beings are alienated from. Therefore when it comes face to face with the jaguar, 'the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized, / As a child at a dream'. In the first two stanzas humanity's destructive maltreatment or repression of nature is finely depicted, however, after the volta in the third stanza the reader is shown that ultimately something still survives the havoc. The jaguar is symbolic of that which cannot be repressed. The jaguar's rage is not directed solely towards the fact that it is encaged; its rage is a manifestation of non-rational life and energy and like Blake's tiger Hughes' jaguar is a personification of the divine. With hyperbolic gusto, Hughes describes how 'The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel'. The jaguar is a bomb 'On a short fierce fuse', threatening to blow away the cage and the crowd, disrupt the inane tranquillity of the zoo to which it does not belong. Its eye or self is 'satisfied to be blind in fire', that is, unwilling to follow in man's footsteps and fall from grace. Hughes does not project man's Fall as something worthy of praise since it has entitled us to lose the kind of energy possessed by the jaguar. Even though not extolling an animal's state of semi-consciousness as being better than human consciousness, Hughes does not refrain from pointing out that the latter, together with knowledge, makes it very hard for us to acquire salvation since it tends to narrow down our perception mostly to that which belongs to the profane realm we inhabit.

The act of encaging the jaguar is quite childish since it fails to kill the creature's energy:

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him

More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

Besides having the power of a mandala, the jaguar's movements are in a way comparable to a shamanic dance. This comes as no surprise since for North and South American Indians jaguars and shamans are to a large extent identical. In 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' (*W* 25-26), the creature acts in a ritualistic fashion, 'Muttering some mantrah, some drum-song of murder' and 'Going like a prayer-wheel' while 'Hurrying through the underworld'. The act of 'making his skin / Intolerable' derives from the shamanic rite of certain communities of shedding the skin and wearing a magical one in order to heighten the power of one's sensibility.

It is interesting to note that initially Hughes planned to end 'The Jaguar' (*CP* 1242) in a slightly different manner:

But what holds them, from corner to corner swinging,

Swivelling the ball of his heel on the polished spot,
 Jerking his head up in surprise at the bars,
 Has not hesitated in the millions of years,
 And like life-prisoners they through bars stare out.

Here we see that Hughes intended to much more explicitly emphasise the crowd's entrapment within their own world and consciousness, out of which they stare at the sacred freedom of the jaguar. However, this does not mean that the poet renounces the possibility of reprieve. For him it all boils down to a question of will: human beings possess the power to embrace the jaguar or to reject it. Olmec statuary depicts priests holding the jaguar boy and the jaguar god. These statues and figurines represent the jaguar qualities possessed by the priest, giving an indication of the human potential and capacity to transcend oneself beyond ordinary limits and thus forge links with the natural and the supernatural. The mystical and psychic energy embodied by the jaguar and the human relationship with this energy are explained by Hughes' own comments about the symbolic nature of the creature:

It is my belief that symbols of this sort work. And the more concrete and electrically charged and fully operational the symbol, the more powerfully it works on any mind that meets it. The way it works depends on that mind...on the nature of that mind... A jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects...he is a beautiful, powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is a supercharged piece of cosmic machinery, he is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation... Or he is simply a demon...a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy. The symbol opens all these things...it is the reader's own nature that selects. The tradition is, that energy of this sort once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one.²³

For Hughes, Blake's 'The Tyger' and Yeats' 'The Second Coming' are poems manifesting an 'upsurge' against negative forces, in the one case 'against the oppressive crust of the monarchies' whereas in the other 'against civilization itself, the oppressive deadness of civilization, the spiritless materialism of it'.²⁴ The symbols in both poems, just like the symbol in 'The Jaguar' and other poems by Hughes, are 'an irruption, from the deeper resources, of enraged energy – energy that for some reason or other has become enraged'.²⁵

According to Hirschberg in the poet's 'earliest animal poems, the process of writing the poem recreates the rite of blood brotherhood between the Shaman and his animal Helper... Hughes establishes a mystical alliance and "exchanges blood" with his animal familiars. Hughes makes contact with a feral energy at the heart of the cosmos, mindless, luxuriant, capable of bringing death and revitalizing the dead, a terrible power to be both summoned and feared'.²⁶ A poem is thus seen to be as one of the best means of channelling this wild energy for beneficial human purposes. 'The Thought-Fox' (*HR* 15) is most obviously a poem about the writing of a poem. The speaker recounts his experience of being possessed by a spirit that yields to him the gift of a completed poem. The poem's very first line is an allusion to the first lines of Blake's 'The Tyger'. Both poems evoke dark phantasmagoric forests out of which creep such creatures as the fox and the tiger, which are both illuminated by the brightness of the numinous natural world since both are its representatives. The description of the blank page

merges with that of the snow-covered landscape outside the window until we find it hard to distinguish the real from the imaginative. The act of creating a poem is an act of intense concentration, of meditation even. The 'loneliness' is saturated with the aura of a mysterious presence. The window looks on the outside but it is also a window inside the poet-persona's head. We are told that the fox is 'Something more nearer / Though deeper within darkness'. The fox is probably a spiritual creature or an inhabitant of the unconscious, moving out of the depths in order to illuminate the poet and help him print the page. The 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox' is the moment of annunciation when the conveyer of inspiration allows the poet to create a tangible form that is yet infused with the intangible. At the end of the poem we are told that 'The page is printed' and we realise that earlier on, in the fourth stanza, the 'neat prints' in the snow were meant to indicate that it is the fox that sets the poetic process in motion. The importance of the poem's last line is emphasised by the fact that Hughes shifts from four-stress lines to a line of two stresses with strong alliterated plosives.

In 'The Thought-Fox' we witness a sudden almost imperceptible mutation in the narrating voice. It is as if the writer's self is suddenly possessed by his double as soon as he is confronted by the 'sharp hot stink'. The window, through which the fox travels into the room and into the poet's head, is the threshold between consciousness and the subliminal, the latter being the wild realm outside the civilised surroundings of the room of consciousness. The printed page is the product both of a creative fusion between two different yet indivisible psychic realms and between two different yet indivisible realities, civilised life and natural life. This is probably what leads Scigaj to affirm that "'The Thought-Fox' can be considered a response to the reductive stance of Movement poets".²⁷ In a way the poem is an allusion to the typical shamanic healing activity undertaken by the shaman when he 'rides' on the drumbeat and journeys to the spiritual world, in which he finds a power animal that can help cure his patient. After he finds this animal, the shaman returns by his patient's side and 'breathes' the animal into his

patients' head and chest. Subsequently the power animal revitalises the dispirited person.

In 'The Horses' (HR 16-17), the speaker gives us a portrait of mythic stillness and majesty, something we have already encountered in the first poem of the volume. The horses, 'Huge in the dense grey – ten together – / Megalith-still', remind us of a Neolithic temple especially since they seem to be awaiting the sun to rise. The speaker describes how 'the sun / Orange, red, red erupted // Silently' and how he 'turned // Stumbling in the fever of a dream, down towards / The dark woods'. Brilliance and energy terrify him and unlike the horses he is unable to stand still and worship the sacredness of the material world. In many ways he is similar to the terrified protagonist of Hughes' short story 'The Rain Horse' from the volume *Wodwo*. However, in the poem the speaker 'came to the horses', that is, he finds it in himself to enter the temple and acquire illumination. The 'silence' of the whole scene as well as the horses' silence is emphasised throughout the poem. Hughes is pointing out to us the fact that we are witnessing some kind of ritual or solemn rite. The horses are depicted in a mythic manner and this amplifies the significance of their attitude. They are a manifestation of self-fulfilment and centrality, just like the hawk's eye. This state of being recurs throughout Hughes' major celebrations of nature and it is complementary with the extreme vitality exhibited by such a creature as the jaguar. It is a state of being seemingly denied to the human individual constantly haunted by nothingness. However, for Hughes healing results from the constant pursuit of this constantly elusive ideal.

The final two stanzas convey to us the speaker's wish to recall all that he experienced out on the moors while 'In the din of the crowded streets, going among the years, the faces'. Nature is portrayed as something replete with regenerating powers and the 'lonely...place' the speaker wishes to re-experience while in the bustle of an urban environment is equal to a shrine or temple that one visits regularly in order to revitalise oneself spirit-wise. The speaker wants to be

able to reencounter his memory of divine revelation and this is not a banal ending to the poem, as Sagar claims.²⁴ In the poem's final line the implication is that nature is constantly having to fend off the evil forces that are emanated by the world the speaker hails from, however, the fact that 'the horizons endure' is reassuring. Hence the speaker's desire for solitude and peaceful stillness is the manifestation of his need to recapture over and over again the meditative stance one requires in order to effect communication with the spiritual world.

The human need to achieve fulfilment is seen particularly in those poems that deal with human relationships. These poems lack the kind of vigour exuded by Hughes' animal poems, however, in them we find a grim portrait of the human desperate wielding of desire to possess the other and so seek to reduce one's emptiness. In 'Incompatibilities' (*HR* 27) this idea comes out quite explicitly. Desire propels human beings to seek union with the other, however, 'Desire's a vicious separator in spite / Of its twisting women round men'. This paradox is traced to the origin of male and female genders and it is implied that it is the separation itself that gave birth to the dark element of desire. According to Plato, the gods came to envy and fear human wholeness and so they created the division of the genders out of spite. Plato's theory of the human soul regards appetite or desire as the lowest part of the soul, sees it as prone to frequently come in conflict with the highest level, the intellect. In order to possess a properly functioning soul the intellect should control desire with the aid of the will. Hughes subscribes to this philosophy as long as the intellect is not given totalitarian power over the emotive and sensory realm, but allows itself to be properly counterbalanced by desire. He acknowledges the fact that desire alone is ineffectual in the human attempt to solve the problem of lack of self-fulfilment:

Each, each second, lonelier and further
Falling alone through the endless
Without-world of the other, though both here
Twist so close they choke their cries.

Notice that in this poem Hughes is not speaking about love but about something crude and instinctual, something predatory that makes us similar to the two wolves in the poem 'A Modest Proposal' (HR 26), neither of which

can make die
The painful burning of the coal in its heart
Till the other's body and the whole wood is its own.
Then it might sob contentment toward the moon.

According to most critics the modest proposal put forward in the final stanza of the poem, that is, the loving relationship between 'the two great-eyed greyhounds' belonging to 'The great lord', whom the wolves watch riding by while in a thicket; this modest proposal is interpreted as an ideal kind of relationship, similar to the human institution of marriage with its strengthening of the communal order. However, the poem is somewhat ambiguous in its contrast of wolves and hounds. The hounds lack the burning vitality of the wolves even though the latter's 'red smelting of hatred' is denying them the energy to hunt, whereas the hounds 'Leap like one' and 'day after day bring down the towering stag'. Here the poem identifies the hounds with Diana's dogs, pursuing and killing Actaeon, the voyeur. The fact that the wolves hide in a thicket while watching the gracefulness of the hounds infuses them with Actaeon's thirst for beauty and love, something that becomes possible only once the wolves do away with scopophilic raw desire and opt for a relationship built upon ritual and mutual understanding. The reader-voyeur is likewise urged to follow the same pattern.

There are only a rare number of poems in *The Hawk* that project a portrait of the successful reformation of human subjects. Two of these are 'The Conversion of the Reverend Skinner' and 'The Dove Breeder' (HR 24). The latter differs from Hughes' other love poems in that it portrays an effective blending of nature and the civilised world, or passion and reason. The poem speaks about the cataclysmal effects love has on the human individual given to temperate pursuits. The poem's subject has dedicated his entire life to the breeding and exhibiting of

fantails and pouters, which stand for a complacent attitude to life. However, this serenity was violently jolted when 'Love struck into his life / Like a hawk into a dovecote'. The 'raider' has destroyed the man's efforts to lead a life whose only exciting events were those times when he managed to breed 'world beaters'. The poem's ending can either be read as the triumph of a person who reconciles his being to the savage energy of passion (the mild self united with the 'big' I of the hawk), or else (less adequately) as civilisation's ability to tame the most vital of energies and transform it into something false.

Yet he soon dried his tears

Now he rides the morning mist
With a big-eyed hawk on his fist.

The cause of the bleakness emanated by Hughes' portrayal of human beings and their relationships in most of the poems in his first volume of verse is beyond doubt his revulsion for the monistic human mind that insulates itself against the greater reality outside it and within it. The poem 'Egg-Head' (HR 37-38) is a direct attack of such an attitude to life and the world. It is a rather too explicit picture of a pretentious, complacent frame of mind and mode of existence. The speaker acknowledges the 'Dewdrop frailty' of the man he is parodying in the poem, but this does not stop him from abhorring the man's shallowness. He points out the fact that those who have genuinely striven to comprehend the wonders of the natural world felt all their efforts being smitten by its unique greatness. They were no different than the theologian who felt himself capable of unravelling the mystery of God only to be made to realise how small is the human mind:

So many a one has dared to be struck dead
Peeping through his fingers at the world's ends,
Or at an ant's head.

What angers the speaker is not the kind of man attempting to understand what is too great for his mind to sufficiently digest, but the person who closes this greater reality outside himself, who 'resists receiving the flash / Of the sun, the bolt of the earth', who 'feeds / On the yolk's dark and hush'. This kind of person feels threatened by a world much bigger and much more powerful than his ego. Due to his 'eggshell head's / Fragility' he must constantly remind himself of the 'staturing "I am"'. Hand in hand with this goes the kind of arrogance that allows him to set himself up as some kind of demigod – 'Must stop the looming mouth of the earth' – who has the right to reject nature's sacredness in favour of his egocentric vision.

Confront it and preen,

Spurn it muck under
His foot-clutch, and, opposing his eye's flea-red
Fly-catching fervency to the whelm of the sun,
Trumpet his own ear dead.

Hughes at this stage of his career is not the kind of semi-nihilistic poet we encounter in the majority of the poems collected in *Wodwo* and *Crow*. Salvation is possible even for the egg-head. In 'Meeting' (HR 41) the narcissistic human subject 'smiles in a mirror' and in a Lacanian manner acknowledges the existence of his self, however, he allows his ego to swallow up the other and he soon assumes the 'role // In which he can fling a cape, / And outloom life like Faustus'. The false demigod opens his eyes only when, like Moses in the desert, he is confronted by a numinous kind of revelation in the form of a goat, which is a symbol for the Dionysiac energy of life.

On an empty mountain slope

A black goat clattered and ran
Towards him, and set forefeet firm on a rock
Above and looked down

A square-pupilled yellow-eyed look,
The black devil head against the blue air....

The goat makes the man realise that if he thinks himself a giant there exist giants before which he is an insignificant speck of dust. The goat symbolises Being, in confrontation of which the human subject can choose either between leading an authentic life or else continuing to submerge himself in its opposite. The goat's stare cuts the man down to size with the full power of the Sartrean 'look':

What gigantic fingers took

Him up and on a bare
Palm turned him close under an eye
That was like a living hanging hemisphere....

The 'I' of nature is too powerful for the man to renounce and in front of it his own ego dwindles down to a more realistic size. This is what is implied by the beating echoes we continue to hear after 'the goat clatter[s] away'. The lack of comment in this poem makes it all the more powerful.

The annihilating force of nature in regard to human narrow-mindedness has been encountered in most of the poems we have discussed above. However, in nearly none of these poems does this destructiveness, which for Hughes is the complementary facet of nature's creativeness, come out as strongly as it does in 'Wind' (HR 42). In this poem the 'Dewdrop frailty' of the human world is violently affronted by the 'stampeding' might of the elements. Language in this poem is used like a chisel in the hands of a surrealistic sculptor. The hyperbolic images, metaphors and similes evoke a fount of energy that is meant to daunt our reason and perception and provide us with the same godlike look in the eye as that we find in 'Meeting'. The house in 'Wind' is a symbol for the sense of home created by our comfortable place in the civilised world. It is meant to protect us and insulate us from the external universe just as the egg-head seals his skull shut so that he will not have to face a truth that he can never hope to comprehend, even though it is one he might be willing to appreciate, as we find affirmed in 'The

Man Seeking Experience Enquires His Way of a Drop of Water'. However, the house is as fragile as the egg-head's skull and the natural world makes it clear that it will not be ignored by the creatures who should venerate it.

The house

Rang like some fine green goblet in the note
That any second would shatter it. Now deep
In chairs, in front of the great fire, we grip
Our hearts and cannot entertain book, thought,
Or each other. We watch the fire blazing,
And feel the roots of the house move, but sit on,
Seeing the window tremble to come in,
Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons.

In *Shamanism*, Eliade describes how after a person's death a mourner gives out a recital that is meant to seek a messenger who is willing to inform the underworld's inhabitants of the deceased's imminent arrival. At first nothing in the natural world answers her call since everything is afraid of traversing the boundary between the world of the living and that of the dead. However, the Wind Spirit takes up her plea, abandons his human form and seeks the best road to the underworld, to which place he goes in the form of a hurricane. When he notifies the dead these jump into a boat and frenziedly row to the house of the deceased person. Once there they rush inside, take hold of the soul and transport it to the underworld. Hence we see that one can read the elemental power in 'Wind' as a force announcing the death of complacent humanity, as well as a representative of the spirit world helping to break into the secure world of the deceased and provide him with regeneration. In this we find a parallel to the great wind that the prophet summons in order to infuse the dead with life in Ezekiel 37: 9-10. The wind is also symbolic of the redemptive chaotic forces that inhabit the human inner reality, which we like to think of as external to us. The window in the last stanza is the thin film of protection between consciousness and the subconscious, the latter being our binding force to nature and a deposit of wisdom

that we need to let into our consciousness. The tone of threat that runs through the poem is that emanated by the speaker himself whose custom of psychic repression has resulted in the kind of forceful recoil we are presented with in the poem. The wind as an elemental, spiritual and psychic life-force is comparable to Lorca's duende and to Carlos Castaneda's nagual, both of which are described as great winds possessing the power to sweep away man's neat, insular structures. This poem elicits the notion that most of Hughes' early work transforms us into voyeurs of a violence that induces a stultifying fear in us because it appears to be directed at our own crass and unanimated existence.

Some reviewers of Hughes' poetry have accused him of infusing everything, from the smallest act to the most important, with the same kind of cosmic significance. This is noticeable in 'Parlour Piece' (*HR* 21), for example, in which two people 'With love so like a flood' within them, drinking tea, have to be careful not to 'Let out a trickle lest the whole crack'. Such a technique is wholly justified when one comes to 'Childbirth' (*HR* 47) since this poem further develops his ideas about the life-generating powers of nature. In the poem the act of parturition is described as an event manifesting the whole miraculousness of the material world. The act of a child traversing from the chaotic dimension of its origins into the world of meaning can quasi allow 'The huge-eyed looming horde from / Under the floor of the heart' to 'run / To the madman's eye-corner'. Life in all its magnificence is a redemptive power and the thread that binds each child to the anagogic is clearly outlined:

Miracle struck out the brain
Of order and ordinary: bare
Onto the heart the earth dropped then

With whirling quarters, the axle cracked,
Through that miracle-breached bed
All the dead could have got back....

In the poem the womb represents the underworld of the spirits and the psyche and especially that of the earth. From within its darkness comes life and emphasis is laid upon the intertwinement of death and life in order to demonstrate the autochthonous nature of human beings, who should not believe themselves independent of the realm that bore them, as Christianity, on the contrary, encourages them to do.



Lupercal is a continuation of the themes and ideas encountered in *The Hawk*, however, Hughes' second collection is marked by a heightened artistic refinement, an organisation of the material round the main poetic impetus, as well as by a visionary affinity binding all the poems together into one significant whole. Scigaj distinguishes between Hughes' first collection and his second one by saying that 'Individual *Hawk* poems were organized through eye imagery or the structural mediation of opposites, but from *Lupercal* forward Hughes organizes every volume by means of leitmotifs and myths that knit groups of poems together'.²⁹ In *Lupercal* we see Hughes deliberately trying to create something akin to a sequence possessing a holistic vision of its own that at the same time derives added scope through its intimate kinship with *The Hawk*.

Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts are of the opinion that 'What a poet such as Hughes ultimately shares with the shaman is a concern for psychic equilibrium'.³⁰ This equilibrium as an ideal, an equilibrium which extends also to the human relationship with the material world and the spiritual dimension it embodies, is put forward in the poem 'An Otter' (L 38-39). The creature in the poem is described as a survivor with no fixed roots. The state of in-betweenness or amphibiousness we meet in Eliot's *The Waste Land* is the dominant characteristic of the otter's existence:

Brings the legend of himself
From before wars or burials, in spite of hounds and vermin-poles;

Does not take root like the badger. Wanders, cries;
 Gallops along land he no longer belongs to;
 Re-enters the water by melting.

Of neither water nor land.

Just like the human individual, the otter is 'seeking / Some world lost when first he dived, that he cannot come at since'. The otter is 'neither fish nor beast... / Four-legged yet water-gifted'. He epitomises the glorious endeavour to reach fulfilment, achieving it perhaps through the very struggle to do so. The otter is the mascot of that person who will never couch himself in the comfort of having attained the truth, but will always go on striving forward (just like the reader himself going through poem after poem). Unless that person is killed, that is. In fact in the poem's second section we find a description of the otter as a hunted prey. Already in part I he was compared to 'a king in hiding' and the first line of part II tells us that 'The hunt's lost him'. The hunt for the otter parallels the hunt for the spirit. Hence we see that 'the self under the eye lies, / Attendant and withdrawn'. The inner self hides in the depths, 'He keeps fat in the limpid integument / Reflections live on', at a distance from the egg-head's 'staturing' ego. The otter's dual existence symbolises man's own dual nature in the complementary facets of consciousness and the subliminal and body and spirit. We are told that

The otter belongs

In double robbery and concealment –
 From water that nourishes and drowns, and from land
 That gave him his length and the mouth of the hound.

The embrace of extremes and monistic states of mind is perilous and the otter can 'linger nowhere'. If he does so, death swallows him up immediately:

Yanked above hounds, reverts to nothing at all,
 To this long pelt over the back of a chair.

Eliade points out that among the Ojibwa Indians the role of the shaman is taken over by the otter. According to this mythology the messenger of the Great Spirit 'seeing the miserable state of sick and enfeebled humanity, revealed the most sublime secrets to the otter' and made it 'able to initiate and at the same time consecrate men'.³¹ 'The pebbles of the source' in 'An Otter' are probably 'the small shells that are believed to hold magico-religious power'³² and which were placed in the otter's pouch by the messenger of the Great Spirit. It is these that make it 'immortal'.³³ Hirschberg claims that the otter in a way is the shaman's 'alter ego...one of the shaman's souls'.³⁴ Moreover he argues that 'The mysteriously bifurcated double existence of the otter provokes Hughes' admiration as an emblem for the existence of the secret self, submerged but always there. The uncaught and uncachable, secret primordial self exists side by side, yet invisible with the visible land-held self of the otter'.³⁵ For Hirschberg, as for Eliade, the sacred realm is incapable of being harmed or destroyed by the profane realm. However, Hughes' last lines in 'An Otter' suggest that the connection with the sacred can be broken down, that the spirit within human beings can ultimately be destroyed, even though that outside them is relatively invulnerable. The function of the poet as shaman or rather of poetry as a shamanic tool is to maintain the existence of this connection, to converge extremes and from unity create wholeness.

This state of wholeness, however, is as uncomfortable as the state of in-betweenness. Man finds it very hard to withstand it and so invents all kinds of conjectures to help him evade it, even while seeking it. The boat is a symbol for the state of in-betweenness and life on a boat is much less comfortable than life on solid earth. In 'The Voyage' (*L* 35) the speaker is Everyman embarked upon life's journey; looking at the great expanse surrounding him he is unable 'to claim / Neither known face nor held name'. He is swallowed up by the collective, his unique identity vanishes beneath the waves of the immensity before which he is nothing; a wondrous phenomenon he can never hope to fully know:

The whole sea's

Accumulations and changes
 Are the sea. The sea's elsewhere
 Than surrenders to sand and rocks,
 Other than men taste who drown out there.

The land is a place of safety to which man surrenders when frustrated of the voyage, however, not even those who confront the sea can hope to unravel its essence. They risk losing hold of their sanity, drowning in it without even tasting that which they had long been questing for. However, despite the bleakness of man's fate, the quest or voyage defines his being and lends him some of the glory he travels through in the brief space of time accorded to him.

Much in the manner of Hamlet acknowledging the actuality of human mortality by means of Yorick's skull, and of Paul Valéry meditating on the relationship between the manifest and the idea by focusing on seashells, so the speaker of 'Relic' (*L* 36) is led to consider a number of similar issues by musing upon a jawbone he finds on a beach. The act of contemplating upon a jawbone is an allusion to a similar event in the Eskimese shamanic initiation as described by Joseph Campbell and Eliade, as well as to Ezekiel's vision of the valley of the bones. In the poem the sea's creatures form part of the wonder that is the sea, they 'Continue the beginning', swimming in a state that marries change and changelessness. At the heart of the universe there is one dominant impulse, that to survive in a self-fulfilling way. However, fulfilment in the sense of living independently of the overall pattern is unachievable.

The deeps are cold:
 In that darkness camaraderie does not hold:
 Nothing touches but, clutching, devours. And the jaws,
 Before they are satisfied or their stretched purpose
 Slacken, go down jaws; go gnawn bare. Jaws
 Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach:
 This is the sea's achievement; with shells,
 Vertebrae, claws, carapaces, skulls.

Like J.M. Synge's *Riders to the Sea*, this poem presents a bleak portrait of human existence within this universe that is nevertheless a very realistic one for Hughes. It deflates the human urge to distinguish man from the beasts and makes it quite clear that outside nature there is only nothingness. The human world, like a glasshouse replete with dreams and illusions, cannot set itself off from transience and the cycles of the material world, cannot avoid becoming part of 'the sea's achievement'. All that will survive of us will survive us for a brief period of time and before crumbling into dust it will act as a reminder to such others as the poem's speaker that all egocentric efforts to transcend one's niche are doomed beyond hope.

Time in the sea eats its tail, thrives, casts these
 Indigestibles, the spars of purposes
 That failed far from the surface. None grow rich
 In the sea. This curved jawbone did not laugh
 But gripped, gripped and is now a cenotaph.

The 'curved jawbone' might well be a human one and it 'did not laugh' because it was heavily preoccupied with a deep thirst for a more substantial being outside of nature.

In 'Hawk Roosting' (L 18) that kind of firm faith we met in 'The Hawk in the Rain', which we perceived through the eyes of a human speaker, is manifested in the first person declaration of the hawk itself. Like the sea, the hawk is a powerful, self-possessed phenomenon. It knows no hypocrisy, has no illusions, is what it is and requires nothing else.

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.
 No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.

Listening to this bird, one almost imagines that a dictator or God himself is speaking. However, the hawk refutes the idea that it is a deluded creature trying to deceive the reader, as many critics have accused it of being, while at the same time it claims to embody the universe's divine dimension:

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly....

The same mythic stillness we met in 'The Hawk in the Rain' and which is intimately akin to cyclical change (as when the hawk falls from the sky and 'mix[es] his heart's blood with the mire of the land') is seen both in the sea's unchangeability as well as in the hawk's 'Inaction, no falsifying dream / Between my hooked head and hooked feet'. The hawk is part of the cycles of the material world that remain forever the same. Like the sea creatures in 'Relic', it knows a beginning and continues it as though the perfection of the Genesis is everlasting:

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Speaking of 'Hawk Roosting', West claims that in this poem 'we have an extraordinary humanized anti-human brain thinking'.³⁶ Hughes' comments about the poem shed light on why his hawk strikes us as so particularly malevolent:

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. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature...and

Nature became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit.³⁷

Here we see that Hughes identifies his hawk with the Old Testament God, Job's God, a tyrannous divinity as awe-inspiring and horrific as that symbolised by Blake's tiger, who is the complementary facet of the lamb. Moreover, Hughes' bird is a feminine symbol, an embodiment of Mother Nature and the White Goddess. This allows us to say that the speaking hawk is an aesthetic artifice meant to criticise the human negative perception of the hawk's violent nature. The reader, a representative of the world's most unnecessarily violent species, feels ill-at-ease when confronted by the hawk whose being lacks 'sophistry', needs none of the justifications and explanations human beings futilely conjure up to excuse their behaviour. Hence we see that 'Hawk Roosting' is not 'a glorification of totalitarianism'³⁸ or 'a vision of the complete insanity of power',³⁹ but a portrait of a true mode of being whose natural savagery we are not being asked to make our own and whose truth or authentic mode of being we are surely encouraged to develop. The hawk's nature is that of an unashamed predator, true human nature is something altogether different from the 'falsifying dream' we are accused of collectively sharing.

In 'The Jaguar' and other animal poems we see how for Hughes the creatures of the natural world are analogous to visionaries possessing the ability to perceive what the ordinary human eye has blinded itself to. In 'The Bull Moses' (L 29-30) this train of thought is brought forward more directly. The bull in the poem is most obviously a creature of darkness, an inhabitant of the unconscious or the mysterious sacred realm whom the farmer lets out into the light for a while everyday. The poem's speaker, most probably a young boy, tells us how he took a 'look in at the byre's / Blaze of darkness' and experienced 'a sudden shut-eyed look / Backward into the head'. The speaker is here informing us of how he deigned to look at something that he believed was external to him and found his look being mirrored back at him, transporting him into himself. Here the poem

underlines the intimate link between beast and man, body and spirit, consciousness and the subliminal and we are reminded of the kind of duality we met in 'An Otter'. Watching the bull, registering it with the 'mind's eye', the speaker describes how the bull resides within another dimension to that of his own, a dimension in which the bull is unperturbed by 'the square of sky where I hung, shouting, waving'.

Something come up there onto the brink of the gulf,
Hadh't heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,
Stood in sleep.

The speaker is 'nothing to him' and 'nothing of our light / Found any reflection in him'. The civilised world of the speaker is seemingly unable to affect the natural world the bull hails from. The 'Blackness' the bull inhabits is an image for all that we do not know and cannot hope to know as long as the bull is kept across the gulf from us. The gulf is a symbol for the distance there exists between elements that have become polarised along the ages. At the same time the gulf's darkness is numinous and its truths can only be perceived by means of 'the round angelic eye' referred to in 'The Hawk in the Rain'.

The bull is a symbol of virility, of great sexual potency. The bull is a Dionysiac, diabolical force, just like the goat in 'Meeting'. As an inhabitant of the id he is symbolic of repressed, redemptive energy, an energy that elicits fear and manifests itself in oblique ways when it manages to escape through the various control valves.

The weight of the sun and the moon and the world hammered
To a ring of brass through his nostrils.

These lines remind us of the egg-head's struggle to shield himself from the 'the flash / Of the sun, the bolt of the earth'. The bull, 'Shut, while he wombed, to a dark shed', is similar to the otter, who 'can take stolen hold // On a bitch otter in a field full / Of nervous horses'. Both creatures are symbols of the immense energy

we restrain and hunt down for fear that it might bring about the cracking of the eggshell we have exiled ourselves in. Fear of 'the locked black of [the bull's] powers' makes us have faith in a brass ring or in a 'long pelt over the back of a chair'. Some critics have chosen to emphasise the bull's entrapment and servility, however, an anticipation of liberating havoc flows out of the bull's gentle stroll back to the byre:

something
Deliberate in his leisure, some beheld future
Founding in his quiet.

For Craig Robinson, Hughes possesses an 'optimism' for the future that leads him to share Martin Heidegger's belief 'in the notion of the Turn, a grand reversal of our long drift from being, initiated now in the attempt at making a new era propitious for the return of the god'.⁴⁰ The horned bull is the horned Moses, the liberator of an entire race of people, who himself will not venture into the Promised Land but who will guide his people to its threshold. We all know what happened to those who did not follow the spiritual leader in the biblical legend of Moses. Whether the speaker achieves redemption or not is left entirely to the reader to decide after the poem's last lines inform us that the speaker 'kept the door wide, / Closed it after him and pushed the bolt'. Is a quotidian encounter with the bull enough to provide the speaker with a harmonious psychic and spiritual life, with a fulfilling mode of being, or is something more than the diffident act of securing the bolt required?

One striking feature of Hughes's animal poems is the hallucinatory aura they are enshrouded in. This dream-like quality serves the purpose of defamiliarising the ordinary; it combines with the sinewy language employed by Hughes to create a surrealistic kind of landscape that is almost unconsciously symbolic and metaphoric. It is as if the poem once free of the poet's control is capable of communicating with the reader in both a personal manner and a collective one. The poem, as an experience, heightens the perception of the reader

who most times comes to participate in the event described in a similar way to that of the poem's speaker or human subject. In 'A Dream of Horses' (L 13-14) we realise how hard the poet strives to make us undergo the same transformation as that endured by the grooms in the poem, that is, the transformation from mere spectators into participants. The horses in the poem epitomise the kind of vitality admired by Hughes, a violent kind of energy that fills the grooms with an attitude of reverence as they become conscious that what they are witnessing is a sacred rite. Whereas other creatures impress upon us an awe-inspiring portrait of mythic stillness and self-possession, the steeds in 'A Dream of Horses' confront us with a symphony of thunder.

We must have fallen like drunkards into a dream
Of listening, lulled by the thunder of the horses.

It is not only the grooms who endure a mind-shaking experience; it is not only the grooms who dream, but even the horses themselves. We are informed that when they awoke the 'stable-horses / Lay in their straw, in a hag-sweat, listless and wretched'. The poem seems to draw a parallel between the horses' experience and the shaman's magical flight, the encounter with the gods which injects one with energy and somewhat consumes one at the same time. The Altaic shamans call their drum 'horse' and among the Buryat the horse-headed stick (also called 'horse') is as important as the drum in bringing on a state of ecstasy. Eliade says that 'Ecstasy induced by the drum or by dancing astride a horse-headed stick...is assimilated to a fantastic gallop through the skies'.⁴¹ The horses in the poem travel into the darkness and the grooms are spectator-participants of this cataclysmal event.

Out of the night that gulfed beyond the palace-gate
There shook hooves and hooves and hooves of horses:
Our horses battered their stalls; their eyes jerked white.

And we ran out, mice in our pockets and straw in our hair,
Into darkness that was avalanching to horses

And a quake of hooves. Our lantern's little orange flare

Made a round mask of our each sleep-dazed face,
Bodiless, or else bodied by horses
That whinnied and bit and cannoned the world from its place.

Here we see that the horses and grooms somehow blend into one; the lantern-small consciousness of the speakers enters the darkness, the black gulf of 'The Bull Moses'. The human spirit takes on an equestrian form or is guided by a familiar spirit in the form of a horse while it journeys in the sacred realm. The horses permeate everything: 'every grain of the earth had hooves and mane'. The speakers feel ecstatic and like Saint Theresa experiencing the soul-penetrating thrust of God, they long for complete union with this divine entity pouring itself into them:

Everything else this plunging of horses
To the rim of our eyes that strove for the shapes of the sound.

We crouched at our lantern, our bodies drank the din,
And we longed for a death trampled by such horses....

Like John the Baptist, Moses, Jesus Christ and other visionaries, the grooms have experienced an extraordinary encounter that influences them to make an all-important decision. When the darkness recedes we see that the grooms have become wholly committed ministers of the mystical power they have come in contact with in the desert.

Now let us, tied, be quartered by these poor horses,
If but doomsday's flames be great horses,
The forever itself a circling of the hooves of horses.

The death referred to in the poem is the death of the old self during the shamanistic rite of initiation, when the candidate undergoes imaginary decapitation or disembowelment as symbolic acts of purification. Eliade points out that 'the horse facilitated trance, the ecstatic flight of the soul to forbidden

regions. The symbolic "ride" expressed leaving the body, the shaman's "mystical death".⁴² This poem also alludes to the myth of Phaeton who whilst driving the sun chariot through the sky, being a mere mortal, was unable to control the fiery divine horses and so sent destruction streaming onto earth. When ordinary human beings lose all respect for the mysterious powers of the sacred order and fail to interact with these powers in a reverential and ritualistic manner they are risking their own annihilation. This also brings to mind Ezekiel's vision of God's dazzling throne chariot in the sky, which he recounts in the first chapter of his book of prophecies. In front of this vision Ezekiel can do nothing else but prostrate himself on the ground as an act of homage to the divine power that deigned manifest itself to his mere human senses that were nevertheless attuned to it.

'Thrushes' (L 44) is one of the most important poems in *Lupercal* since in it the bond between man and nature is accentuated quite boldly. The poem opens with a description of 'the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn, / More coiled steel than living – a poised / Dark deadly eye'. What makes them so 'Terrifying' is the fact that they are unhesitant, expert killers:

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning stares,
No sighs or head-scratchings. Nothing but bounce and stab
And a ravaging second.

The birds obey something within themselves; they automatically follow a programme that quotidianly shows them how to survive. They are 'Triggered to stirrings beyond sense' and their 'bullet and automatic / Purpose' makes them similar to the shark that innocently 'hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own / Side and devouring of itself'. It also makes the thrushes similar to human genius and we are told that 'Mozart's brain had it'. Some critics have chosen to denigrate this

efficiency which
Strikes too streamlined for any doubt to pluck at it

Or obstruction deflect.

However, for Hughes the automatic quality of the thrushes, the shark and the genius' brain does not make them unadmirable. For him they possess something presently lacking in the ordinary individual, something Hughes considers to be highly desirable:

The Thrush finding and killing its worm, Mozart's composing brain, and the Shark, at their incredible, superhuman speeds, are 'at rest in the law'. Their agile velocity is a kind of stillness. At peace with essential being. Only we humans – 'terrified' by what our debilitated sense of reality sees as negative 'violence' in the activity of the Thrush and the Shark, and renouncing any possibility of sharing Mozart's 'divine' facility – cannot attain that peace. We cannot attain it because we are divided within ourselves against such spontaneous allegiance to the 'divine' law (*WP* 260).

Mozart is the hieroglyph for 'divine activity in something fleshly' (*WP* 258) as are the images of the shark and of the thrushes. The violence of these creatures is what Hughes calls 'admirable violence' because the shark and the thrushes 'are innocent, obedient, and their energy reaffirms the divine law that created them as they are' (*WP* 259). In the images of the poem's first two stanzas we find a 'recognition of the operation of divine law in the created things of the natural world' (*WP* 259). On the other hand, the last stanza of the poem focuses on the aberration of human consciousness in feeling itself unable to be in harmony with divine law:

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years: his act worships itself – while for him,
Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and above what
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
Of black silent waters weep.

Scigaj points out that just as the speaker in Yeats' 'Among School Children' says that he and his lover were almost transformed 'Into the yolk and white of the one shell',⁴³ the speaker in Hughes' poem wishes to become one with the concentrated energy of thrush, shark and genius. But this yearning for the sacred, for the wholeness it bestows does not eliminate the fact that man is prey to doubt, cynicism and lack of faith. In part, man's self-worship gives rise to the aforementioned factors as well as to sin, guilt and despair. The human individual wants to be able to transcend himself beyond these negative qualities, but he seeks to do so in an incorrect manner since he is unable to recognise anything beyond himself while paradoxically being assailed by a lack of self-faith. Shutting out the miraculousness of the greater reality beyond his ego is a deficient alternative. The poem's last stanza is spoken by a speaker 'who feels inadequate to the challenge' of becoming, like the thrushes, shark and Mozart, a 'hero...of that positive and "divine" immanence in reality itself' (*WP* 260-261). For Hughes the last stanza 'is written from within the "customary social and humanitarian values" which confirm and even make a virtue of this sense of inadequacy' and which 'protect the familiar human condition, that is alienated from its spiritual being as it is from its animal integrity'; values that 'at best...tolerate and at worst collude with the evil consequences' (*WP* 261). 'Thrushes' insightfully relates to the social values by which we live and it exercises sympathy for our frailty, but at the same time it maintains a tight grip on a strong criticism of both factors.

Just as in 'Thrushes', in 'Pike' (*L* 48-49) we get the same portrait of predatory sophistication:

Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.

.....

The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument....

Hughes claims that 'If the Hawk and the Pike kill, they kill within the law and their killing is a sacrament in this sense. It is an act not of violence but of law' (WP 262-263). The poem's speaker, most probably a child, is in awe of the fish's 'submarine delicacy and horror', terrified of the strength of the creature's being, the 'iron in this eye'. When he dares to go fishing at night we immediately realise that the speaker is not merely fishing for pike but for what these symbolise. The numinousness of this fish for the poet is emphasised by a poem first published in *The Listener* in 1986, in which the pike is described as having 'somehow, unmoving / Sailed out of the sun' (CP 702). The creature's reverential stillness or 'silence of space' is its major feature and it gives the pike the power of 'Making the skull creek' (CP 702). As we saw in other poems, water and darkness are images for immensity, mystery and the anagogical. The speaker in 'Pike' is fishing in the spiritual unknown, in the collective unconscious, or in the 'real', trying to discover wisdom, the light within the darkness. The speaker is terrified of the horror that resides within the depths, terrified due to his culturally determined mode of perception. However, the speaker acknowledges the redemptive quality of these same depths and that like God the horrific can also be highly beautiful:

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them –

Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move.
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods

Frail on my ear against the dream
 Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
 That rose slowly towards me, watching.

Here we witness a confrontation between two different selves, two different psychic realms and realities. The word 'watching' could easily have been followed by ellipsis since this confrontation is never-ending, it is a phenomenon that must be constantly repeated if its purpose is to be kept alive. A poem in a way is a confrontation, a meeting that hinges upon previous meetings and future ones. By watching and being watched, by looking deeply into the Other and allowing it to look into himself, the speaker is gradually healed. He becomes heroic for he is quite willing to transcend himself beyond the comfortably couched attitude referred to in the last stanza of 'Thrushes', and strive to enter the 'dream / Darkness' and encounter that which it contains. In this the speaker is on a par to the grooms in 'A Dream of Horses', who undergo a shamanic journey with the help of their familiar spirits.

The symbolic associations of water we encounter in 'Pike' and in other of Hughes' poems are also found in 'To Paint a Water Lily' (L 21-22):

Prehistoric bedraggoned times
 Crawl that darkness with Latin names....

The water lily, like the otter, possesses a dualistic kind of nature and in this of course the lily is very much a symbol for the many dualities of the human condition, a symbol whose harmonious amalgamation of opposites makes of it a yet unattained ideal.

Now paint the long-necked lily-flower

Which, deep in both worlds, can be still
 As a painting, trembling hardly at all

Though the dragonfly alight,
 Whatever horror nudge her root.

Like in 'An Otter' the emphasis is on being 'deep in both worlds', however, given that the lily is also an explicitly aesthetic creation, Hughes in this poem is highlighting art's ability to effect the reconciliation of antithetical forces, of creating a synergistic synthesis out of their confrontation. In this sense this poem is much more self-reflexive than Hughes' other poems, which are all dominated by the same therapeutic agenda as that we find featured in 'To Paint a Water Lily'.

A poem that shares the same kind of self-reflexivity as that found in the poem discussed immediately above is 'February' (L 5). The main idea behind the latter poem is that of man being a fugitive from nature and the greater reality beyond his conscious ego. In the poem, the human subject is pursued by the wolf-spirit whose nature is tamed in such stories as *Little Red Riding Hood* or transformed into a mere artefact as in the Norse legends. In real life the wolf is 'gibbet-hung', wiped out from such a country as Britain to be preserved solely in photographs and engravings. The natural forces have thus become enslaved and in our secure lives 'The worst since has been so much mere Alsatian'. The latter line can be better understood in the light of Popa's notion in *Wolf Salt* that wolves become dogs when people are stripped of the wholeness of their humanity by the immanent technological pursuits of contemporary civilisation. The knowledge that nothing dangerous exists outside us and within us allows us to repose in comfortable complacency. But the speaker knows that this is only an illusion since the wolf-spirit will never stop haunting our dream world. It is as 'unkillable' as the creature in 'Esther's Tomcat' (L 15). Robinson claims that 'Because Being is the ultimate foundation, the deepest layer of reality, it encompasses and underpins even all deviations from itself and can never be defeated by rational-technological thinking'.⁴⁴ This idea of inviolability runs through the majority of the poems discussed above. In 'February' the wolf's 'feet // Print the moonlit doorstep, or run and run / Through the hush of parkland, bodiless, headless'. Like drum taps, the wolf's feet 'pursue, siege all thought', doing so 'By day, too'. Man

seeks to protect himself by creating wolf-masks and thus channel the wolf's spirit into the world of art and literature. But whether this ploy is enough to shield us from the unrestrained energy of inner and outer nature is shown to be somewhat questionable by the ambiguous last two stanzas of the poem:

These feet, deprived,
Disdaining all that are caged, or storied, or pictured,
Through and throughout the true world search
For their vanished head, for the world

Vanished with the head, the teeth, the quick eyes –
Now, lest they choose his head,
Under severe moons he sits making
Wolf-masks, mouths clamped well onto the world.

Art is not an end in itself, but a beginning. It is not something in which to compartmentalise energy in order to keep that energy at bay. For Hughes a wolf-mask, a poem is a door leading into the world from which that aesthetic creation derives its force, the world to which it recognises its origin. As in most of his work, Hughes in 'February' seems to prod us to use art as a means for spirit-invigorating activity, a means by which we become like the wolf and pursue that which we truly require.

The month of February was sacred to the god Februus, an ancient Italian divinity often associated with Pluto, god of the underworld. The name Februus derives from the word *februare*, to purify, and the wolf, arising out of the spiritual or subconscious depths, journeying through dreams and the artistic creations of civilisation, is intent upon purifying us if we embrace it or destroying us if not. Furthermore, the mutilated wolf in 'February' echoes the disembodied or decapitated person or creature in shamanism, something symbolic of the stage of purification, the step preceding that of regeneration and new identity. In his introduction to Popa's *Collected Poems*, Hughes speaks about how in Popa's poetry the wolf stands for the spirit of the Serbian nation and that it frequently appears as lame and in need of shelter. Many critics, including Hughes himself,

have identified Popa as the 'mythical shepherd of the wolves'⁴⁵ and his wolf poems as 'a call to a whole people, in the profoundest kind of language. And a call to the Ancestral Spirit of a whole people'.⁴⁶ Both Hughes and Popa use images of mythic animals in their poetry for the same redemptive purposes.

The Lupercalia was a festival celebrated on the fifteenth of February in Ancient Rome. It was held on the Palatine hill, at which place is found the cave in which according to legend Rome's founders, Romulus and Remus, were suckled by a she-wolf. The Lupercalia was celebrated in honour of Lupercus and his priests, the Luperci. Lupercus was an ancient Italian divinity who was worshipped by shepherds as the protector of their flocks against wolves. However, the main significance of the festival was that of restoring fertility to barren women. Dogs and goats were sacrificed in the festival and the Luperci, young athletes spattered with dog's blood and milk and holding goat whips in their hands, raced round the hill and struck those women wishing to be able to bear children. It was believed that fertility would be infused in the women at the touch of the whip. In his study of Francois Rabelais and the carnivalesque, Mikhail Bakhtin claims that during carnival people were freed of the constraints of rank and status, norms and prohibitions and this was because 'Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change and renewal'.⁴⁷ This is also true of the Roman fertility festivals from which, as Bakhtin points out, evolved medieval carnival.

'Lupercalia' (L 53-55) comes at the very end of Hughes' second collection and it marks the peak of the poet's vision in his first two books. In it we find a fresh emphasis on poetry as a ritualistic device, engaging in prayer the reader who throughout these two collections of poetry underwent a gradual and repeated metamorphosis from mere voyeur to a participant in a sacred rite. In the *London Magazine* interview, Hughes made the following comments about how violence and ritual are bound together:

Any form of violence – any form of vehement activity – invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the

contact has been made – it becomes difficult to control. Something from beyond ordinary human activity enters. When the wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive – and that is the position with us. And that is why force of any kind frightens our rationalist, humanist style of outlook... If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control – rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one.⁴⁸

The above statements tell us that for Hughes the fusion of polarities must be effected through ritualistic devices. Poetry for Hughes is a religious kind of activity and within a poem's being opposites are reconciled and wholeness is indicated, just as is done in a sacred ritual. A ritual is therapeutic because the participant in a ritual experiences the fusion and sense of wholeness created by it. The Lupercalia were a means by which to merge the concerns of civilisation and those of nature and by which to strive to maintain a symbiotic kind of relationship between the two realms.

'Lupercalia' is divided into four parts, each part revolving round one of the main participators in the ritual. In the first section, the dog, a descendant of the wolf, is described as having 'declined blood', but all the same it has 'A mouth like an incinerator' which 'held man's reasonable ways // Between its teeth'. This reminds us of the wolf-spirit's appetite in 'February', whereas the dog's 'grinning mouth' while being sacrificed reminds us of the pike's 'malevolent aged grin'. In part II we are introduced to one of the barren female figures:

This woman's as from death's touch: a surviving
Barrenness: she abides; perfect,
But flung from the wheel of the living,
The past killed in her, the future plucked out.

However, this woman shall soon feel the whiplash that shall ignite in her the 'old spark of the blood-heat'. The infertile woman has allowed 'death's touch [to]

engross her bed'; she is not a contributor to the life cycle and so she is no better than the dead, who provide the living only with 'A worn witchcraft accoutrement // Of proverbs'. The poem celebrates the feral energy of a divinity whose facets of life and death, creativity and destruction are tightly knit together, just as they are in the case of the White Goddess. The awe and fear evoked in the poet by the latter figure are the same concoction of feelings we sense simmering beneath the surface of 'Lupercalia'. The creatures in the poem are diabolical, symbols of dangerous unrestrained frenzy and excess, and yet through them shines the light of life. Rituals and poetry are seen to be the most appropriate means by which to maintain the necessary balance.

The goat, from whose skin the whip of fertility is made, represents the god Pan, who is considered to be a figure of virility and sensuality. The goats in the third section of the poem are essentially a kind of Dionysiac life force.

Goats, black, not angels, but
Bellies round as filled wine-skins
Slung under carcase bones.

Their 'sudden reared stare / Startle women', who through them retrieve the sacred gift of procreation. The goat is a 'mountain listener', Pan being a wanderer of the mountains of Arcadia and a cultivator of music. The Romans associated their god Faunus with Pan and given that for them Faunus was a giver of oracles the phrase 'mountain listener' takes on added implications. The goats in 'Lupercalia' are similar to the mountain goat in 'Meeting', in which poem the creature is a representative of the numinous. This is emphasised by the fact that the goat in 'Meeting' possesses a 'yellow-eyed look' that has the same special quality shared by the look of the goats in 'Lupercalia':

Yet that's no brute light

And no merely mountain light –
Their eyes' golden element.

It is this divine quality that is transmitted to the women by the 'tinder' of 'the brute's quick', whose 'Stink of goat, of a rank thriving' is as creative as the 'sudden sharp hot stink of fox' that illuminates the poet-persona of 'The Thought-Fox'.

The Luperci in the poem's last section possess the superhuman gracefulness we encounter in the poem 'Acrobats'. This infuses them together with the spirit of the sacrificed dog, which has managed to do that which the wolf-spirit in 'February' strives so hard to do.

Their attitudes -
A theorem of flung effort, blades:
Nothing mortal falters their poise....

Besides being athletes, the Luperci are also priests and thus they serve as bridges between the human world and the spiritual one, just like the shamanic tree of life. They are points of contact not only for the barren women but also for the whole group of people congregated together in the temple of Lupercal, including us readers. The whole congregation witnesses the unification of earth and sky, profane realm and sacred realm:

The earth's crammed full,

Its baked red bellying to the sky's
Electric blue.

The wasted earth, indicative of a spiritual wasteland, is regenerated by the anagogical dimension beyond it. The barren women are an extension of the earth itself whose parchedness is also touched by the athletes: 'Over sand that the sun's burned out / Thudding feet of the powerful'. Hirschberg suggests that the fourth section is narrated through the point of view of the public gathered along the race course, watching the Luperci 'bounding past' with 'Fresh thongs of goat-skin / In their hands'. We observe how one particular woman is whipped by the priests and how she is instantly transformed as their energy infuses her static figure, making

her one with their dynamic forms: 'And deliberate welts have snatched her in / To the figure of racers'. She is injected with 'Their fury', which 'the dog has blessed'.

After reading the poem's final lines we realise that the poem itself seeks to be an embodiment of fertilising power. Through it we participate in a life-revivifying ritual and our own barrenness is touched by the healer's whip, even though perhaps the healing it accords us is not of the absolute kind that comes with the state of semi-divinity possessed by Hughes' animals and by his ideal human figures. It must be borne in mind that the Luperci are preterhuman figures and hence the psychic and spiritual health they possess and promise to the congregation takes the form of a conclusive numinous presence, which we seemingly can do nothing else but yearn for. The phenomenal attributes of these priests, just like the extraordinary cosmic qualities of Hughes' horses, jaguar and wolf are something we can only pray for, something currently absent in spite of the fact that we are communicants. What we must keep in mind is that 'prayer is more / Than an order of words, the conscious occupation / Of the praying mind, or the sound of the voice praying'.⁴⁹ Our wholehearted participation in the ritual helps us to experience this mana energy and more strongly yearn for it. However, just as he does in 'The Hawk in the Rain', 'The Jaguar' and 'The Acrobats', Hughes emphatically implies the idea that ordinary human beings, linguistic creatures tainted with the sins of the civilisation they form part of and which has moulded them into who they are, have no guarantee of attaining the absolute spiritual and psychic wholeness they desire, the healing touch that will deliver them forever from the not altogether unpleasant burdens which help define their being as ordinary men and women. For Hughes participation in rituals and the reading of poetry are our means of striving for healing, whose absolute presence (just like a text's absolute meaning) is undoubtedly, constantly deferred. However, this deferral is not a source of loss and frustration, but one of *jouissance* since our expectations are unsettled and we are compelled to continue our pursuit.

Hence the very act of participation infuses our being with meaning and value. What is most important for Hughes' purposes is not that we become analogous to the Luperci or to his semi-conscious, non-linguistic animals, but that we recognise the precious qualities of both and strive to make them our own and not shun them and denigrate them out of malice, complacency and ignorance as is the egg-head's practice. Ultimately, the greatest achievement is the fact that the voyeur of violence mutates into a protagonist of a celebration of energy who willingly recites the prayer for life and vitality that closes off a sequence spanning over two collections of poetry:

Maker of the world,
Hurrying the lit ghost of man
Age to age while the body hold,
Touch this frozen one.

Notes

- ¹ The first half of this title is a reference to Calvin Bedient's accusation that Hughes in his early collections is on a par to 'a voyeur of violence' because his 'relation to his themes...is one of a sniggering voyeurism, a voyeurism of various forms of extravagance'; Calvin Bedient, 'On Ted Hughes', *Critical Quarterly*, 14 (1972), 103-121 (p. 112-113). The word 'prayer' is an allusion to the phrase 'blent in prayer' from the poem 'Thrushes', which, as Scigaj points out, can be read as an allusion to the following lines from Yeats' 'Among School Children': 'and it seemed that our two natures blent / Into a sphere from youthful sympathy'; W.B. Yeats, *Collected Poems* (1985; London: Picador – Macmillan, 1990), p. 243.
- ² William Blake, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Alicia Ostriker (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 184.
- ³ Friedrich Holderlin, *Selected Poems and Fragments*, trans. by Michael Hamburger, ed. by Jeremy Adler (1994; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1998), p. 103.
- ⁴ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers – G. K. Hall, 1991), p. 17.
- ⁵ Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Guide to the Poems* (Portmarnock, County Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 23.
- ⁶ Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow*', *London Magazine*, January 1971, pp. 10-11.
- ⁷ John Redmond and Alan Sillitoe, 'Poet of the Spirits of the Land: Ted Hughes', available online: <http://books.guardian.co.uk/>, posted on 30 October 1998, accessed on 21 October 2002.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), p. 79.
- ¹⁰ Laurence Coupe, *Myth* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 12.
- ¹¹ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained to Children: Correspondence 1982-1985*, ed. by Julian Pefanis and Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), p. 20.
- ¹² Ibid, p. 24.
- ¹³ Faas, p. 6.
- ¹⁴ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 448.
- ¹⁵ Ibid, p. 14.
- ¹⁶ Scigaj, p. 23.
- ¹⁷ Keith Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 14.
- ¹⁸ Thomas West, *Ted Hughes* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 22.
- ¹⁹ Scigaj, p. 29.

- ²⁰ Dylan Thomas, *The Poems*, ed. by Daniel Jones (1971; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1990), p. 201.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 202.
- ²² Gerard Manley Hopkins, *The Complete Poems with Selected Prose* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1996), p. 23.
- ²³ Faas, pp. 8-9.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Hirschberg, p. 8.
- ²⁷ Scigaj, p. 30.
- ²⁸ Sagar, p. 21.
- ²⁹ Scigaj, p. 41.
- ³⁰ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 21.
- ³¹ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Bolligen Series LXXVI (1964; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 316.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, p. 316.
- ³⁴ Hirschberg, p. 16.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ West, p. 56.
- ³⁷ Faas, p. 8.
- ³⁸ Dennis Walder, *Ted Hughes* (Milton Keynes and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1987), p. 41.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.
- ⁴⁰ Quoted in Sandie Byrne, ed., *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), pp. 114-115.
- ⁴¹ Eliade, p. 408.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 470.
- ⁴³ Yeats, p. 243.
- ⁴⁴ Quoted in Byrne, p. 114.
- ⁴⁵ Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (1997; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2003), p. xxvii.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. xxviii.
- ⁴⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 10.
- ⁴⁸ Faas, pp. 9-10.
- ⁴⁹ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 215.

CHAPTER 2

The Marriage of Blood and Light:

Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama (1978)¹

From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.

T.S. Eliot – ‘Little Gidding’²

To begin to live in the present, we must first atone
for our past and be finished with it, and we can only atone
for it by suffering, by extraordinary, unceasing exertion.

Anton Chekov – *The Cherry Orchard*, Act Two³

For Hughes as a sequence *Cave Birds* is meant ‘to make an “alchemical” ritual drama of transformation, with beginning, middle, end, and a good outcome’ (*TB* 183). *Cave Birds* was first published in 1975 by the Scholar Press as a limited edition of 125 copies and it was comprised of ten poems with accompanying drawings, together with texts and facsimiles. This edition coincided with the 24 May 1975 Ilkley Literature Festival, during which was given a dramatised reading of thirty-one poems, twenty-nine of which subsequently constituted the October 1978 trade edition of *Cave Birds*. At the festival the majority of the poems in the sequence were accompanied by overhead screen projections of Baskin’s drawings of anamorphic birds. On 23 June 1975, George Macbeth’s production of the reading of Hughes’ poems was broadcast on BBC Radio 3 and it was supplemented by Hughes’ own commentary on the poems. There is no doubt that out of all Hughes’ work this sequence is one of those that most purposefully attempt to bring about healing and personality growth. Basically what we find in

this complex sequence is a parable demonstrating the fact that a sick psyche can only be healed once opposites are fused together through ritual, after one's submission to a passage of suffering.

In *Cave Birds* the transformation process we encounter is one undergone by a nameless protagonist, who embarks on a kind of inner quest towards redemption and wholeness. Hence we see that the kind of narrative we find in *Gaudete* is missing from *Cave Birds*, however, in spite of this disparity the latter sequence shares the death-rebirth pattern experienced by the Reverend Nicholas Lumb. Moreover, the kind of healing effected in the reader by *Cave Birds* is to a large extent missing from Hughes' cinematographic poetic sequence whose many negative elements, as Ann Skea points out, 'prevent us from understanding and identifying with his hero. And because we see no link between his experiences and our own, we cannot learn from them'.⁴ Hughes' description of *Cave Birds* makes it obvious that the book is structured in a number of stages; in fact it is fairly possible to determine to which particular stage each specific poem appertains, even though the concerns of each particular stage merge with those of a following or previous stage. On the whole *Cave Birds* exhibits a kind of cohesion and equability that do not feature so strongly in Hughes' other sequences. At the same time it is constructed on the same principle of development we have already exposed in our reading of the poet's first two collections. Most of the poems start off as a commentary or description of the drawings accompanying them, however, in the course of a single poem we witness a subtle development in the way Hughes detaches himself from the drawing to knit that particular poem with the rest of the sequence. The majority of the poems create the kind of extended conceits typical of the seventeenth century metaphysical poets. Hughes' use of this poetic device is very similar to the way John Donne employs it in his work, especially to how a single poem condenses various esoteric, mythological and literary motifs that extend the horizons of that poem's concerns. Furthermore, in this and other things, Hughes exhibits the

influence of or at least a similarity to Popa's technique. Hughes' words in regard to Popa's *Earth Erect* volume are an apposite description of *Cave Birds*, and this comes as no surprise given the fact that Hughes learned a lot from the way the Serbian poet structured his poetic fables and myths into poem-cycles. Hughes discovered that he could approach and tackle a given theme from a manifold number of directions:

At the same time the whole sequence operates, with even greater intensity, as an organic sequence of dream-visions, drawing on many sources, charged with personal feeling, an alchemical adventure of the soul through important changes.⁵

In *Cave Birds*, Hughes blends together the shamanic events of death and rebirth, the Jungian individuation process and the alchemical distillation of a pure element. This is most obvious if one studies the sequence's subtitle. The use of the term 'alchemical' is most probably a reference to Jung's discussion of the inner metamorphosis undergone by the alchemist during his quest for the lapis as found in Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*. Ancient Egypt is acknowledged as the birthplace of alchemy, however, in spite of the fact that the word 'alchemy' has Arabic roots it is not at all clear from where it derives. One possible explanation is that the word originates from the Greek term *chymia*, which is associated with the practice of melting and alloying metals. Alchemy, the key to all power, to political, psychological and physical wellbeing, to a new dawn, a new age, is concerned with the integration of opposites: gold and silver; black and white; sun and moon. At the end of *Cave Birds* we realise that the protagonist has been transformed into an alloy of two psychic components he had kept separate in the past. The popular perception of the alchemist is that seeing him as a person bent upon transmuting cheap common metals into gold, but the latter in alchemy symbolically stands for wisdom and perfection. Aristotle's theories about matter have for long provided alchemists with the philosophical basis for their attempts. Aristotle maintains that air, fire, earth and water are the four elements that

constitute every substance. Different substances possess different proportions of these four elements and when one element is acted upon by the actions of another a third element is produced. The idea is that since elements can undergo transformation so can the substances they constitute. However, in order for such an act of transmutation to be achieved the correct processes must first be discovered. Apart from the production of gold, the alchemist's quest for perfection takes on another far more important guise, that of attempting to impel the human soul into a state of spiritual excellence. The alchemist's true goal, his Holy Grail, is a spiritual El Dorado. The stories of alchemists striving to distil gold out of lead or to arrive at the Philosopher's Stone are highly allegorical. In *The Sufis*, a book reviewed by Hughes in 1964, Idries Shah maintains that the metallurgical aspect of alchemy is essentially an allegory for spiritual and psychological transformation, veiled in chemical phraseology in order to shield the pursuit from the attacks of organised religion.⁶ The seven stages preceding the state of gold through which metals progress after birth are on a par to the seven ages of man or the seven planetary spheres preceding the soul's arrival at heaven. The quest for the Philosopher's Stone is the quest for the human reunification with the spirit of the universe. The cosmos is believed to be pervaded by a spirit that can somehow be compressed into the lapis, the substance capable of creating both material gold and most importantly spiritual gold, the latter being a psychic and spiritual wellbeing analogous to immortality. The alchemist is not only engaged on a journey back in time to the origin of life, but also on one into the depths of himself and thus a journey fraught with psychological and spiritual danger mainly due to the unknown forces encountered there. Unlike Christianity, alchemy has a moral ambivalence to it; it strives for a knowledge that is beyond good and evil, a knowledge above faith, a knowledge one needs to experience directly. Hence the journey is a feat that demands courage. In Hughes' sequence the significance of this quality is underlined quite boldly.

The word 'cave' is found only once in the whole sequence, but it is clear that a cave's darkness is for the poet analogous to the mysteriousness of the subliminal, into which the protagonist must immerse himself, encounter a number of archetypes and undergo transmutation before climbing back into the light. For Hughes the cave is a non-linguistic dimension, paradoxically similar to Jung's conception of the unconscious and to Lacan's conception of the 'real'. Scigaj acknowledges the fact that 'To find words for moods, affective states, and psychoemotional curves and progressions that almost by definition reside beneath the resources of language was no simple task'.⁷ The reference to the cave can also be interpreted as an allusion to Plato's parable of the cave, in which is found the idea that the inhabitants of the cave have no notion of external reality. In Hughes' case external reality is what threatens the spiritual life. The term 'drama' is probably meant to point out the idea that the sequence is in fact the complex portrait of an inner drama, that is, a course of events taking place within the sequence's quester. In this, *Cave Birds* is similar to Hughes' play *The Wound*.

Cave Birds' inception owes something to Hughes' involvement with Peter Brook's experimental drama *Orghast*, especially in the latter's dependence on myth as a means by which to achieve what he calls 'a colliding place of all human energies and all polarities' (*WP* 126), or in other terms the healing of an audience through its participation in the almost ritualistic act of coalescing divergent forces. *Cave Birds* was preceded by *Prometheus on His Crag*, which was later incorporated into *Moortown*. The protagonist of this sequence was highly influential on Hughes' moulding of *Cave Birds*' protagonist. Skea points out that another influence on *Cave Birds* was that of Farid ud-Din Attar's twelfth century Sufi fable *The Conference of the Birds*, in which the bird-protagonists undertake the quasi shamanic quest of searching for the Great Bird Simurgh, an embodiment of the cosmos' divinity. The Sufi belief that all individuals carry within them a god-like quality which once discovered and properly utilised provides them with salvation is found embedded in the framework of Hughes' sequence and it is very

similar to the alchemical idea of distilling the pure element out of the raw substance. Both alchemy and Sufism put forward the notion, long attested to by Hughes and by his most influential poetic forebears, that the body and the spirit constitute an indivisible entity. For Hughes what is admirable about the Sufis is their act of undertaking 'a highly refined course of moral self-development, annihilating themselves without heaven or hell or religious paraphernalia of any kind, and without leaving life in the world, to become the living substance of Allah, the power of Creation' (*WP* 59). The appeal to Hughes of the combination created by alchemy and Sufism is found in the idea that 'the stone or elixir is a state of mind, concentrated by the doctor within himself and transmitted to the patient by means of his mind'.⁸ Poetry for Hughes is a healing agent because in a way it transmits to us a quantity of concentrated energy, reconfigures us with the source and essence of life. His questers are people bound on a journey of discovery and in this sense the majority of his sequences are allegorical of the same journey of discovery and quest for self-perfection that we are all required to embark upon.

The protagonist of the sequence is very similar to the main protagonist of the fifteenth century English drama *Everyman* and in fact Hughes' protagonist undergoes a number of experiences that feature in this medieval morality play. This aspect of the protagonist is an intentional one on Hughes' part. It is bound to what Gifford and Roberts call 'the discovery of the universal in the self',⁹ which is in turn part of the universality of the paradigm set down by the idea that the road to joy is one of suffering. The latter idea is part of what makes the protagonist of *Cave Birds* a Promethean one. The quester experiences Prometheus' torture in the ordeal to reconcile human energies and numinous elemental ones, the Apollonian realm and the Dionysian one, and consciousness and the subliminal. Prometheus, a descendant of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven), possesses the amphibious quality of the otter in *Lupercal*; he is a creature who walks the tightrope between the spiritual world and the human one and his gift of fire to mankind can be read

as his gift of a divine quality to creatures who formerly possessed no transcendental form of being whatsoever. Prometheus' punishment for deceiving the gods and the suffering this entails are necessary for that is the only means by which to repent and acquire self-knowledge and the freedom this brings with it. In a way, *Cave Birds* follows Campbell's idea of the monomyth as elucidated in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which is a mythic pattern of descent into the underworld, initiation and return. The monomyth features in all religions and mythologies and one can clearly see it in the shaman's mystical journey. In *Crow* we encounter a trickster who, even though able to survive in the hostile world of feral energy and darkness, is unable to achieve spiritual fulfilment because he lacks the will to enact self-purgation, a process undergone in *Cave Birds* and that foreshadows the *unio mystica*, the marriage with the divine. In this regard Sir Philip Sidney's assertion that 'our erected wit maketh us know what perfection is, and yet our infected will keepeth us from reaching unto it'¹⁰ is particularly pertinent. Hence *Cave Birds* is to a large extent a logical continuation of *Crow*.

In a letter to Skea dated November 1984, Hughes explains that the sequence's 'plot consists of two parallel "stories". In the one, the dramatis personae are birds. In the other, a man and a woman'.¹¹ Throughout *Cave Birds* we notice that these two plots merge into one another and make it very difficult for us to distinguish between them or to try to separate them. In fact, Hughes elucidates how this coalescence takes place when he says that the protagonist's 'soul becomes a bird and is judged by birds. Throughout the stages of this judgement, projections are made, into the "human world", where the man and woman enact...the phase of the relationship, between male and female, which is being dealt with, at that point, in the judgement of the birds'.¹² The sequence portrays the ordeal of a man whose crime against the female principle leads him to undergo trial and punishment at the hands of the bird spirits. The protagonist is swallowed up by the darkness of the inner cave, in which he undergoes

dissolution and acquires regeneration through the act of reunification with the female other.

The sequence commences with a poem entitled 'The Scream' (CB 7) and in this poem as in a number of others we find an exposition of the protagonist's crimes, which are adeptly illustrated by the Baskin drawing accompanying 'The Accused', a later poem in the sequence. This drawing shows the poem's persona as a self-satisfied, over-confident cockerel. This latter characteristic of the protagonist's personality is further emphasised by the fact that the original title of the drawing was 'A Tumbled Socratic Cock'. Being a kind of uxoricide, Hughes' cockerel is unlike Chaucer's uxorious Chauntecleer. By identifying the protagonist with a cock, Hughes is telling us that the protagonist is a traitor who has renounced his inner truth and betrayed his essence, especially since the cock is a symbol for the betrayal committed by Saint Peter in regard to Christ. In a note to 'The Scream', originally intended for the BBC Radio 3 broadcast but later omitted, Hughes says the following: 'The hero's cockerel innocence...becomes his guilt. His own self, finally, the innate nature of his flesh and blood brings him to court'.¹³ Here it seems as if the crime is an almost biological one and that is not far from what Hughes intended if one examines such a poem as 'The Accused'. The reason for this tenacity becomes clear if one takes into account the fact that Hughes intended the subtitle to *Cave Birds* to be 'The Death of Socrates and his Resurrection in Egypt'.¹⁴ Hughes elucidates this in some more detail when he says that his 'starting point was the death of Socrates. The crime for which he is judged, and which he expiates, in the sequence, is not the crime of which the Athenians accused him — rather the one for which...history holds him responsible, namely, the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess (as Mother and Bride)'.¹⁵ Graves propounds the view that 'Socrates, in turning his back on poetic myths, was really turning his back on the Moon-goddess who inspired them and who demanded that man should pay woman spiritual and sexual homage'.¹⁶ This reminds us of 'The Perfect Forms' from *Lupercal*, in which Hughes satirises

Socrates as 'Smiling, complacent as a phallus'; guilty of the 'six-day abortion of the Absolute', of bearing a 'monstrous-headed difficult child!' (L 43), the latter being an allusion to the 'monstrous birth' Iago 'engendered' (I. 3.) by means of his diabolically rational, unloving mind. For Hughes, Socrates embodies that kind of rationalism that destroys the significance of the human emotive realm, that denigrates the mysterious wonders of the greater reality beyond the confines of the ego and its tool of logical analysis. Just like Crow, the protagonist of *Cave Birds* epitomises a violent attitude in regard to the female order within nature and the human psyche. It is a passionless violence, an unnecessary, unadmirable violence; it is a form of violence exerted by means of iron-cold rationalism and it is the antithesis of the kind of regenerative violence we witness in Hughes' animal poems. As we have already mentioned in our discussion of the poet's first two collections, Hughes' diagnosis of civilisation's sickness is very similar to that proposed by Blake, whose way of representing the malady was by creating the two opposed figures of Orc and Urizen. The latter's trait of rational narrow-mindedness is mirrored by Hughes' protagonist, whereas Orc as an embodiment of the human imagination represents an ideal towards which his quest is partly directed. However, Hughes' conception of Egypt as the magical place where the Socratic mind can find its regeneration is not something Blake approves of since for him Egypt embodies all the oppression Urizen stands for and from which Orc must flee.

In the second stanza of 'The Scream' we find what is probably the poet's reference to his own artistic talent, which in this case only serves to aggravate the protagonist's crimes. His creative gifts only help the persona to further detach himself from people and their suffering. The protagonist has in a way disobeyed the thunder's injunction to give, sympathise and exercise self-control.

All day the hawk perfected its craftsmanship
And even through the night the miracle persisted.

.....

And the inane weights of iron
That come suddenly crashing into people, out of nowhere,
Only made me feel brave and creaturely.

When I saw little rabbits with their heads crushed on roads
I knew I rode the wheel of the galaxy.

Hughes highlights the idea that the protagonist mirrors his own artistic self because the poet possesses the tribal belief (of societies lacking a written form of literature) that the artist is the preserver of a community's identity and spiritual wisdom. Hence if in this poem Hughes is subtly identifying himself with the protagonist of the sequence he is doing so in the knowledge that the shaman is first and foremost a wounded healer, a person required to cure himself before attaining the ability to administer healing to others. In 'The Scream' the reference to the poet himself acts as a reminder of Hughes' attempt to use his own life and experiences as a means by which he can put forward universally relevant patterns and ideas. For Skea 'by continually working through the process of self-examination, Hughes has formulated answers which are presented in his poetry with increasing certainty, authority and skill'.¹⁷ The speaker of the poem is guilty of an intellectual crime against the female and he must learn that the only way to be free is to admit the importance of the female principle and to halt the repression of one's love for the female. The arrogant claim expressed in the last of the above-quoted lines of verse makes us see the protagonist's fantastical notions as being similar to those of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov. In fact, the pattern of experiences followed by the nineteenth century Russian hero in some ways parallels that followed by Hughes' quester.

The hawk-like qualities yearned for in Hughes' first two books are seemingly possessed by the poem's persona, however, they are not being used in a correct manner since the speaker's 'Flesh of bronze' and 'bronze thirst' makes him unable to flinch when confronted by lobotomised and mutilated friends and creatures. However, the horror surrounding him as well as that residing within

him is too huge for him to ignore and soon the speaker is forced into a pose similar to that of Edvard Munch's subject in *The Scream*:

Then I, too, opened my mouth to praise –

But a silence wedged my gullet.

Like an obsidian dagger, dry, jag-edged,
A silent lump of volcanic glass,

The scream
Vomited itself.

The final two lines exhibit the female aspect or the anima of the protagonist's psyche or being, detaching itself from oppression in order to express outrage, pain and humiliation.

Partly due to the protagonist's resemblance to Hercules, Hirschberg identifies the female figure in *Cave Birds* with Athena, who represented the intellectual aspect of war and was the patroness of arts and crafts. Athena's chief symbol was the owl and like the female in Hughes' sequence was fond of taking on the appearance of various birds. The female protagonist in *Cave Birds* can be interpreted variously as the Jungian anima, the *soror mystica*, the White Goddess, a daimon or nature's spirit. What is important is that she stands for the violated, repressed and forsaken female, who not only manifests herself in outer nature but most significantly in the male protagonist's inner nature. Given this fact and various clues in the poems themselves it is fairly accurate to say that Scigaj is right when he implies that Hughes' conception of the female in *Cave Birds* is predominantly as the anima. The issue carries more weight if we take into account the fact that Jung underlined the importance of the *mysterium coniunctionis* as a means towards wholeness, something Hughes adopts as a goal for his protagonist. The drive towards an androgynous form of being does in fact make itself felt in the sequence, however, Hughes' realisation of how wide is the gulf between the

two genders makes him see the androgynous condition as a somewhat illusory ideal, even though not one the quester should desist from pursuing.

Before going on trial the protagonist encounters what Scigaj identifies as the Jungian shadow in the poem 'The Summoner' (CB 8). The shadow stands for all those qualities that are repressed in the psyche's underworld due to their having been rejected by the conscious self. The shadow is described as 'Spectral, gigantified, / Protozoic, blood-eating'. He is an ineradicable part of the persona's psyche and regularly arises out of the gloom to undermine his complacency.

Shadow stark on the wall, all night long,
From the street-light. A sigh.

Evidence, rinds and empties,
That he also ate here.

Before dawn, your soul, sliding back,
Beholds his bronze image, grotesque on the bed.

On every encounter with the shadow the individual 'recognize[s]' him as an inherent part of himself, but each time he rejects him. However, this mode of behaviour cannot be kept up for too long and 'Sooner or later - / The grip'. Like the anima, the shadow is about to rebel and make the protagonist pay for the long years of repression. However, in spite of all the menace that surrounds the shadow's appearance, in the penultimate stanza he is called 'your protector' and this refers to the idea that a negative perception of natural elements is due to a warped mental framework for which nature is not responsible. Scigaj puts it quite appositely when he says that 'If the dreamer is willing to wrestle with his own unconscious energies, the archetypes change from darkly menacing figures to helping agents of transformation'.¹⁸ By the end of *Cave Birds* we notice that it is not only the protagonist's self that has undergone mutation, but also his perception. With regard to this Hughes himself explains that 'as in the Bardo Thodol (Tibetan Book Of The Dead), the soul is confronted by everything which, in the upper world, he had rejected. He is confronted, that is, by the Goddess in

various forms: if he rejects again, he would be annihilated. If he accepts, he will be resurrected... Going through the ordeals of acceptance, he is transformed. When he achieves total acceptance he is resurrected'.¹⁹

In the next poem, 'After the First Fright' (CB 10), the speaker tries to cogitate some form of defence: 'I sat up and took stock of my options. / I argued my way out of every thought anybody could think'. However, this intellectual means of safeguarding the self cannot stop the 'Catherine wheel in my belly'; the protagonist has failed to entirely transform himself into a 'monstrous-headed difficult child' (L 43) since he cannot argue his way out of fear and anxiety. Confronted by his shadow, the persona tries to logically squirm his way out of a tight corner, but when he sees that his words are like poison poured into an innocent man's ears he starts to acknowledge his guilt.

The disputation went beyond me too quickly.
 When I said: 'Civilization',
 He began to chop off his fingers and mourn.
 When I said: 'Sanity and again Sanity and above all Sanity',
 He disembowelled himself with a cross-shaped cut.
 I stopped trying to say anything.
 But then when he began to snore in his death-struggle
 The guilt came.
 And when they covered his face I went cold.

The summoner's act of chopping off his fingers is an ancient practice of primitive societies, in which a mourner was required to lose a finger as a show of bereavement. For Hughes 'It is part of the coherent, balanced, successfully adapted system by which those societies manage life and their world'.²⁰ For the protagonist of *Cave Birds*, as for that of Dorothy M. Johnson's 'A Man Called Horse' (in which the same act features), the act of self-mutilation goes against the values of sanity and civilisation, but only because these values obfuscate and narrow down the vision of those harbouring such values. The summoner in Hughes' poem can thus be read as mourning for the protagonist's death, which seems to be the only means by which the protagonist can achieve redemption for

himself, given that his being is too hopelessly shallow to save in any other manner. The 'cross-shaped cut' mentioned in line nine is the means by which disembowelment can be effected, imaginary disembowelment being part of the shamanic rite of initiation. For Hughes the act reminds him of Hara-kiri which he describes as 'an ultimate confrontation of the real pain of pain, a deliberate, controlled translation of psychological pain into physical pain, the absolute acceptance of pain on its own terms'.²¹ The word 'cross' brings to mind Jesus Christ's faith-inspiring rite of suffering and death that ultimately accorded him with the power of a saviour. For Hughes this idea is highly significant: 'The point of the poem is that the real language of pain is clear—its declaration to the "I" in the poem is immediate and complete, totally understood'.²² The implication here is that suffering is a phenomenon deprived of falsity, an event in which the individual comes face to face with authentic being. Moreover, the 'cross' incised into the summoner's belly is an indication that the protagonist must embrace his Promethean ordeal in order for him to become a Christ-like paradigm.

In 'The Interrogator' (*CB* 12), the protagonist undergoes the throes of an 'Investigation / By grapnel' and there is 'Small hope now for the stare-boned mule of man / Lumped on the badlands, at his concrete shadow'. The protagonist can in no way avoid an examination of his guilty self conducted by his menacing anima, whose untainted nature accords her a description in terms of 'the sun's keyhole / The sun spies through her'. She frightens the poem's persona and threatens his being with the promise of death, symbolised by her vulture-like aspect, which we find in Baskin's drawing. The persona's 'angered righteous questions / Agitate her craw' and this dark stomach portends the swallowing up of the protagonist in the poems 'The Executioner' and 'First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin'. The vulture in Egyptian mythology is often associated with Isis, wife and symbolic mother of Osiris, the god who died and was reincarnated in the form of Horus, his son. Mut, goddess of heaven, had the form of a vulture and being the wife of the Theban god Amun, who later on became Amun-Ra, is particularly

important since Ra was Osiris' counterpart. The vulture goddess Nekhabet is another possible female divinity whom Hughes could be alluding to, as is the vulture-headed Grdhramukha from the *Bardo Thodol* and another vulture-headed goddess, Hathor from *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*. The vultress in Hughes' poem is also the tormentor sent by Zeus to Prometheus. In this poem we see how the anima's 'prehensile goad of interrogation' yields her with 'a dripping bagful of evidence' with which 'She sweeps back, a spread-fingered Efrete, / Into the courts of the afterlife'. Here it is made quite obvious that the inhabitant of the 'badlands' and the goddess-like female are polar opposites. However, the path towards reconciliation begins to be laid out soon after the protagonist's disturbing encounter with his psychic interrogator.

In the poem 'She Seemed So Considerate' (CB 14) the anima confirms the thoughts the speaker had been forming about himself:

Then the bird came.
She said: your world has died.
It sounded dramatic.

But my pet fern, the one fellow creature I still cherished,
It actually had died.
I felt life had decided to cancel me.
As if it saw better hope for itself elsewhere.

The act of manifesting affection solely for an inanimate plant highlights the protagonist's inability to love others and the state of vacuousness this accords him, which go counter to the anima's description as a 'creature / Who never harmed any living thing', as she admits to the protagonist while embracing him. This embrace infuses him with a sense of love and safety, a sense of hope that plays an important part in spurring him on to take up the ordeal of transmutating himself into someone new, doing so after overcoming the indifference that features strongly in his personality at this present stage:

I was glad to shut my eyes, and be held.

Whether dead or unborn, I did not care.

For Gifford and Roberts 'The Judge' (CB 16) 'acts as a warning early in the sequence that the figures be seen, not as independent controlling forces but as representatives of the hero's own physical nature'.²³ The poem is in fact a parodical portrait of the protagonist's narrow rationality. The language of the poem encourages us to imagine a stern, sweating, apoplectic-looking Victorian judge, whose self-righteousness makes him invulnerable when made the target of barbed pleas for mercy and empathy. This is emphasised by Baskin's drawing of a fat, towering creature. He is described as 'The garbage-sack of everything that is not / The Absolute on to whose throne he lowers his buttocks'. Notice that as in 'The Perfect Forms' the word 'Absolute' carries a capital letter, signifying that Hughes is most probably referring to the same concept or quality that is misappropriated and trampled upon by the same kind of intellect. The judge is 'A Nero of the unalterable'; his imposition of meanings and his manufacturing of false truths are conducted in the fashion of a blind demigod. Similar to the Court of Chancery in *Bleak House*, we see that 'Hung with precedents as with obsolete armour / His banqueting court is as airy as any idea'. He 'fatten[s] on the substance of those who have fouled // His tarred and starry web' and this 'web-glistening geometry' is the rational mind's arrogant attempt to neatly understand, classify and categorise all that which eludes it, managing only to entrap countless helpless victims in its vampiric coils. After having banqueted in this manner, the judge 'squats listening / To his digestion and the solar silence', because after having deluded themselves with the idea that logic and knowledge have brought about order and stability in the chaotic universe there is nothing else to do for such persons as the judge and the egg-head but rest in 'Cosmic equipoise'.

Besides being the interrogator, the anima features also as the plaintiff and this is because the harmed subject of this trial is in fact civilisation's female aspect. In 'The Plaintiff' (CB 18) the anima is described as 'the bird of light!' and 'the life-divining bush of your desert // The heavy-fruited, burning tree / Of your

darkness'. By means of these images, Hughes alludes to Moses' revelation in the desert, a revelation that transformed him into the saviour of a whole race of people by guiding them on their quest for the Promised Land. In the Old Testament, God's illumination is masculinely horrific, however, as is made clear in the poem 'Hawk Roosting', for Hughes it possesses a feminine creative power. All the anima's efforts are geared towards eradicating the old criminal self and safeguarding the means by which a new authentic self may be born.

The feet
Roots

Buried in your chest, a humbling weight
That will not let you breathe.

Your heart's winged flower
Come to supplant you.

By breaking into two brief lines the first stanza immediately quoted above, Hughes is emphasising an idea found in a reading of the Osiris myth that Isis is both mother and daughter of the reincarnated god. This is corroborated by the poem's eight line: 'How you have nursed her!' The 'winged flower' refers to the protagonist's resurrected self in the poem 'The Owl Flower', which comes towards the end of the sequence.

The protagonist's crime is further revealed in the poem 'In These Fading Moments I Wanted to Say' (CB 20), in which the speaker's admission of 'How imbecile innocent I am' is tied to an acknowledgement of the coldness festering in his heart.

So some perfect stranger's maiming
Numbs me in freezing petroleum
And lights it, and lets me char to the spine....

This ataraxia pervades him completely, it has suffocated his anima, his feelings and emotions, and his entire being, even.

But she was murmuring: Right from the start, my life
 Has been a cold business of mountains and their snow
 Of rivers and their mud....

The 'fading moments' mentioned by the protagonist refer to the process of annihilation that is gradually assailing him and the reality he believes in. He is slowly acknowledging the fact that once his identity commences to be erased there would be nothing to stop the slide toward dissolution. However, the persona still attempts to defend the way he is, but this struggle lacks the strength to refute the plaintiff's metaphorical description of the oppression she suffered at the hands of the accused. We are told that even during the protagonist's meetings with his friends 'The scree had not ceased to slip and trickle / The snow-melt was cutting deeper / Through its anaesthetic'. His detachment from others, their joys and sorrows has repressed that part of his psyche that makes love and empathy possible. The poem's persona is guilty of rejecting the world and in its turn the world has rejected him:

The whole earth
 Had turned in its bed
 To the wall.

These final lines remind us of the same indifference exhibited by the protagonist in the final lines of 'She Seemed So Considerate'. Furthermore, both the protagonist and the earth seem to suffer from an existential despair that is triggered off when one's being is faced with the threat of decimation. However, whereas the protagonist's death will yield him with resurrection, the death administered to the earth by the protagonist's detachment and abuse of all that forms part of nature (including his own anima) knows no such nostrum, other than that of the protagonist's reformation.

In order for regeneration to take place dissolution must first come about, as is expounded by Lawrence's 'Phoenix':

Are you willing to be sponged out, erased, cancelled,
made nothing?
Are you willing to be made nothing?
dipped into oblivion?

If not, you will never really change.²⁴

This is similar to the ideas expressed in Patrick White's *Voss*, which Hughes reviewed in 1964: 'Few people of attainments take easily to a plan of self-improvement... Only a few stubborn ones will blunder on, painfully, out of the luxuriant world of their pretensions into the desert of mortification and reward'.²⁵ For the quasi-supernal explorer 'To make yourself, it is also necessary to destroy yourself'.²⁶ In 'The Executioner' (*CB* 22) the chaotic subconscious realm tightens its grip on the persona and submerges his consciousness, his entire being into its dark redemptive energies. The gradual execution of the diseased self is conducted in what must be imagined as a pool of healing water. The act of being swallowed up by the darkness is an allusion to the myth in which Osiris is shut into a coffin and thrown into the sea. Seth, the perpetrator of this act, later butchers him and scatters his body pieces all over Egypt. Isis reconstructs Osiris' body and saves him from annihilation by bearing him a son.

The tap drips darkness darkness
Sticks to the soles of your feet

He fills up the mirror, he fills up the cup
He fills up your thoughts to the brims of your eyes

You just see he is filling the eyes of your friends
And now lifting your hand you touch at your eyes

Which he has completely filled up

The sensation of fluidity is reinforced by the fact that this poem relatively lacks punctuation. This stylistic device is employed by Hughes whenever he paradoxically desires his reader to linguistically feel the freedom of a primordial dimension in which the constraints invented by civilisation are absent. It is a

stylistic device he started to employ in the eponymic last poem of *Wodwo* and which he also used in *Crow*. The drawing accompanying the poem resonates of a shot of Mephistopheles gigantically looming over a dwarfed town in F.W. Murnau' 1926 *Faust*. Baskin entitled the drawing 'Raven of Ravens' and in alchemy the raven is a symbol of the *nigredo* or blackness, which is either an initial state of chaos or else a state induced by the division of the elements.

The reference to 'hemlock' in the second stanza reminds us of Socrates' act of willingly drinking poison and we are forced to realise that what we are witnessing in *Cave Birds* is the renovation of culture through the reformation of the protagonist's being, who is hence a representative of the collective. The fact that the encounter with the executioner marks the first stage in the persona's rebirth process is emphasised by the last two stanzas which demonstrate how the persona has returned to his origins and been stripped of all the encumbrances that weighed him down in the same manner they continue to do to the system embodied by the judge:

You have no idea what has happened
To what is no longer yours

It feels like the world
Before your eyes ever opened

In order for the executioner to properly do his job, the protagonist must first manifest his willingness to submit himself to the executioner's care and this is what takes place in 'The Accused', in which all that the persona ever knew is sacrificed in order for remission to be bestowed upon him by the sacred realm he had formerly rejected.

In 'The Accused' (CB 24), which to some extent alludes to the feast of the fowls ordained by God in Ezekiel 39: 17-20, the protagonist 'Confesses his body - / The gripful of daggers' and 'His stomach - / The corpse-eating god'. The latter is a reference to the deity *Grdhramukha* who is vulture-headed and feeds on cadavers and whom we have encountered in 'The Interrogator', in which is found

a reference to the bird's menacing 'crawl'. Lastly, after other body parts, comes the moment when the accused 'Confesses...his hard brain – the sacred assassin'. Hence we see that in this poem the protagonist determinedly decides to accept the ordeal of metempsychosis.

He heaps them all up, for the judgement.

So there his atoms are annealed, as in x-rays,
Of their blood-aberration –

His muddled body, lord of middens, like an ore,

To rainbowed clinker and a beatitude.

The word 'annealed' is important since it tells us that purification will be pursued by alchemical means. The term refers to the metallurgical practice of heating metal and then cooling it slowly for the purposes of rendering it less brittle. Hence we see that the accused hopes to acquire a new far stronger form of being by placing his inauthentic self 'On a flame-horned mountain-stone, in the sun's disc'. This line is a reference to the Vulture Headdress worn by Isis, who together with Osiris and forty-two other judges constituted the tribunal before which the human soul appeared after the body's death. The term 'annealed' also refers to the practice of heating a substance in order to fix its colours and this shows us that the cold, quasi-inanimate protagonist yearns for the 'beatitude' that comes with a 'rainbowed' self.

The protagonist of *Cave Birds* is deliberately identified with Hercules whose journey to Hades and subsequent self-immolation on Mount Etna is one of the patterns followed by Hughes' sequence. According to Hirschberg, 'Hughes gives Hercules's descent to the underworld its true character as an initiatory ordeal, a necessary breaking of strength by the strongest of all men, a self-confrontation by him who has conquered everything and has nothing more to conquer except himself'.²⁷ *Cave Birds* relies upon various myths in order to achieve its objectives, but that of Osiris is particularly important. Osiris' death

and resurrection symbolised the cycle of the seasons and promised mankind the hope of another life. Osiris taught mankind respect for the gods and the use of rituals. In this manner he was also a sower of civilisation. Most of these aspects are reflected in the ultimate purpose of the quest undertaken by Hughes' protagonist, a quest that must be seen as an extension of Hughes' poetic healing method. In the guise of the accused, the sequence's protagonist conforms with the Egyptian belief that upon death everyone becomes a new Osiris and has to undergo an underworld trial presided by Osiris himself, after which trial the individual is rewarded with a new life.

In 'First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin' (CB 26) the persona journeys through the fantastic mysterious realm inside the raven which has swallowed him up. This event reminds us of the biblical story of Jonah, who after having been swallowed up by a Moby Dick-like whale, in whose stomach he spends three days, is transformed into a saviour and sets forth upon his mission of converting Nineveh. The language of this poem and the experiences it describes bring to mind the heroic and expiatory quests recounted in classical epics. Hughes intentionally identifies his protagonist as an epic quester by alluding to various world-renowned literary epics, however, one of the most significant texts for the purposes of the sequence's vision is *The Waste Land*. The seventh stanza of Eliot's 'What the Thunder Said' is alluded to in Hughes' last three stanzas in 'First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin':

I came to loose bones
On a heathery moor, and a roofless church.

Wild horses, with blowing tails and manes,
Standing among graves.

And a leaning menhir, with my name on it,
And an epitaph, which read:
'Under this rock, he found weapons.'

The 'leaning menhir' announces the persona's temporary sojourn in the underworld while the 'epitaph' engraved on its surface symbolically salutes the diseased aspect of the old self and directs the persona towards all future journeys, in which the 'weapons' of self-knowledge, awareness of one's mortality and of one's subservience to material nature are all-essential for the Parsifal-like quester.

In alchemy the stage described in this poem is known as Raven's Head, a stage in which the individual experiences the annihilation of all that he formerly valued about himself. It is an initial stage, one preceding the undertaking of the quest of actual self-transformation. Hence in this poem we see the protagonist embarking on a voyage that transcends the confines of a single poem and is performed throughout a whole sequence, which in turn is mirrored in other sequences composed by the same poet. The raven in Hughes' sequence is a symbol for what Hirschberg calls 'an incubation period within a cave or womb prior to being reborn or hatched'.²⁸ Together with that of the cave and the womb, one can also add the notion of the tomb, walking out of which Christ the saviour on the third day acquires resurrection. Perhaps Hughes' idea is to capture the same kind of ambiguity conveyed by Chidiock Tichborne's and Samuel Beckett's undermining of the definitions appended to the words 'tomb' and 'womb'.

Hughes' protagonist is not just swallowed by a raven, but most importantly he becomes the bird itself, that is, he dissolves into the very nothingness that engulfs him. For the Laps when a raven's blood is added to the milk of a young child that child grows into a healer and this is significant since what we are discerning are the steps leading towards the protagonist's final rebirth. However, according to Hirschberg, Hughes by 'making his hero crow-like...represent[s] the undesirable character traits that render him less than human, chief among which are his indifference, his self-conceit and most importantly his power of denying to himself the truth of his condition'.²⁹ However, besides being a form of punishment, the process of dissolution is also a beneficial one for the protagonist since in a truly alchemical manner it yields him with his quintessence.

The quest undertaken by the protagonist is an internalised one and this internalisation is accomplished slowly along the way, borne forth by the protagonist's gradual realisation of the truth about himself, his acceptance of the fact that he is a victim of psychic inflation and that self-purgation can only come about if the surplus material is eradicated and the tiny precious essence that constitutes his authentic being is discovered. The act of discovery is paradoxically achieved when the protagonist experiences sub-humanity.

It is highly appropriate that the poem that comes next is 'The Knight' (CB 28) in which, as Gifford and Roberts claim, 'The discipline of the poem's central metaphor permeates the tone of the poem so that complete submission to the process of death achieves a still knowledge of unity with the material universe'.³⁰ The poem is accompanied by a drawing of a dead raven and the poem focuses on describing the decomposing bird. Hughes' handling of language makes it so that the bird's apparently definite end strikes us as a glorious beginning. Through his sacrifice, his entire subjection to the forces of the material world, the knight 'Has conquered', that is, he has attained union with nature's cosmic pattern. As a faithful vassal of a sovereign he owes his entire allegiance to, the knight's death marks the moment when this great love finds its utmost manifestation:

Now he kneels. He is offering up his victory
And unlacing his steel.

In front of him are the common wild stones of the earth —

The first and last altar
Onto which he lowers his spoils.

And that is right. He has conquered in earth's name.
Committing these trophies

To the small madness of roots, to the mineral stasis
And to rain.

Like the bird in 'The Hawk in the Rain', the bird in 'The Knight' achieves perfection because 'His sacrifice is perfect. He reserves nothing'. The knight's 'submission is flawless'. For Gifford and Roberts, the knight attains an 'achieved state of consciousness' because 'The quiet celebration of his own body's physical decay is...the product of a discipline of consciousness'.³¹

The poem's thirteenth stanza tells us that 'His eyes darken bolder in their vigil / As the chapel crumbles'. This is an allusion to the Grail legend and to those works by such artists as Richard Wagner, Paul Verlaine and Eliot that utilise the story in one way or another. The knight's death is part of his quest for the spiritual regeneration of the wasteland and in the stanzas that follow we learn that 'Nothing remains of the warrior but his weapons // And his gaze'. The 'weapons' collected in the preceding poem remain intact, they are beyond decay just because they are so necessary, and it is the earth, or its psychic equivalent, the unconscious which preserves them for each new generation's salvation. Just as the jaguar-visionary of Hughes' first volume is 'blind in fire' (*HR* 12) because it has not betrayed its nature, so the knight's 'gaze' is that of someone who has attained a mystical revelation through piousness and humility, suffering and self-sacrifice. This is what is accentuated by the poem's final three lines:

He is himself his banner and its rags.

While hour by hour the sun
Strengthens its revelation.

Coming after 'The Knight', the poem 'Something was Happening' (*CB* 30) is rather anticlimactic since it presents us with a picture of the persona's indifference towards human suffering. The speaker does not join a small crowd that flees from a woman broken down by sorrow; he stays watching her while 'She was burning'. Although he shows adeptness in describing the struggles of a suffering person, the persona's tone lacks the kind of sympathy one would expect from him at this stage of his transformation. He remains as unchanged and as

apathetic as his inanimate possessions, while the earth, which has already once turned its back on him, now does so once again in response to his own detachment:

The leather of my shoes
Continued to gleam
The silence of the furniture
Registered nothing

The earth, right to its far rims, ignored me.

The protagonist's indifference to some extent replicates Hamlet's attitude in regard to Ophelia, whom he ignores in his quest for justice and revenge, a crime Hughes' protagonist risks repeating if he fails to maintain a clear perspective of what he is meant to truly achieve. However, the persona's aloofness is not directed solely towards the suffering woman but also towards his own self since the above-quoted lines clearly exhibit an awareness on the speaker's part of a single individual's insignificance in the overall workings of the cosmos. Even though the tone of 'Something was Happening' might remind us of that employed in 'The Scream', it is at the same time unimbued with notions of grandiloquence and self-aggrandisement. The protagonist is experiencing the confusion brought about by the cataclysmic changes occurring within him and this is perhaps why he is forgiven the transgression he commits in this poem and accorded an animal helper in recompense for the submission to nature that he exhibited earlier on. According to Scigaj, the persona, in the guise of an eagle-hunter, comes to realise that his capturing of the eagle parallels the act of capturing his new self.

In 'The Gatekeeper' (CB 32), which can be identified as the beginning of the rebirth process, the protagonist further undergoes the rite of shamanic initiation and fully experiences shamanic flight:

The candidate is stripped.

Such fear – your weight oozes from you.

No matter, it was upholstering ease,

It was insulation
From this stranger who wails out your name

Then drops, hugging a bare piece of ground
Where everything is too late.

The protagonist further loses his old self, which starts becoming alien to him as he is slowly transformed into someone he must yet come to know, even though it had always been entrapped within him like an ounce of gold in a pound of copper. Guilt torments him and his 'cry is like a gasp from a corpse' as 'Everything comes back'. He is seized by his animal helper but he is not informed of his exact destination. Nonetheless, whichever it is, the protagonist commences a journey into the greater reality of the sacred.

And a wingspread

Nails you with its claws. And an eagle
Is flying

To drop you into a bog or carry you to eagles.

'A Flayed Crow in the Hall of Judgement' (CB 34) is very similar to 'First, the Doubtful Charts of Skin' since the emphasis is once again on dissolution, an impression of which is conveyed to us by means of alchemical and shamanic terms and images. However, the main point of focus is the quintessence that is slowly being yielded by the process of dissolution.

Nothingness came close and breathed on me – a frost
A shawl of annihilation has curled me up like a new foetus.

I rise beyond height – I fall past falling.
I float on an air
As mist-balls float, and as stars.

A condensation, a gleam simplification
Of all that pertained.

The new self is being distilled, rebirth is taking place. From the sixth to the ninth stanzas the speaker bombards himself with a number of rhetorical questions that nothing stops us from answering. The tone of anguish resonates clearly with every question that escapes his lips and the speaker senses what lies behind his confusion as a 'cry' inside his 'tissues'. In other words, the speaker knows that something mysterious is tightening its grip upon him, something at once threatening and beneficent. He tells us that 'A great fear rests / On the thing I am, as a feather on a hand'. These lines are most certainly referring to *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, in which we find the belief that when the deceased appears before Osiris his heart is weighed against the feather of truth. After this the deceased can either be pronounced justified and thus worthy of the Osirian underworld, or else not and thus condemned to be devoured by the eater of the dead. From this probably evolved the Catholic occult notion of the sin-eater, who is the only one capable of providing the dying sinner with absolution for his life's mortal sins through the act of taking them upon himself. In Hughes' sequence the two ideas interweave since the protagonist is both devoured for his unpardonable crimes and has his sins devoured by the female, who thus saves him from eternal death and regales him with the possibility of resurrection.

In the poem it is the fear of absolute annihilation that torments the speaker, as well as the fear experienced by the trudging man in 'The Hawk in the Rain'. However, unlike the latter persona, the speaker of 'A Flayed Crow in the Hall of Judgement' submits to the processes that start working on his being. This capitulation will further on be rewarded with the 'beatitude' promised in 'The Accused':

I shall not fight
Against whatever is allotted to me.

My soul skinned, and the soul-skin laid out
A mat for my judges.

The final line quoted above makes reference to Maat, Egyptian goddess of justice, and the implication is that the protagonist has finally arrived at the realisation that there exist values which he can no longer assume himself to be above of. Full submission to these values means that the protagonist can truly achieve the state of perfection evoked by 'The Knight'. The term 'mat' could also be an allusion to the Welsh mythic hero Math the son of Mathonwy, a sacred king whose virtue and point of weakness, in an Achillean fashion, resided in his feet. When away at battle he left his feet in the lap of a priestess, who also happened to be his wife. In Hughes' poem, the anima or earth-goddess is a protective force as well as one that helps goad the protagonist into arriving at the right adjudication and the truth, after a battle with erroneous judgements and self-deceit. Acknowledgement of the significance of an Antaeus-like reverential contact with the origin is fundamental for this to happen. Since the bird-spirit in this poem and the rest of the sequence's middle section is a crow or raven and due to other reasons, one can postulate that in *Cave Birds* Hughes intended to follow to its redemptive ending the unfinished sequence we find in *Crow*.

'The Baptist' (CB 36) re-enacts the same embrace we witness in 'She Seemed So Considerate', however, the baptist's embrace is not merely consolatory, but it provides the protagonist with purification in the form of 'winding waters, a swathing of balm // A mummy bandaging / Of all your body's puckering hurts'. This cleansing act infuses the persona with wellbeing and sows inside him the qualities that shall bloom further on in the sequence.

A whale of furtherance

Cruises through the Arctic of stone,
Carrying you blindfold and gagged

You dissolve, in the cool wholesome salts
Like a hard-cornered grief, drop by drop

Or an iceberg of loss
Shrinking towards the equator

Or a seed in its armour.

As in alchemy, it is only by following the exact procedure that the efflorescence of this seed of salvation can be attained. The seed imprisoned beneath the snow brings to mind Heaney's poem 'The Tollund Man', whose speaker 'pray[s]' the sacrificial victim buried in the peat bog 'to make germinate'³² a better future. This is especially more relevant given the implication that Hughes' protagonist might have been dropped in the 'bog' by his eagle animal-helper in 'The Gatekeeper', the bog being a symbol for the earth's motherly nature that the human individual helps in inseminating, he being the 'Bridegroom to the goddess'.³³ In this poem Hughes juxtaposes images of dissolution and expungement of pain with ones of cyclicity or development. This poem tries to linguistically capture the actions of being dipped and dissolved in swirling waters. The particular verbs used by the poet emphasise the act of pervasion of and confluence with an element that has swallowed up the protagonist. That sense of fluidity achieved by the omission of punctuation in such a poem as 'The Executioner' is here attained by means of an adept manipulation of sound patterns. Paul Bentley points out the fact that 'The highly textured use of fricatives, nasal resonants and semi-vowels...conveys the impression of the words sliding or dissolving into each other, as if in a murmur'.³⁴

The persona of 'Only a Little Sleep, a Little Slumber' (CB 38) puts himself at the disposal of 'a little knife' and experiences 'a small incision, / A snickety nick in the brain'. This operation is nothing like the lobotomy performed on his 'mate' in 'The Scream'. What is removed from the persona's head is what Scigaj calls 'the old self-concept'.³⁵ This missing part could also correspond to that body part Isis failed to find in her reconstruction of Osiris, which part was inessential in helping Isis' impregnation by her husband. The poem's last two stanzas focus on the bird spirit into which the protagonist has been newly transformed, however, the bird could also be a symbol for the anima timidly moving out of the shadows in order to be embraced by the protagonist.

Who are you, in the nest among the bones?
You are the shyest bird among birds.

'I am the last of my kind.'

The answer provided by the mysterious bird in the final line can be interpreted in two ways, depending on whom one conceives the bird to be. If the anima, then the bird is the survivor of an otherwise extinct species, and if one believes the bird to be an embodiment of the protagonist then what we are seeing is the prototype of a race that must still yet come into being, the next step in the evolution of a species that is slowly losing its synergy due to the lack of role-models.

The two poems that come next in the sequence have been read as presenting temptations the quester must avoid in his attempt to achieve psychic wholeness and the reunification with the anima implied by this. However, they can also be seen as putting forward a portrait of the bliss that exists in nature and which bliss can be attained if the human individual accepts his place in the overall pattern and seeks union with the spirit. The anima for Hughes is an extension of nature or of the White Goddess; she is one representation of the female principle the individual cannot help but pay full respect to. In 'A Green Mother' (CB 40) the anima tells the protagonist that nature is made up of an infinity of 'heavens' and the human thirst for worship can best be slaked if this is addressed to the numinousness of the material world. The anima also assures the persona that she herself will guide him as to how best live in harmony with the greater reality outside him, the implication being that then the protagonist will achieve inner peace as well:

I am your guide.
In none of these is the aftertaste of death
Pronounced poor. This earth is heaven's sweetness.

It is heaven's mother.
The grave is her breast
And her milk is endless life.

You shall see
How tenderly she has wiped her child's face clean

Of the bitumen of blood and the smoke of tears.

The idyllic picture here presented, reminiscent of Romantic and Georgian poets, is too perfect for it to concord with Hughes' conception of nature's reality, which combines violence and sacredness in equal proportions. In fact, according to Gifford and Roberts, 'A Green Mother' puts forward 'a paradisaical vision that denatures earth and blurs the distinction between the this-worldly and the other-worldly'.³⁶

In 'As I Came, I saw a Wood' (CB 42) the speaker describes the material world as though it were 'in the middle of a ritual' in which all living things were taking part while 'time was not present' and 'Everything moved in an excitement that seemed permanent'. Watching the creatures participating in this ritual, the speaker notes 'their absolution in sanctity // And their obedience'. The speaker is a voyeur observing something of great beauty and value and he fully realises this:

I could see I stood in a paradise of tremblings

At the crowded crossroads of all the heavens
The festival of all the religions....

The speaker's serenity is not long-lived however, since as a voyeur he is living an inauthentic life; for him to achieve the peace and love his eyes drink up, participation in the ritual is obligatory:

But a voice, a bell of cracked iron
Jarred in my skull

Summoning me to prayer

To eat flesh and to drink blood.

Nevertheless, becoming a communicant of the kind of ritual described in this poem is nothing short of embroiling oneself in an illusion that though powerful

enough to daze the speaker possesses no substance at all. The 'bell of cracked iron' is symbolic of the idea that the sort of perfection on earth depicted by this poem is practically impossible to achieve and that the attempt to attain the kind of tranquillity described in this poem and the one preceding it is necessarily futile. For Hughes the processes of nature are ritualistic, but in addition to exaltation and light they also involve suffering and blood. 'The Green Mother' and 'As I Came, I Saw a Wood' present us with an untainted world, which the jarring bell rejects while making the protagonist realise that the path towards self-healing is an unending one. As Hirschberg rightly claims, Hughes 'can never release [his] heroes from their posture of suffering and let them slip off the cross'.³⁷ He also points out that 'the need to create ever more complete conditions of self-confrontation and self-purgation has become a permanent fixture in Hughes' universe of moral values, a moral stance...that must be reinvoked by increasingly violent scenes of self-catharsis'.³⁸

'A Riddle' (CB 44) is constructed of a number of paradoxes that describe the protagonist's anima, who happens to be the speaker of this poem. The anima is the protagonist's 'bride' while he is her 'father' and this is due to the fact that his psyche has given birth to her while it is his self that must marry her. For Gifford and Roberts the speaker 'appears both as accuser and as corrective to the illusions of the Green Mother'.³⁹ In the final three stanzas the anima describes how the quester's salvation lies in complete union with her. This union marks the true rebirth of the protagonist and his 'cry' at the end is that of a person who has recaptured the innocence of an infant while simultaneously acknowledging how wrongly he has behaved in the past. The 'cry' is also one of extreme joy at the fact that reunion with the anima corresponds to a reunion with nature and with those wonders he had formerly failed to perceive. The protagonist comes to perceive the truth about the material world and about his place within it, the same truth adumbrated in such poems as 'A Voyage' and 'Relic':

Now as you face your death

I offer you your life

Just as surely as you are my father
I shall deliver you

My firstborn
Into a changed, unchangeable world
Of wind and of sun, of rock and water
To cry.

In the poem, the female speaker claims to be the bride, mother and daughter of the quester and this is explained by the fact that Isis was both Osiris' wife as well as the person who enabled his rebirth in the form of Horus. Furthermore, it is significant that Isis derived her powers from Ra, the sun in its diurnal phase, whose counterpart was Osiris, the sun in its nocturnal phase. The poem's final lines are an obvious allusion to Isis' act of reconstructing Osiris' body and delivering him into life once more or else perpetuating his heritage by means of his son, the new self manufactured out of the old one. According to Hirschberg the protagonist's female opposite is the *soror mystica*, union with whom fits into the alchemical subtext since for alchemists incest was nothing but a bonding with one's own being. For Hirschberg incest 'when transformed into the context of a mystical alchemical marriage becomes an accurate representation for the consolidation of the psyche'.⁴⁰ In relation to this, West is of the opinion that 'Total identity with body, when all censorious fictions or taboos are released, represents the basement door of Hughes' religious edifice, the "new Holy Ground...that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse"'.⁴¹ In the poem, the speaker tells the protagonist that 'As your speech sharpened / My silence widened' and what she is expressing here is the idea that when the rational patriarchal facet of the individual manifests a domineering attitude she is reduced to speechlessness since even language itself is alien to her, language being a reflection of masculine hegemony.

The rebirth of the protagonist can only come about once all vestiges of disease have been swept out of one's psyche and this is what happens in 'The

Scapegoat' (CB 46), which like 'The Accused' depicts the quester determinedly cleansing himself of his criminal self. Purgating himself of the cockerel and the crow and being reborn as the falcon is necessarily achieved by means of suffering. The scapegoat is driven out and sacrificed to the eagles, into whose ranks the protagonist wishes to enter. The poem reminds us of 'Scapegoats and Rabies' from the Harper and Row edition of *Wodwo*, in which Hughes perceives all Western civilisation's inhabitants as scapegoats due to the fact that rationalism and industrialism have vindictively deprived us of nature's energy and moulded us in similar ways to the complacent and obedient zombies that feature in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. A victory for the quester corresponds to a victory for the anima, who like him has been born into the light after a longer trial of violence and annihilation. In 'After There was Nothing There was a Woman' (CB 48), the female is described as a mother 'Whose breasts had come about / By long toil of earthworms / After many failures'. Here Hughes describes this archetype as an offspring of nature and it is clear that Hughes wants to reinforce the idea of how closely linked or quasi-indistinguishable are the human psyche and the material world outside it. As in 'The Baptist', water in this poem is a healing element and in it the anima discovers those phenomena which will help her with her parturition of the protagonist.

She had found her belly
In a clockwork pool, wound by the winding and unwinding sea.
First it was her toy, then she found its use....

The anima's existence is an almost miraculous one and this is emphasised by the fact that she effortlessly reconciles such opposites as innocence and wisdom, fragile beauty and diligent potency. However, her being is a miracle that could easily have failed to happen. The quester's will and faith play a most significant part in the drama of the female's reawakening.

She looked at the grass trembling among the worn stones

Having about as much comprehension as a lamb
 Who stares around at everything simultaneously
 With ant-like head and soldierly bearing

She had made it but only just, just –

The dash at the poem's end is significant because it implies the idea that like the healing process, the anima's survival and the rebirth process recognise no definite denouements.

In the next poem, 'The Guide' (CB 50), the female speaker continues her pledge for the protagonist's deliverance. She describes the quester in terms of Ra's sacred creature, the phoenix – 'When everything that can fall has fallen / Something rises' – who achieves transmutation through her aid, for it is her mission to help the protagonist, or 'my headway', as she herself puts it. Progress and development are possible only if the quester has faith in her, who claims to be

the needle

Magnetic
 A tremor

The searcher
 The finder

The idea that the hero is reborn only by means of the female persona's unhesitant efforts is accentuated by the fact that in the Scolar Press edition the following couplet came after the first stanza: 'The chick ruptures its shell, then stops, dazzled. / I have not stopped' (CP 1270). The poem was originally entitled 'A True Guide', perhaps in order to accentuate the idea that the paradises offered in 'A Green Mother' and 'As I Came, I Saw a Wood' are nothing but illusory. The bird in this poem is not the horrific creature we encounter in such a poem as 'The Summoner', and the drawing accompanying it portrays a swift with its wings spread out in the form of a cross. This is because 'The guide seems to represent the achievement of an intuition, a sure instinct for living, that starts from

subjection to the elements',⁴² as Gifford and Roberts put it. What we commence to witness in this poem is primarily a re-born mode of perception that is a sure sign of the protagonist's salvation. In 'The Guide' the anima says that the protagonist's purification is to be achieved by mystical winds. This could be an allusion to Lorca's description of the duende as 'a mental wind blowing relentlessly over the heads of the dead, in search of new landscapes and unknown accents...announcing the constant baptism of newly created things'.⁴³

And we go

Into the wind. The flame-wind – a red wind
And a black wind. The red wind comes
To empty you. And the black wind, the longest wind
The headwind

To scour you.

In 'His Legs ran About' (CB 52) the quester is seen having trouble in orienting himself to his new mode of being until in one of his 'tangle[s]' with the female the knot between them is finally tied and the masculine singular pronoun changes into 'their' in emphasis of this amalgamation, even though as an archetype the anima continues to exist in the singular too. The word 'their' refers to the arms' hands but it can still be read as a device by which to highlight the protagonist's attainment of an androgynous condition, something manifested by the rest of the triplet:

His arms lifted things, groped in dark rooms, at last with their hands
Caught her arms
And lay down enwoven at last at last

This union cleanses the persona's doors of perception and his vision is amplified to that of a seer who possesses the ability to witness reality in its transfigured state.

Finally got what it needed, and grew still, and closed its eyes

Then such greatness and truth descended

As over a new grave, when the mourners have gone
And the stars come out
And the earth, bristling and raw, tiny and lost,
Resumes its search

Rushing through the vast astonishment.

This same 'transfiguration of the commonplace',⁴⁴ to borrow a phrase by Muriel Spark, is what after all Hughes seeks to achieve by means of his unique poetic idiom and the healing quality that fuels its existence. With 'every part' of his being the persona transcends himself beyond the tomb of that someone he once was and thus achieves exaltation. The glory of this resurrection is made fully manifest in 'Walking Bare' (CB 54), in which the quester is like the bird in 'Hawk Roosting', stripped of lies, sophistries and illusions. The protagonist's transformation as we see it unfold in *Cave Birds* reminds us of some lines from *Four Quartets*:

See, now they vanish,
The faces and places, with the self which, as it could, loved them,
To become renewed, transfigured, in another pattern.⁴⁵

The speaker in 'Walking Bare' embodies the wholeness yearned for throughout *Cave Birds* and throughout the majority of Hughes' poems in the volumes preceding it and in those following it. The bird spirit in this poem reminds us of the kestrel in 'The Windhover', an ideal to shape one's life upon, a state of purity to seek to encapsulate within oneself. In fact, the speaker in the poem, the substance which has undergone dissolution, distillation and other alchemical processes, admits to having become a human incorporation of the Philosopher's Stone, that element whose birth will help transmute other impure substances:

What is left is just what my life bought me

The gem of myself.
A bare certainty, without confection.
Through this blowtorch light little enough

But enough.

The quester has finally discovered who he truly is, what his limits and potential are. He admits to having achieved 'A progress beyond assay', a previously undreamed of peak, but he also acknowledges the existence of counter-forces, which stop him from extinguishing in thin air: 'I rest just at my weight'. The seventh stanza is a manifestation of how changed the protagonist has become. From someone believing himself to ride 'the wheel of the galaxy', the speaker, still a centre in his own right as any other human being, has become someone humble enough to acknowledge that not everything that occurs in the vast universe concerns him or is interested in him:

Hurrying worlds of voices, on other errands,
Traffic through me, ignore me.

In the third stanza, the persona informs us that 'Movement is still patient with me - / Lightness beyond lightness releasing me further'. He also tells us that while flying he notices that 'new skylines lift wider wings / Of simpler light'. If read in conjunction with the poem's final two stanzas we realise that Hughes in this poem is identifying the speaker with Ra, whom the Egyptians recognised as the sun in its diurnal phase. Ra, son of Geb (Earth) and Nut (Heaven), was the incarnation of the sun and it was believed that every morning he was born from his mother's belly and every evening he plunged into the underworld. Here we see Hughes' identification of a link with the myth of Prometheus. His creature being the phoenix, Ra was the god of the resurrection of the chosen ones. Union with the anima is also Osiris' reunion with Isis, who as a magician and healer wore a solar disc and whose powers were derived from Ra. The quester is also Horus, who was initially considered to be Ra's son but who later on came to be identified as Osiris' son by Isis. Horus was recognised as lord of the sky and was

represented as having a falcon's head and the sun and the moon for eyes. In a way the figure of Osiris-Ra is akin to the Jungian psychological state of a *coniunctio Solis et Lunae*,⁴⁶ that is, the integration with the conscious psyche of an unconscious content which the individual has just become conscious of. Horus was the one who regained his father's heritage and battled Seth, an unresolved battle since the balance between the forces of light and those of darkness is what holds the universe and the psyche in place. This same balance is the one depicted in the poem, in which as an embodiment of wholeness and unity, the bird spirit of the quester flies through the nothingness. The final two stanzas emphasise how significant is the balance symbolised by the seemingly insignificant protagonist.

For I am the appointed planet
Extinct in an emptiness

But a spark in the breath
Of the corolla that sweeps me.

It is important to note that in this sequence, as in the sequence embodied by the homogeneous visions of Hughes' first two collections, we witness a movement from violence to ritual, from darkness to light, which forces of life Hughes did not perceive as utterly antagonistic, but rather as complementary aspects of existence, between which a challenging harmony should reign if wellbeing and fulfilment are to run freely in the human individual and the world he inhabits.

In the three years following Plath's death in February 1963, Hughes completed little work. Among other things, he worked on an adaptation of what he calls the 'tribal dream'⁴⁷ of Johann Valentin Andreae's *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz*, part of which became the radio play *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* (later used as the title of Hughes' only collection of short stories) and another part of which was published as *Eat Crow* in 1971. Andreae's work is probably what impelled Hughes to use the wedding ritual as one of the climaxes to his alchemical sequence. According to Hughes "The 'alchemy' of the process operates in bringing the most debased raw materials of de-spiritualised entropy, in

the matter of human relationship, to a perfect spiritualised wholeness'.⁴⁸ For Jung the *coniunctio* produces the lapis, one of whose synonyms is what he calls 'the *rebis* or the hermaphroditic Anthropos who is compared to Christ'.⁴⁹ The protagonist as a Christ-like figure or polymorphous Mercury is evoked quite frequently throughout the sequence and it is the protagonist's union with the anima which produces the lapis whose symbolism 'corresponds to the mandala (circle) symbols...which represent wholeness and order and therefore express the personality that has been altered by the integration of the unconscious'.⁵⁰

Dante's act of traversing hell and purgatory in order to be reunited with Beatrice, who accompanies him on his journey through the seven planetary spheres in order to attain a vision of God, and the alchemist's act of sustaining the seven stages before achieving the state of lapis are similar to the quester's act of undergoing an ordeal of transformation before being reunited with his anima. 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days' (CB 56), which West calls 'the liberated prisoner's epithalamium',⁵¹ concretises the promise of deliverance made by the anima in 'A Riddle'. After the embrace of 'She Seemed So Considerate', after the amalgamation of 'His Legs Ran About', this poem presents us with the concretisation of that union through ritual, the ritualistic officialisation of the knot tied previously, for the idea emphasised by this poem is that ritual is a means of embracing opposites. As the ritual at the end of *Lupercal*, the ritual in this poem is enacted towards the end of the sequence, but purposefully not at the very end, the reason for which shall be elucidated further on.

In 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days', Hughes employs images and metaphors and a particular jargon that make us imagine the spouses as broken down robots or machines helping each other to rebuild themselves. This denies nothing to the beauty evoked by the poem, a human kind of beauty such as that found in the relationship between husband and wife. Gifford and Roberts are right when they say that what Hughes manages to do is 'undermine...the conventional habit of regarding machinery as something the very thought of

which threatens one's most intimate experience'.⁵² The act of reconstructing each other equals to a reorganisation of being, a rethinking of logic, elements previously held captive by an all-domineering Socratic mind. The act of fitting body parts together, oiling them and polishing them is a creative act; it infuses the couple with life: 'They keep taking each other to the sun'. As the spouses assemble each other the poem builds up a climactic movement that ultimately explodes with orgasmic bliss when the couple, having achieved wholeness, discover unity in each other's embrace:

So, gasping with joy, with cries of wonderment
 Like two gods of mud
 Sprawling in the dirt, but with infinite care

They bring each other to perfection.

In a way the couple become a hermaphrodite, which connotes the idea of man and woman fused together into one single divine being. In shamanistic cultures the union between the upper world (Father Sky) and the lower world (Mother Earth) is the harmonisation of the tripartite cosmos. The union is effected in the middle level by means of the union of human beings. Moreover, the shamanic notion of the shaman's union with a celestial wife, who serves the function of a guide or muse, is similar to the Jungian concept of the *mysterium coniunctionis* between anima and animus. The shaman's spiritual wife is his link with the otherworld and this link is symbolised by the tree used in the nuptial ceremony. For Jung the anima is the individual's bridge between what he knows and what is hidden from his consciousness. Here we can also note a parallel to the poet's union with the White Goddess, who is both the inspirational force behind his work and his link with the otherworld she inhabits. The oneness attained by male and female in this poem is comparable to the sexual and spiritual union symbolised by the Taoist symbol of ying and yang. For Eastern mystics the union of the male and female modes of one's being can only be experienced on a higher plane of consciousness in which traditional opposites entrenched in thought and language are surpassed.

The three days referred to in the poem's title are those of Christ between death and resurrection, a phenomenon that in the protagonist is achieved by means of both the spiritual and the physical. In this poem we see that like Lazarus, the protagonist transcends himself beyond spiritual death and decomposition by means of faith. Like Raskolnikov (for whom the tale of Lazarus was particularly helpful), he transcends himself beyond his guilty self by means of suffering and love. The latter point is particularly important because as Hirschberg points out 'for all its complexity *Cave Birds* is retelling an old story...a quest for love or more specifically the conditions under which it may exist and be available to the narrator – and more to the point what kind of person he himself must be, or transformed into, to undertake such a quest'.⁵³ Most readers might not agree with Hirschberg's lack of differentiation between the poet and the sequence's hero, but the significant element is the observation that the attainment of a spiritually fulfilling love relationship necessitates suffering and self-purgation.

In 'Song against the White Owl' (*CP* 263-264) from *Crow Wakes* we are told that the creature 'got those eyes that look beyond life / From fluorescence of old corpses' and this special quality is bountiful for the speaker: 'I spoon your soul from a bowl / And my song steams'. These elements are pertinent to 'The Owl Flower' (*CB* 58), whose title in the Scholar Press edition is 'The Good Angel' and in which the seed sown in 'The Baptist' is seen to bloom as though it were 'a filament of incandescence'. It is described as 'the brimming heaven-blossom', the resurrection of the dead.

A coffin spins in the torque.
Wounds flush with sap, headful of pollen,
Wet with nectar
The dead one stirs.

.....

The egg-stone
Bursts among broody petals -

And a staggering thing
Fired with rainbows, raw with cringing heat,

Blinks at the source.

In the poem the earth-mother or anima is probably represented by Blodeuwedd, a Celtic goddess that had a floral aspect until transmogrified into an owl by Gwydion in *The Mabinogion*. 'The egg-stone' that 'Bursts among broody petals' can be read as being symbolic of the reborn quester who has finally achieved physical, intellectual and spiritual reunion with the forsaken female element. This is further confirmed by the fact that the owl was Athena's sacred bird and is symbolic of wisdom. Baskin's drawing accompanying the poem presents us with an owl-like, thickly feathered bird whose form is meant to suggest both the thick density of petals and circularity of a flower and the ovality and smoothness of an egg.

The rebirth of the quester is described in terms of an act of redemption for others in 'The Risen' (CB 60), in which the persona in the form of a falcon has become a saviour to emulate and in whose integration of opposite forces one finds one's healing. Similar to the apotheosised Adonais, Hughes' protagonist has transcended the human world and 'like a star, / Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are'.⁵⁴

When he soars, his shape

Is a cross, eaten by light,
On the Creator's face.

The above-quoted lines are obviously meant to elicit the idea of Christ's resurrection and transfiguration. Christ is alluded to quite frequently in Hughes' work partly because of the fact that in alchemy Christ is the only one who has within him the perfect balance of the four elements that constitute all matter. Hence Christ himself is the quintessence. The second half of the sequence's original subtitle, 'The Death of Socrates and His Resurrection in Egypt', tells us

that Hughes at the end of *Cave Birds* deliberately intended to portray the protagonist's 're-emergence as a Horus-beloved child and spouse of the Goddess'.⁵⁵ In 'The Risen' we see that the quester has attained a state of numinosity that exists as an ideal for all human beings to pursue, an ideal that demands of each individual the same ordeal as that experienced by the protagonist of *Cave Birds*, which thus makes it a very difficult ideal to achieve. This is because the persona has managed to transcend himself beyond ordinary human fears, sins and agonies, and the veiled reference to the phoenix in the eight stanza confirms this. According to Hirschberg 'it is precisely the superhuman conditions of unendurable pain and a suffering that cannot be evaded that guarantee his transcendence of himself and his entry, by Zeus's fiat, into Olympus'.⁵⁶ In 'A Flayed Crow in the Hall of Judgement' we are told that 'A great fear rests / On the thing I am, as a feather on a hand'. Fear's place in 'The Risen' is replaced by that quality which makes of the quester a superhuman creature.

In the wind-fondled crucible of his splendour
The dirt becomes God.

But when will he land
On a man's wrist.

In this poem Hughes seemingly reveals himself to be an adherent of the idea that 'Man is a rope stretched between the animal and the Superman – a rope over an abyss' and that 'Man is something to be surpassed'.⁵⁷ However, the poet's conception of the *ubermensch* in this poem is not entirely identical to that of Friedrich Nietzsche, who despised the notion that the human individual could transcend himself beyond the earth. The falcon in the poem is a divine creature seemingly incapable of being embodied by the ordinary human being, who is more likely to feel frustrated by its existence and to loath it than to revere and desire it. Its glorious condition almost compels one into empathising with the speaker of 'The Hawk in the Rain' and this is probably one of the major defects of Hughes' project and overall vision in *Cave Birds*. The poem's final stanza is an

ambiguous one since it does not inform us whether the falcon as 'an apotheosis of the transformed hero'⁵⁸ is meant to remain unattainable for the unchosen ones. According to Bentley after following Jung's ideas throughout the length of the sequence, Hughes 'swerves clear of the Jungian goal of the "unified personality" by implying the impossible *inhumanity* of such a position'.⁵⁹ For Bentley the falcon represents an inhuman state of being because it manifests the complete annihilation of the self's otherness. Since 'human experience depends on the otherness of language and social forms for its shape and meaning',⁶⁰ the falcon's state of wholeness is doomed to remain forever beyond human reach. However, an acknowledgement of this fact does not negate the importance of the quest, since even if the ideal does not define us, for Hughes as for Shelley, the pursuit towards that ideal very much does. This reminds us of some lines from 'East Coker':

There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
For us, there is only the trying.⁶¹

Ultimately, the results of pursuing the unattainable are self-development and transformation, or human alchemisation.

Hughes shows himself similar to the Romantic poets in that in most of his work he exhibits a constant yearning for the presence of an absolute value or truth or ideal mode of being. However, parallel to this desire runs the recognition that the presence desired is always absent or present in the form of a lacuna, always shrouded by the mists of the past or of the future. Hence we see that in this way Paul de Man's claim in *Blindness and Insight* that the Romantics deconstruct their own poetry is also a fit pronouncement to pass upon Hughes. The self-reflexive element of *Cave Birds* and of the sequence constituted by Hughes' first two collections is the implicit idea that the single text is always unable or inadequately equipped to supply the reader and human protagonist with that quality he or she

continually desires, and which it continually promises but continually defers. The text is obliquely pointing out its inability to sufficiently harness the desired presence, to provide us with the lapis. To some extent this latches onto the fact that alchemical texts are intentionally evasive. Just as the secret of the stone is something elusive, so are the meanings of these texts. The reader is forced to keep up the pursuit, doing so by means of different interpretations that yield meanings that even though not the quintessence itself are highly rewarding. In this manner the pursuit of absolute meaning parallels the pursuit of absolute healing.

For Skea 'Alchemy...is a painstaking and delicate process each step of which depends on what has gone before. And a successful alchemical synthesis, despite the cyclical repetitions which occur in many of its stages, progresses steadily and systematically towards its climax'.⁶² However, even though as a description of *Cave Birds* this is mostly correct, the climax we find in 'The Risen' is immediately followed by a counterpoint of a 'Finale' (CB 62) that seems to somewhat serve the purpose of keeping things in a realistic perspective. In *Voss* we find the idea that 'The mystery of life is not solved by success, which is an end in itself, but in failure, in perpetual struggle, in becoming'.⁶³ Hughes chose not to end the sequence with 'Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days' or 'The Risen' because he recognised that healing is a struggle with no specific resolution. Similar to the rebirth process in the sequence, healing is an ongoing phenomenon in the life of an individual and hence any ritual must regularly be repeated, because ultimately the condition in 'The Risen' is only of temporary duration; the malady is always round the corner since the taint of the Fall spares no one. Like a poem, a ritual for Hughes is something latched onto something else; it is not an end but a doorway through which one must pass occasionally if that which the dimension beyond the door bestows upon the person is still yearned for. As West remarks 'The mythic copula is not *is* but the gerund of continual action, *being*'.⁶⁴ Hirschberg consolidates this idea when he points out that 'while shamanic rituals suggest th[e] process of self-transformation only has to occur once, alchemists

held quite a different view, one much closer to Hughes' own. They stress the necessity for a repeated pattern of suffering and death'.⁶⁵ Hence we see that the sequence's 'Finale' is not truly a finale but more of a reminder that

At the end of the ritual
up comes a goblin.

The poet's comments to Faas in the 1971 interview explain the importance of this poem for Hughes:

You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin. Anyway within a week the whole thing has changed, one needs a fresh bulletin... In the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another.⁶⁶

The 'Flesh of bronze, stirred with a bronze thirst' we encounter in 'The Scream', descriptive of the cockerel's green bronze feathers as well as of his inhumanity, is reflected in the goblin's greenish colour. The goblin can be read as symbolising the human propensity to yield to his baser instincts as in Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market', or in this case to narrow empiricism. It can also be read as referring to the shifting sands of literary and linguistic meaning. Dispelling the goblin is beyond doubt an insuperable feat since perfection is both unattainable and to some extent unsatisfactory (though desired). What is certain is that drawing the golden mean between the goblin and its impossible antithesis means keeping alive the quester's Sisyphean spirit, or else, to put it in a different manner, frequent sojourns into that which lies beyond the doorway. In the above quotation Hughes explicitly points out literature's inability to provide us with absolute values. The thing 'missed' is psychic and spiritual health, which can seemingly never be attained in its absolute manifestations but only as a by-product of constant deferral.

Notes

- ¹ Besides being an obvious allusion to Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, this title is partly an echo of the chapter title 'From World of Blood to World of Light' in Keith Sagar's *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000).
- ² T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 219.
- ³ Anton Chekov, *Three Plays: The Cherry Orchard, Three Sisters, Ivanov*, trans. by Elisaveta Fen (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1951), p. 60.
- ⁴ Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, New South Wales: University of New England Press, 1994), p. 35.
- ⁵ Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (1997; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2003), pp. xxvii-xxviii.
- ⁶ Idries Shah, *The Sufis* (1964; London: The Octagon Press, 1989), pp. 196-203.
- ⁷ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers – G. K. Hall, 1991), p. 101.
- ⁸ Shah, p. 201.
- ⁹ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 199.
- ¹⁰ Katherine Duncan-Jones and Jan Van Dorsten, eds, *Miscellaneous Prose of Sir Philip Sidney* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 79.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Skea, p. 41.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Quoted in Gifford and Roberts, p. 205.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, p. 260.
- ¹⁵ Skea, p. 41.
- ¹⁶ Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976), p. 11.
- ¹⁷ Skea, p. 2.
- ¹⁸ Scigaj, p. 104.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Skea, pp. 41-42.
- ²⁰ Quoted in Gifford and Roberts, p. 260.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Ibid, p. 209.
- ²⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems*, ed. by W. E. Williams (1950; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 134.
- ²⁵ Patrick White, *Voss* (1957; London: Readers Union, 1959), p. 80.
- ²⁶ Ibid, p. 38.
- ²⁷ Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Guide to the Poems* (Portmarnock, County Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 163.
- ²⁸ Ibid, p. 158.

- ²⁹ Ibid, p. 177.
- ³⁰ Gifford and Roberts, p. 213.
- ³¹ Ibid, p. 214.
- ³² Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out* (1972; London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 48.
- ³³ Ibid, p. 47.
- ³⁴ Paul Bentley, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion and Beyond* (Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998), p. 89.
- ³⁵ Scigaj, p. 106.
- ³⁶ Gifford and Roberts, p. 219.
- ³⁷ Hirschberg, p. 172.
- ³⁸ Ibid, p. 172-173.
- ³⁹ Gifford and Roberts, p. 221.
- ⁴⁰ Hirschberg, p. 159.
- ⁴¹ Thomas West, *Ted Hughes* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 84.
- ⁴² Gifford and Roberts, p. 227.
- ⁴³ Federico Garcia Lorca, *In Search of Duende*, trans. and ed. by Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998), p. 62.
- ⁴⁴ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 35.
- ⁴⁵ Eliot, p. 219.
- ⁴⁶ C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works: The Symbolic Life: Miscellaneous Writings*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, ed. by Herbert Read and others, vol. 18 (1977; London: Routledge, 1993), p. 752.
- ⁴⁷ Ekbert Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 212.
- ⁴⁸ Quoted in Skea, p. 42.
- ⁴⁹ Jung, p. 753.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid.
- ⁵¹ West, p. 82.
- ⁵² Gifford and Roberts, p. 225.
- ⁵³ Hirschberg, p. 166.
- ⁵⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Poems* (London: The Softback Preview, 1993), p. 317.
- ⁵⁵ Quoted in Gifford and Roberts, p. 260.
- ⁵⁶ Hirschberg, p. 167.
- ⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. by Thomas Common (Ware, Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1997), pp. 6-8.
- ⁵⁸ Gifford and Roberts, p. 231.
- ⁵⁹ Bentley, p. 82.
- ⁶⁰ Ibid.
- ⁶¹ Eliot, p. 203.
- ⁶² Skea, p. 49.
- ⁶³ White, p. 289.

⁶⁴ West, p. 87.

⁶⁵ Hirschberg, pp. 160-161.

⁶⁶ Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow*', *London Magazine*, January 1971, p. 15.

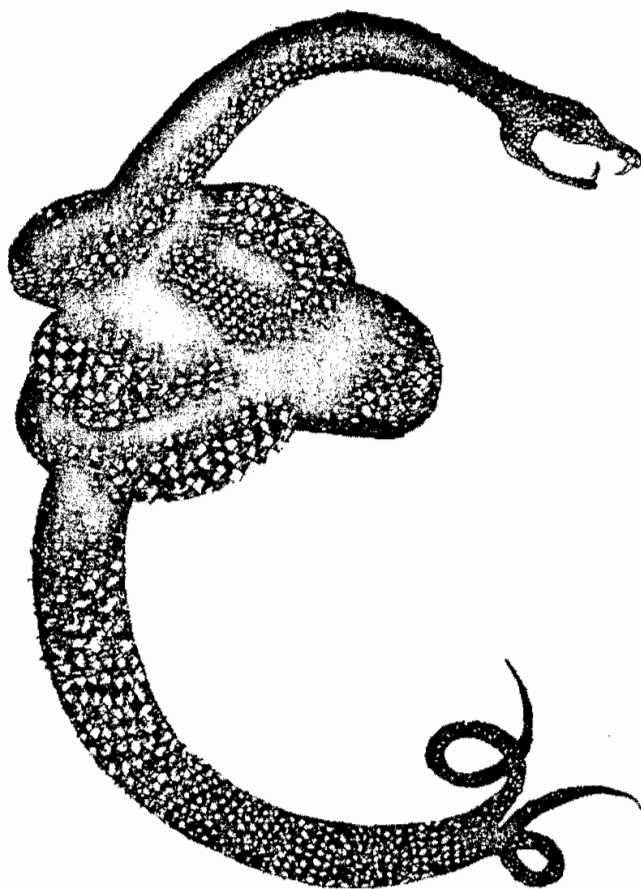


Figure 2 – Baskin's drawing of a serpent that is not quite an ouroboros
Reproduced by permission of The Galerie St.Etienne

CHAPTER 3

Rooted in Numbness and Numinosity: *Moortown* (1979)

And cleaves himself
Into two living halves

One half comes to rest below earth
The other flies up to heaven

Somewhere in the middle
Between earth and heaven
His vast incandescent heart is left

A new red star is shining
Waiting for its inhabitants

Vasko Popa – ‘The Lame Wolf’s Tracks’¹

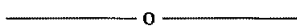
As a sequence *Moortown* lacks the kind of cohesiveness and narrative development that characterises *Cave Birds* and this is because the volume is essentially made up of four distinct parts that contain material that was mostly published earlier on in limited editions. The four parts of the book can be thought of as four distinct sequences even though the third section is made up of a number of brief sequences and occasional poems. However, in spite of this it is possible to recognise the existence of a unifying thread or vision running through or informing all the segments of *Moortown*.

The second section, ‘Prometheus on His Crag’, is the first to have been produced, fruit of Hughes’ involvement in Peter Brook’s production of *Orghast* for the 1971 Shiraz Literature Festival in Persia. The sequence was conceived during Hughes’ writing of *Orghast* and first published in 1973 as a Rainbow Press limited edition. All the other three sections of *Moortown* were first issued by Ted

and Olwyn Hughes' Rainbow Press. The first section first appeared as *Moortown Elegies* in 1978 and it was later released as a Faber trade edition in 1989 under the title *Moortown Diary*, in which the majority of the poems carry the date on which they were written. In 1978 came out *Orts*, some of whose poems go into the making of the third section of *Moortown*, 'Earth-Numb', as do previously uncollected poems from as early as 1963. Besides constituting *Moortown's* fourth section, 'Adam and the Sacred Nine' was published separately in 1979, the only difference being that the Rainbow Press edition contains five poems not found in *Moortown*.

The first U.S. edition of *Moortown* carries two drawings by Baskin; the one at the very beginning of the book depicts a coiled snake seemingly about to bite its forked tail and the one at the end a phoenix arising out of the flames (see Figures 2 and 3). The first drawing could be a representation of Aesculapius' healing serpent, but it most probably alludes to the snake alchemical symbolism that is made use of by Hughes, something both Blake and Yeats utilised in their own works. For example, Blake's aquarelle *Jacob's Ladder* depicts the staircase leading to heaven in a serpentine, coiled form, at the foot of which sleeps Jacob, who thus seems to have established what Jung calls 'a protected *temenos*, a taboo area where he will be able to meet the unconscious'.² For Jung 'the serpent is an alexipharmic and the principle that brings all things to maturity and perfection'.³ In symbology the snake eating its tail is known as the ouroboros that, among other things, symbolises 'the potential before actualization'.⁴ Furthermore, the Hinduistic kundalini, the latent energy symbolised by the dormant serpent which propels the individual into the Centre and enlightenment when awakened by means of ritualistic and spiritual practices, shares its symbolism with the ouroboros. The symbol of the snake eating its tail corresponds to that of a mandala. According to Jung when this symbol occurs in an individual's dream it signifies a future event in which the subject will be involved. For Jung, the snake 'clearly indicates a potential centre which is not identical with the ego and round

which the ego revolves',⁵ the implication being that until the centre is embraced psychic healing cannot be effected. Coming at the beginning of the volume, Baskin's drawing is therefore a form of premonition. In Baskin's drawing the snake is not a tail-eater and hence we can surmise that there yet exists no holy magic circle, no sacred area in which consciousness can encounter the unconscious, no sense of wholeness. For healing to come about the individual must root himself into the centre of the circle and overcome his desire to flee from the spiritual realm; he must find the will to transform himself. The sequences in *Moortown* (or the volume as a whole) are meant to show how this can be achieved and why it is so necessary. Robinson points out that *Moortown* as a sequence 'is not heterogeneous'.⁶ For him 'The movement is that of Baskin's spiral serpent lifting matter into spirit'.⁷ From a description of man's relationship with actual reality and of how this relationship rewards human beings with spiritual fulfilment, *Moortown* develops into a questioning of this relationship while simultaneously examining man's being through his encounter with suffering and mortality. The sequence then progresses into a celebration of man's healed spirit. The drawing of the phoenix appositely forms the epilogue to Hughes' quartet.



In the early 1970s, Hughes bought a farm in North Devon and farmed it together with his second wife and her father, Jack Orchard, to whose memory 'Moortown', *Moortown Elegies* and *Moortown Diary* are dedicated. The latter volume contains a preface, dates and notes, elements that are highly helpful for one's understanding of Hughes' experiences as an artist in the rural environment of North Devon, which he says 'felt like an island' (*MD* vii). The first poem in *Moortown Diary* (as that in *Moortown*) is 'Rain' and it carries the date of 4 December 1973. The last dated poem is 'Sheep', part I written on 20 May 1974 and part II on 4 June 1976. This poem is followed by six undated poems, which are in the form of an elegiac celebration of Orchard. In his preface to *Moortown*

Diary, Hughes says that 'The pieces in this collection came about by the way', they grew out of an 'impulse' (MD x) to preserve something valuable from the onslaught of time and the distortions of memory. Through them he wanted 'to make a fleeting snapshot, for myself, of a precious bit of my life' (MD x). His writing of the Moortown journal was fuelled by the urge to retain something intact, to preserve the truths he gleaned during his life-enriching and maturing experience at Moortown, which ultimately exist not only for himself but even for the reader. In many ways 'Moortown' exhibits how the human community can possess a rewarding relationship with the animal world, which constitutes one of its main food supplies.

In his preface to *Moortown Diary*, Hughes says that the earliest journal entries in 'Moortown' were initially written in prose form and later re-moulded into verse, a process similar to that in which the majority of Edward Thomas' poetry was written. Gradually Hughes found that writing rough verse was much more helpful in maintaining intact the nexus between the past and the present. In this Hughes betrays his belief in poetry's incantatory quality. It seems as if Hughes in 'Moortown' is trying to tap truths that can only be made accessible by means of an unadorned, unladen kind of verse; the implication being that the *rougher* the verse, the *truer* the poetry. Maintaining intact the roughness meant preserving the truths broadcast by the lines and the sacred dimension beyond them. However, Hughes' ideas in this regard are highly debatable since he seems to be implying that his earlier nature poems are less bountiful in terms of the truths he searched for whilst at Moortown. Hughes' belief that a crude kind of verse could yield him with a reflection of the precious crudity of nature is paradoxical to say the least, since the poems in 'Moortown' elude this intention and are poems of high value just because they distort what they refer to for the purpose of exposing all its wealth. The language used in relation to the material world, a language of brilliant discoveries since metaphors and similes daunt us with their aura of novelty, is proof enough that by means of poetry what is

external to us can be experienced in all its potency of beauty and horror; the ignored, unknown and unseen appear to us in a transcendental light and the world we come to perceive with all our senses is one as energising as the poetry itself. Scigaj remarks that 'The net effect is to cleanse and refresh the reader's perceptions, to enable the reader to live more deeply and intensely'.⁸ However, this is not achieved by means of the poet's rigid adherence to what he believes to be the true appearance of the material world, since by saying so one would not be sufficiently taking into account the artistry involved in the production of Hughes' journal. Undoubtedly, Hughes in 'Moortown' aims for some kind of realism, but somehow this realism is infected with the aesthetic effects that make his earlier nature poetry so effective a means of defamiliarisation.

'Moortown' seems to dangle somewhere in between the kind of mimetic poetry we find in the first two collections and the mythic verse of *Cave Birds*. Even though it seems to share little with the latter sequence, being an extreme form of the nature poems that we find in *The Hawk* and *Lupercal* but seemingly lacking all mythopoeic elements, the place of 'Moortown' at the opening of the book is part of a well-thought ploy on Hughes' part to create a cohesive structure that binds together material nature and the aural world of the imagination. The farming poems and the mythic sequences in *Moortown* share a number of issues that show themselves to be the poet's major concerns throughout all his work. Among these we find that concerning the human perception of and relationship with nature, that of death and the human self, and that of the necessary qualities needed by the modern human individual in his quest for regeneration and equilibrium. The majority of Hughes' poetry is geared towards finding a means of tapping an energy that churns wildly and purely in material nature. In the Western world, which has alienated itself from this energy and from the ancient means by which to tap it, poetry is one of the tools available for its harnessing. In 'Moortown', Hughes amalgamates together poetry and the rural life, which he came to acknowledge as another way by which to access nature's energy.

Robinson points out that 'At the same time that [Hughes'] representatives of natural energy, the hawk, jaguar, and pike, portrayed that energy at its purest and most rousing intense, they portrayed it also at its farthest remove from man, especially social man'.⁹ In the sense of possessing the ability to deal with nature's energy, the tramps of Hughes' first two collections are a rare race of human beings. In his work there exist only a handful of poems that depict characters that live symbiotically with the material world. It seems as if the poet was faced with the problem of a dearth of success stories. However, in *Orchard* he discovered one such success story and in 'Moortown' Hughes portrays him as a figure of mythic stature. In the figure of the farmer, Hughes came to see an epitome of the kind of harmonious relationship the poet calls for throughout most of his work. In 'Moortown' we see a poet who seems to have matured beyond the thirst for shock and bewilderment he continuously aimed at in his portraits of violent and exotic creatures. Cows and sheep, a typical aspect of British rural life, demand human care and attention. They do not shun human beings or despise them, but they depend upon them for their survival. Hence by focusing on the rural environment, Hughes is telling his readers that what his early work demanded of them can truly be pursued with the same kind of sense of commitment. Hughes is not asking us to become farmers, but for him husbandry and agricultural work are metaphors for the necessary requirements of an awareness of and respect for nature's sacred energy, requirements that can and should be embraced by all. The rural world is not the solution to all urban humanity's problems. It is merely a metaphor for a sound way of being, for what should be kept in mind whilst questing for the values that alone can provide us with psychic and spiritual health.

As in Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall', in the farming poems of 'Moortown' we find the notion that boundaries and demarcation lines, even though unpleasant, have come to be seen as being a necessary part of the human relationship with others and the external world, something demanded of us by ancestral wisdom. Nature continually strives to bring walls down, but "Good

fences make good neighbours”¹⁰ and nature’s elvish spirit must perforce be somewhat tamed if harmony is to prevail. In ‘Rain’ (M 3-4) the elemental forces of the material world are described as being a quasi-malignant force, from which human beings must shield themselves or which they must rein in. As in ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ we see that the rain ‘hammered’ everything beneath it; people struggle against the elements, but not with the same aspirations as those of the speaker in the earlier poem. The speaker and his mentor in ‘Rain’ ‘drive post holes’ into the mud and they are seemingly on a par to the cows who ‘look out sideways from under their brows which are / Their only shelter’. They know that the ultimate end of such a condition is similar to that achieved by a dead animal:

The fox corpses lie beaten to their bare bones,
Skin beaten off, brains and bowels beaten out.
Nothing but their blueprint bones last in the rain,
Sodden soft.

The farmer and his apprentice are experiencing the same hard existential conditions that creatures in the natural world undergo quotidianly. Since the sequence opens with this portrait of the farmer’s willingness to bear the brunt of nature’s harshness, we must assume that the farmer through his behaviour is imparting a kind of wisdom accorded to him by his close contact with nature, which wisdom the apprentice is gradually assimilating. The conditions presented in the poem seemingly negate all other existential conditions and denounce the comfortable and complacent life lived by most Western people as imbued with all-consequential falsities:

Nowhere they can go
Is less uncomfortable. The brimming world
And the pouring sky are the only places
For them to be.

However, the speaker of ‘Rain’ is not propounding the idea that this ‘Misery’ should be the substitute for all other forms of human modes of being. As in the

rest of *Moortown* and in such a sequence as *Cave Birds*, Hughes is accentuating the importance of acknowledging suffering's necessity for the attainment of wellbeing. Harshness and lack of pity are one of the aspects of the goddess and if her loving, maternal aspect is to manifest itself in regard to the human individual, he must learn to accept her as a whole entity made up of vital contradictions that complement and not oppose each other.

The act of erecting a boundary that serves the purpose of marking off one's territory from that of others and from the rest of external reality reveals the idea that man must to some extent master nature and utilise it to the best of his and its potential. As long as this utilisation is kept at a level that is not injurious to the material world, then the poet sees no harm in engaging in the activities a man like Orchard engaged himself in throughout the whole span of his life. Much in the manner of Lawrence's description of the Brangwens in the opening pages of *The Rainbow*, the farming community focused upon by the poet behaves in a way that is purposefully described as an ideal, an ideal that is very difficult to follow in a world dominated by technological acumen. The act of setting up a fence is analogous to the act of establishing the alchemical magical circle or *temenos*. Inside the fenced-in area the farmer mediates between the human world and the natural world, between the needs of one realm and those of the other. In this his role is a significant one and we can see how Hughes vests his mentor with the habit of a saviour or at least that of a tight-rope walker in whose hands lie the answers to Paul Gauguin's *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* In this, Hughes' farmer is similar to the re-born protagonist of *Cave Birds* with all his Promethean, Herculean and Christian attributes. Even though the farmer and his apprentice seem to be on a par to the creatures of the natural world in their struggle with the elements, the poet still feels somewhat reluctant to amplify them into heroic proportions and in such a poem as 'Feeding Out-Wintering Cattle at Twilight' (M 11-12) the contrast between the cattle's endurance and the speaker's fragility is the main point of focus. We see that 'the

cows, dark lumps of dusk, / Stand waiting, like nails in a tin roof. Like the creatures in 'The Horses' they are

taking the strain
In their stirring stillness. As if their hooves
Held their field in place, held the hill
To its trembling shape.

On the other hand, the speaker feels disoriented in such a tempestuous scenario, purposefully reminiscent of that in 'Wind':

They grunt happily, half dissolved
On their steep, hurtling brink, as I flounder back
Towards headlights.

In this environment, out of which the poet intends to derive the wisdom needed for others and himself, 'People / Walk precariously, the whole landscape / Is imperiled, like a tarpaulin / With the wind under it' (*M* 15).

The human usage and misuse of the material world and its creatures is expounded upon by means of such portraits as those presented in 'Dehorning' (*M* 5-6) and 'Fox Hunt'. In the first poem the bloody and painful act of pulling out the horns from a cow's head makes the farmers 'Grimace like faces in the dentist's chair'. At the end of this operation the cows have 'all lost one third of their beauty', but the necessity of dehorning a 'Bad-tempered bullying bunch' redresses the balance. In 'Fox Hunt' (*M* 13-14), the solitary fox is pursued by a mob of hounds who are described in terms of 'a cloud of excitements, / Their voices like rusty, reluctant / Rolling stock being shunted'. Where the speaker's sympathy lies is quite conspicuous in how he depicts the hunt:

The fox
Is flying, taking his first lesson
From the idiot pack-noise, the puppyish whine-yelps
Curling up like hounds' tails, and the gruff military barkers:
A machine with only two products—
Dog shit and dead foxes.

When we are told that 'the fox runs in a suburb / Of indifferent civilized noises' we understand that the speaker is putting forward a critical observation about the rift between the fox's world and the destructive, complacent human world. The poem's final lines encourage us to ponder about which world will turn out victorious in the end:

Will he run
Till his muscles suddenly turn to iron,
Till blood froths his mouth as his lungs tatter,
Till his feet are raw blood-sticks and his tail
Trails thin as a rat's? Or will he
Make a mistake, jump the wrong way, jump right
Into the hound's mouth? As I write this down
He runs still fresh, with all his chances before him.

Just as in 'The Jaguar', the creature's survival entails the survival of the human world. Once the jaguar stops raging in its cage, once the fox stops running, the world stops spinning. The end of the poem promises salvation for the hunted creature and for us who are slowly becoming prey to our own excesses, but this promise is in contest with the possibility of final annihilation. Furthermore, typical of Hughes' overall vision, we do not get the definite denouement we come to desire through our sympathy for the fox. We are encouraged to pursue that denouement which continually eludes us. Like the fox we cannot ever stop, for else another kind of denouement immediately assails us.

In 'Fox Hunt' the creature is celebrated for being a survivor and the quest for survival plays a very important part in the Moortown journal. This is because Hughes feels engrossed with the fact that the lives of animals are one continual race for survival, as well as being perturbed by the fact that human beings have lost this instinct and thus take everything for granted and live in a quasi-automatic mode. Most of the poems in 'Moortown' deal with death and birth and Hughes' factual descriptions, seemingly conducted in the form of snippets of reportage, are meant to do what his war poems strive to do. Engaging with the realities of death

and birth is one means by which the individual can achieve a spirit of authenticity, in the sense that these two seminal events represent our place in the overall fabric of nature and if we fail to engage with them as part of our reality we cannot hope to be infused with energy. In a number of his poems the issues of death and birth are inseparable, most obviously in his portraits of stillbirths. This tells us that to look joyfully at life while avoiding to think about the presence of life's termination is to live in existential bad faith, since for Hughes cyclicity must be accepted in its entirety. In the *Norwich Tapes*, a 1978 recording of poems by Hughes and R.S. Thomas, Hughes says that 'It's extremely difficult to write about the natural world without finding your subject matter turning ugly. In that direction of course lie the true poems, the great complete statements of the world in its poetic aspect... What all those works have in common, of course, is not exactly a final, up-beat note, but it is a peculiar kind of joy, an exaltation. But that's the paradox of poetry, as if poetry were a biological, healing process: it seizes on what is depressing and destructive and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing'.¹¹ Many of the farming poems commence with a description of a specific event and then towards the end develop into a gloss upon the general state of events in the wider arena of nature and the human world. According to Robinson 'This movement...implies that no event or creature exists in isolation, that the world is ultimately a unity' and it is quite 'useful when a poem has to deal with a death at birth. The supervening, at the close, of the general scene can place an individual death in a potentially redeeming perspective. It also leads towards an acceptance of natural processes'.¹²

In 'Struggle (*M* 8-10) we are presented with the parturition of a calf who after being born refuses to eat and ultimately dies. The tone of the poem is a sympathetic one as well as one expressing awe at the miraculousness entailed by nature's acts of creation and destruction:

But his eye just lay suffering the monstrous weight of his head,
The impossible job of his marvelous huge limbs.

He could not make it. He died called Struggle.
Son of Patience.

The patient farmer and his apprentice play a part in this miraculousness, their involvement in the calf's birth is laudable even though in this particular case it leads to nothing except a closer bond between themselves as human beings:

They lay face to face like two mortally wounded duelists.
We stood back, letting the strength flow towards them.

For Nicholas Bishop the poet's 'chief function in the present poem is clearly *extra-linguistic, extra-literary*, that of an active assistant in the calf's birth rather than an abstract framer of an artistic picture. The poet reclaims his religious role when he resists the specialization of the term "poet" and becomes a practical healing agent in communal life...advancing another step towards the unity of "Poet" and "Shaman".¹³

The human will to survive sometimes outstrips that of animals as is shown in 'Little Red Twin' (M44-46), in which a newly born calf is too weak and sick to survive. Abandoned by her mother it falls on the speaker to try to revive her. Even though in one instant the calf is pronounced dead, the speaker does not give up his hopes and like Christ awakening Lazarus or Martha succeeds in bringing her back to life. He cannot hide his joy when he exclaims 'Yet she's alive!' The miracle of birth sometimes fails to appropriately take place as in 'February 17th' (M32-33), in which the speaker saves a sheep's life by beheading its half-born lamb and pulling out the corpse with the strength of his own hands. In this poem, Hughes is demanding a strong sense of involvement in the workings of nature. The speaker's act of thrusting his hand into the sheep's womb is symbolic of the kind of responsibility the poet believes we all should foster for the future of the world's ecology. Bishop claims that 'The style of the piece is itself purely functional' and that its full scope depends upon the 'poet and reader's willingness to push poetic *function* beyond the realm of pure aesthetics'.¹⁴ We are again forced to abandon the comforts of voyeurism and encouraged to take up participation in real-life

events. In this poem the division between the human and the natural fades altogether and the two entities seem to merge into one. Man here is not derided as inferior, weak and cowardly as he is in Hughes' first three collections. His sense of commitment makes him heroic and his active stance is redemptive. Helping an ewe to give birth, he is at the same time helping his genuine self to come into the light and even though the speaker is forced to kill the lamb this action further contributes to the authentication of his being since death is not shunned but confronted. The very explicitness and candour of this poem challenges us to undergo a trail of self-examination, to weigh the strength of our contributions towards the wellbeing of the material world.

For Gifford and Roberts the farming poems of 'Moortown' share 'the vivid immediacy yet universal vision' of *Season Songs*, however, 'in these poems the observer is also participant, which involves responsibility. This is the price of man's finding his place in the natural world and the consequence of his specifically human contribution'.¹⁵ Human intervention takes something away from nature; it can transform animals into hideous creatures as the lambs start perceiving their mothers in the second part of 'Sheep', and it can kill some of their virility as happens to the rams in 'Last Night' and to the bull in 'While She Chews Sideways'. However, the positive facet of human intervention is that of the animal's survival. 'Ravens' (M 30-31) presents us with a picture of the speaker pointing at the carcass of a lamb and telling his nephew 'it died being born. We should have been here, to help it. / So it died being born'. This affirms belief in the necessity of human supervision, the necessity of man using his gifts for beneficial purposes. In 'Turning Out' (M 35) the cows are happy to be out in the open fields: 'They hurried / Their udders and their stateliness / Towards the new pasture'. On the other hand,

The calves lagged, lost,
Remembering only where they'd come from,
Where they'd been born and had mothers. Again
And again they galloped back to the empty pens,

Gazing and mooing and listening.

The calves were born in the comfort of human-built shelters and thus they were saved from experiencing the throes of winter, hunger and illness immediately after having opened their eyes. Human intervention has allowed them to live and even though initially it somewhat goes against the plans of nature, it is constituted of actions that ultimately are in harmony with those same plans. In 'Moortown', Hughes puts forward the idea that the human mind is one of the peaks reached by nature and thus if it is used to bridge the seemingly antagonistic human and natural realms an almost perfect synthesis can be achieved. As Robinson remarks, for Hughes 'it is the farm, *par excellence*, that is the meeting place of the two worlds... And the meeting is not a confrontation, since the farm can be seen as a working laboratory of co-operation between man and nature'.¹⁶ It seems as if at Moortown, the poet found the opportunity of testing the validity of his ideas and ultimately provides us with a record or a collection of data that evidence what he had always believed in. Scigaj appositely points out that 'Instead of a selfish utilitarian appropriation of nature, the master farmer and his assistant fulfill in their husbandry the laudable ecological goal of stewardship, assisting nature with hands that function equally well in heavy labor and in the delicate midwifery of reaching into animal wombs to assist lambings'.¹⁷ In a similar sense the poet by means of his work is also teaching how the birth of a new human relationship with nature can be midwifed.

Entwined with the issue of human intervention in and supervision of nature's processes is that of human collaboration in this same intervention. The epitome of this collaboration is the relationship between the master and the apprentice, which features throughout most of the farm poems. The idea of collaboration as a means to a more fruitful end is depicted quite explicitly in 'Last Load' (M 49-51), in which a number of farm labourers work in unison in order to protect the stacked hay from the coming rain. For Robinson this co-operative action carries the semblance of a 'ritual' that will ultimately reward its

participants with 'a kind of grace'.¹⁸ The attainment of this feeling of blessedness is emphasised by the fact that the poem's last three stanzas all contain the word 'whole'.

The job of a farmer is one laden with complex contradictions, which are a reflection of the basic and all too vital contradiction of life and death. Sometimes he is forced into the guise of an educator and at other times into that of a killer. In 'Teaching a Dumb Calf' (*M* 47-48), the speaker takes it upon himself to do that which the calf's mother is reluctant or unable to do: teach him how to suckle from an udder. The poem is written in a factual, straightforward style perhaps because that is the way in which he ultimately manages to teach the calf this very basic skill. However, towards the end the tone of victory manifests the speaker's joyful satisfaction at having achieved something worthwhile:

I fumbled one into his mouth—I had to hold it,
 Stuffing its slippery muscle into his suction,
 His rim-teeth and working tongue. He preferred
 The edge of my milk-lathered hand, easier dimension,
 But he got going finally, all his new
 Machinery learning suddenly, and she stilled,
 Mooing indignity, rolling her red rims,
 Till the happy warm peace gathered them
 Into its ancient statue.

In 'Orf' (*M* 39) a sick lamb has to be put down because it cannot survive on its own resources and because it posits a hazard to the rest of the flock:

I shot the lamb.
 I shot him while he was looking the other way.
 I shot him between the ears.

However, after being killed the lamb continues to live on in the speaker's sense of paternal love and even though it asks to be dissolved into nothingness, he preserves it in this very poem, whose last lines are marked by a guilty resentful tone that is part of the affection which led the poet to give the lamb a relatively 'extraordinary sort of funeral' (*MD* 65).

But the lamb life in my care
Left him where he lay, and stood up in front of me

Asking to be banished,
Asking for permission to be extinct,
For permission to wait, at least,

Inside my head
In the radioactive space
From which the meteorite had removed his body.

In the poem the dead lamb's spirit, 'the lamb life', continues to exist, remains present in the poet's thoughts just like a guardian angel, providing him with the impetus needed for both manual and poetic labour; remains present in the poem and thus provides the reader with the impetus needed for his quest for fulfilment and for concord with nature. The dead lamb waits inside the poem on the line between life as a lamb and life as a recycled element.

In 'Orf' we find the idea that a dead creature can provide the human individual with an amount of healing, especially if allowed to channel its energies into a poem. This is something we encounter in 'Coming Down Through Somerset' (M 42-43), too. The speaker in this poem picks up a dead badger from the side of the road and he celebrates its beauty in much the same glorious, epiphanic tone employed in 'The Knight'. He wants the fly-pestered, putrefying cadaver 'To stay as he is'. Throughout the poem the dead creature is built up into a mythic animal that can somehow bring about salvation. The imperative 'Get rid of that badger' is repeated twice in the poem, however, the speaker resists and in the last eleven lines puts forward his reasons for which the badger should survive as he is: food and fruit of the earth in complete surrender to its processes. The poem's final lines put forward a forceful image symbolic of the poet's wish that his poem perpetuates the precious qualities the badger stands for:

I want him
To stop time. His strength staying, bulky,

Blocking time. His rankness, his bristling wildness,
 His thrillingly painted face.
 A badger on my moment of life.
 Not years ago, like the others, but now.
 I stand
 Watching his stillness, like an iron nail
 Driven, flush to the head,
 Into a yew post. Something
 Has to stay.

Just like 'Orf', this poem is a self-reflexive one because while recognising the truth that the 'Heat wave ushers him hourly / Towards his underworlds', it also attests faith in its power to transcend the badger beyond time: a symbol of the earth's processes of change yet also of its changelessness, which is the very changelessness aimed at by the speaker's poetic portrait of the creature. The idea that a dead creature can heal, emphasised in this poem by means of the allusion to Christ's hanging on the rood, is found in a number of poems by Hughes, particularly in those belonging to his first two collections such as 'Sunstroke', 'November' and 'February'. In most of these poems and in 'Coming Down Through Somerset', the dead animal is almost identical to the poems themselves, which are in a way lifeless artefacts but which possess the mystical powers Hughes believes to be the domain of art and nature. For Hughes both a poem and a dead creature exist within the paradox of change and changelessness. A poem remains the same once published yet it changes continually whilst journeying from one reader to another. A dead badger will ultimately atrophy into nothing yet his place within nature's cyclicity makes it so that he is reincarnated. When a poem and a dead badger work in unison these ideas are blended together into something offering transcendence.

Robinson calls 'Coming Down Through Somerset' and 'Roe Deer' 'epiphany poems, concerned with some special moment that separates out of habitual mundane reality and the usual levels of consciousness'.¹⁹ The aura of mythic stillness we encounter in 'The Horses' is recreated for the same symbolic purposes in 'Roe Deer' (*M* 22-23). The poem's first seven stanzas describe the

encounter between the speaker and the two deer in transcendental terms. Dawn immerses the poem's speaker, an inhabitant of a rationally ordered world, into the numinosity of the material world. The two deer possess all the characteristics of paranormal entities and Hughes subtly plays with this aspect, as he does in many other animal poems. He does this in order to emphasise the strangeness of the natural world for the alienated human speaker. We are told that the two animals 'planted their two or three years of secret deerhood / Clear on my snow-screen vision of the abnormal'. They confront him with the same forcefulness of the goat in 'Meeting' and the fish in 'Pike'. The speaker finds himself in a mystical dimension and his meeting with the deer seems to posit to him the invitation to embrace qualities he had formerly shunned:

And stared at me. And so for some lasting seconds

I could think the deer were waiting for me
To remember the password and sign

That the curtain had blown aside for a moment
And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road

The deer had come for me.

When the deer 'eddy and glide and fly away up / Into the boil of big flakes', the speaker is plunged 'Back to the ordinary'. However, the implication is that like the speaker in 'The Horses', the speaker in 'Roe Deer' has discovered the gift of transcending his perception of the 'ordinary'. Robinson claims that 'the meeting does not reach its wished-for climax'²⁰ since the speaker must return back to the mundanity of everyday urban life; the encounter has provided him solely with a 'dawn inspiration' and not with complete healing. In order for the latter to be achieved it is not enough to heal just one individual. The whole 'ordinary' world to which he belongs must undergo a radical transmutation. Something of the sort is not truly conceivable and so all nature and poetry can do is provide therapeutic

'inspiration' and thus fuel people with the desire to pursue that absolute quality that currently is part of a process of constant deferral.

The elegiac tone of 'Moortown' comes out in the final six poems that are all centred round the figure of Orchard, who in many ways reminds us of 'Dick Straightup'. In describing Orchard and nature in mourning for his death, Hughes resorts to what Robinson calls a 'language of paradox', with which 'Hughes hints at an alternative, more accepting and inclusive, moral standard than the residuum of Christianity by which we usually judge',²¹ this in spite of the fact that Orchard is frequently identified as a Christ-figure. In 'A Monument' (*M* 57) the speaker recalls an episode in which Orchard battled against the undergrowth and the cold weather in order to erect a wire fence, which as a monument is completely antithetical to the monuments found in the urban environment. This poem seems to describe the same event presented in the volume's opening poem. However, whereas 'Rain' was one of the first poems to have been written during Hughes' stay at 'Moortown', 'A Monument' is a revisitation of an event that left a lasting impression on the poet's mind. In the notes to *Moortown Diary*, Hughes compares Orchard to the builders of Stonehenge because both possessed the same tenaciousness of spirit. In the beginning of the poem, the speaker uses a number of military terms because to him 'Farmers make especially valuable soldiers' (*MD* 67) due to their possessing the attributes of a jack-of-all-trades. In 'Moortown' physical labour is celebrated as that which gives man spiritual fulfilment and one cannot help realising that in this Hughes was influenced by the quasi puritanical Methodist mentality he was exposed to in his youth in the Calder Valley. He expresses his admiration for physical hardship and resilience of spirit and says that 'The concentration with which [Orchard] transformed himself into these tasks, and the rapt sort of delight, the inner freedom, they seemed to bring him – all without a word spoken – gave me a new meaning for the phrase "meditation on matter"' (*MD* 67). According to Scigaj, Orchard's 'stoic endurance of pain and his commitment to managing nature earns the farmer the blessing of the White

Goddess'.²² In 'A Monument' the wire fence is what marks the boundary between nature's wildness and a proper human engineering of nature. The fence is a symbol of knowledge, values and traditions; something which commemorates the wisdom of the ancestors and acts as a reminder to future generations of the right path to follow in order to achieve physical and spiritual wellbeing:

To be discovered by some future owner
 As a wire tensed through impassable thicket,
 A rusting limit, where cattle, pushing unlikely,
 Query for two minutes, at most,
 In their useful life.
 And that is where I remember you,
 Skull-raked with thorns, sodden, tireless,
 Hauling bedded feet free, floundering away
 To check alignments, returning, hammering the staple
 Into the soaked stake oak, a careful tattoo
 Precise to the tenth of an inch,
 Under December downpour, midafternoon
 Dark as twilight, using your life up.

For Hughes healing comes about only when the rituals and traditions of the past are safeguarded, respected and maintained alive in a form which is suitable for the present age. For him this is what defines a 'useful' life. The seventh line quoted above is Hughes' way of comparing Orchard to Christ, who through physical hardship, suffering and death achieved mythic proportions and salvation. Through this comparison, Hughes makes it obvious that in Orchard he sees a paradigm for the attainment of wholeness and self-fulfilment, a symbol for a vision and way of life that rewards one with deliverance. However, the poet is not asking us to strictly emulate Orchard's way of life, but by learning from it to forge in our own way something for ourselves that is equal to it in terms of psychic and spiritual rewards. The intrusion of the pronoun 'I' is of course meant to portray the speaker as a disciple of this Christ-like figure, a disciple who in his own fashion pursues the same ends as those of the master. Like the four evangelists, the speaker of *Adonais* and Horatio in *Hamlet*, Orchard's apprentice takes upon himself the task

of 'remember[ing]' the master, commemorating his life and persuading others of its superior value.

In 'The Day He Died' (*M* 59-60), Hughes focuses on the actual world's manifestations of loss for Orchard. With the characteristic hyperbole and pathetic fallacy of elegies, the speaker tells us that with the farmer's death comes the immediate death of spring's anticipation. The frosty day following that of the farmer's demise is Valentine's Day and everything seems changed. The verbs and adjectives used in association with birds and snowdrops emphasise this as if a surrealistic confusion has taken rein of reality. Everything registers this 'new emptiness' and everything seems to 'have been somewhere awful / And come back without him'. The land and its creatures have become orphans after Orchard's death:

From now on the land
Will have to manage without him.
But it hesitates, in this slow realization of light,

Childlike, too naked, in a frail sun,
With roots cut
And a great blank in its memory.

The rural environment depended upon him for its survival and prosperity. The relationship was one of trust and the poem subtly pleads with us not to lose this trust. The 'roots cut' of the last stanza are re-echoed in the next poem, 'Now You Have to Push' (*M* 61), whose first stanza describes Orchard's hands in terms of symbols of a community's traditions and hoard of wisdom, or even its collective unconscious:

Your hands
Lumpish roots of earth cunning
So wrinkle-scarred, such tomes
Of what has been collecting centuries
At the bottom of so many lanes

Like a human *yggdrasil*, Orchard was a net of roots binding the human world to the natural world, to the latter's inseparable actuality and numinosity. With his death came severance, however, the implication is that it is only a temporary one. Very much like the speaker of Heaney's 'Digging', the disciple of Orchard's philosophy of life will carry down tradition and the master's world vision by means of his literary gift.

Orchard's hands, 'strange-huge. / A farmer's joke', are portrayed once more in the last poem of 'Moortown', 'Hands' (*M* 63-64), in which the farmer's hands are compared to 'old iron tools' and spoken of in terms of being 'more of a piece with your tractor / Than with their own nerves'. Observing Orchard's hands, the speaker comes to the realisation that it is such hands that have managed to quell some of nature's energy for the purposes of human wellbeing:

And when your grasp nosed bullocks, prising their mouths wide,
So they dropped to their knees
I understood again
How the world of half-ton hooves, and horns,
And hides heedless as cedar boarding, comes to be manageable.

The idea that Orchard was 'A root among roots', part of 'The natural root archives / Of mid-Devon's mud-lane annals' (*M* 62) is exemplified further by the last stanza of 'Hands', in which the poet shows us how Orchard mirrors that which came before him, the traditions, values and wisdom which need to be passed down to a new generation after one's demise:

Your hands lie folded, estranged from all they have done
And as they have never been, and startling—
So slender, so taper, so white,
Your mother's hands suddenly in your hands—
In a final strangeness of elegance.

For Scigaj this last stanza marks 'an apotheosis signifying union with the feminine principle of creation',²³ whilst West finds in it 'a movement towards hermaphroditism, an invocation of a zone or a sentiment where sexuality retreats

to changelessness, where the female becomes visible in the dying male, or the two merge as conscious-perfect motors of change'.²⁴ The strange elegance of the dead farmer's hands seems to cover all the hardship they suffered, but this beauty is only part of the death process which beatifies even the most comic and tortuous aspects of a man like Orchard. The farmer's hands are transfigured in much the same way that an elegy transfigures an ordinary man and exposes his heroic or superhuman facets, facets which in everyday life we tend to ignore. Hughes' final line testifies to this idea. In this the last stanza operates in a self-reflexive manner.

Bishop is of the opinion that in 'Moortown' 'there is no invitation to elevate the rural above the urban as a pastoral idyll; the objective is rather to render the urban mentality receptive to the real nature of Nature, that educative force which a rural community cannot either ignore or suppress'.²⁵ Nature is what impels the human individual to discover further positive aspects of his potential, to transform himself into a creature who lives in balance with his inner being and the reality external to him. 'Moortown' can be read as a parable about how nature's force can be embraced and what this union ultimately engenders.



'Prometheus on His Crag' is a sequence of twenty-one poems that Hughes started writing whilst working on *Orghast*, whose title means 'the fire of being'. The latter combines a wide variety of myths and legends, but the story of Prometheus is present at its very core. In working upon *Orghast*, Hughes and his collaborators relied upon such works as Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound* and Pedro Calderon de la Barca's *La Vida es Sueno*, whose main protagonist, Prince Segismund, is very similar to Prometheus in terms of the violence of his temperament, the imprisonment he undergoes, and the willingness to purge himself. Most of Hughes' poems in 'Prometheus on His Crag', whose poetry is pared down as much as possible, are composed of Prometheus' interior monologues, projecting forward the hero's thoughts about his suffering and the meaning of his existence.

Through them we come to see a gradual development in his identity and in his perception of himself and of external reality.

Prometheus was the son of Iapetus and Clymene and thus a descendant of Uranus (Heaven) and Gaia (Earth). He is recognised as a benefactor of men due to his having stolen fire from Zeus and taught humanity all sorts of useful arts and crafts. Zeus punished Prometheus by chaining him to Mount Caucasus where everyday a vulture consumed his liver, which grew back during the night, an act that symbolises the unity and cyclicity of creation and destruction. Zeus punished humanity by giving Prometheus' brother, Epimetheus, the first woman, Pandora, who brings with her all the diseases and calamities known to mankind. Prometheus is recognised as having placed Hope inside Pandora's jar in order to allow man to walk the tightrope between despair and faith, complacency and the ambition or will to ameliorate the self. One legend recognises Prometheus as the creator of men out of earth and water, with the help of Athena who breathed life into his clay figures. Prometheus' gift of fire can be seen as being analogous to his creation of men, or at least to the re-creation or re-parturition of humankind. In Piero di Cosimo's sixteenth century *The Story of Prometheus*, the Titan is seen sculpting his own body out of stone by means of the fennel stick he used to bring fire to men. Prometheus symbolises the revolt of man against the gods' oppression. Through his ingenuity and treachery he bestowed upon humanity all those treasures and wisdom denied to it by the pantheon. Prometheus is marked by the potent aspiration to achieve equality with the divine order. Besides 'forethought' the name Prometheus also means swastika, which in Hindu, Buddhist and Mexican traditions is a symbol for the sun. The word 'swastika' derives from the Sanskrit *svasti* and *ka*, meaning a mystical cross used to denote good luck. In the Golden Age men and the gods lived in harmony together but Prometheus' act of teaching humanity how to trick the gods when conducting rituals and sacrifices led Zeus to hide the fire used for cooking and to make it harder for men to grow previously abundant crops. This marked the end of the

Golden Age and Prometheus' theft of fire from the wheel of the sun or from Hephaestus' forge and his act of giving it to man led to his and humanity's punishment. The fire Prometheus gave to mankind lacked the permanence of divine fire: it was as fragile as it was powerful and it had to be carefully sustained and protected. Its mortality reflected man's own mortality, however, its presence in the human realm made it so that man was much more similar to the gods than to the animals. Its use in rituals and sacrifices was symbolic of this very significant human quality.

A number of legends and folk tales feature the vulture as the source of sacred fire that men steal, and as a healer who derives her power from human sacrifice. What binds these myths together is the idea that in order to come into possession of fire human beings must entertain a difficult interaction with the horrific vulture, it being a symbol for those phenomena that men fear but which must necessarily be embraced. The vulture symbolises mortality too, the harrowing phenomena of time and death, which every human being must come face to face with and stand upright if he is to achieve authenticity. In the last poem of Hughes' sequence, Prometheus' upright position is emphasised quite forcefully. Prometheus' daily confrontations with death and torment strengthen and ennoble his being. In symbology the vulture is 'Ambivalent as maternal solicitude, protection and shelter, and as death-dealing destruction and voracity. All vultures were thought to be female and symbolized the feminine principle... As a scavenger the vulture represented purification, a worker for good. In Egypt it represented the Mother Goddess, maternity and love...it is purification and good works'.²⁶

Whereas in Aeschylus the Titan prides himself with the fact of having inseminated humanity with the values of civilisation and progress – 'man, in whom, born witless as a babe, / I planted mind and the gift of understanding...Prometheus founded all the arts of man'²⁷ – in Hughes Prometheus is punished in part for the transgressions that resulted out of his

somewhat too hasty and imperfect act of fertilisation. In Hughes' sequence one of Prometheus' crimes is that of having stolen knowledge without first having acquired understanding, of having bequeathed knowledge to humankind without guaranteeing that humanity would manage to develop proper skills of insight. The Titan's gift has been heavily abused and has propagated all the social and environmental evils Hughes indicts in all his work. It is in this sense that Prometheus is the ancestor of Frankenstein. According to Scigaj in the sequence we find 'Hughes's attempt to resolve the problems of the relationship of consciousness and its wordy products to the pain, infirmities, and restrictions of actual living. Humans aspire to godlike freedoms and immortality, but live inside mortal, decaying bodies adrift in a world of pain'.²⁸ In Hughes' adaptation of Euripides' *Alcestis* we are told that Zeus killed Aesculapius because 'God was jealous of the mighty healer' (A 13). In a debacle between Prometheus and God, the Titan says that he has 'given man freedom', the 'freedom / To re-create mankind in his own image', however, God disagrees and tells Prometheus: 'You separated him / From the illumination of heaven, / From the wisdom and certainty of heaven' (A 72-73). God is afraid that an age of rampant humanism is waiting on the threshold: 'When man has learned to live without his soul / I shall be redundant' (A 73). The vulture's purpose in all this is to remind man that he can never free himself of pain and mortality. Even though Prometheus and Heracles delude themselves with the notion that the vulture has been totally annihilated and that this implies freedom for the Titan, in the context of 'Prometheus on His Crag' freedom is possible only once the vulture is embraced, which act denotes the attainment of humility and wisdom.

In the first few poems Prometheus drifts in a sense of numbness characteristic of undeveloped comprehension. In order to awaken out of this numbness he has to make full and proper use of his consciousness, that quality which makes man akin to the gods. This numbness has already been encountered in 'Moortown'; it is a characteristic of the earth, a quality that impinges upon man

a sense of responsibility. During his torture, Prometheus comes to contemplate upon his condition and to gradually acquire wisdom. In the first poem (*M* 67), Prometheus confronts himself, examines his being and initiates the process in which he learns who he is and who he should become. He realises that 'Something is altered' and 'Just within darkness, just within numbness' he starts investigating the possibilities. The first he comes up with while 'Feeling his ice-burned lungs gulp huge clarity' is that he is an eagle. Jung points out that 'The alchemical vulture, eagle, and crow are all essentially synonymous'.²⁹ In Prometheus' identification with the very instrument of his torture, though he is not yet aware of Zeus's punishment, Prometheus' unconscious is probably pushing forward the need for self-purgation and transformation. Prometheus crucified on Mount Caucasus (*M* 68) is a distilled person, a hero bereft of most false conceptions and hollow beliefs:

The blue wedge through his breastbone, into the rock,
Unadjusted by vision or prayer—so.

His eyes, brainless police.
His brain, simple as an eye.

However, this does not stop him from conceiving of himself as an aquiline force. It is this paradoxical new sense of being that makes Prometheus feel like an eagle, which can be seen as the hero's dream of power in the face of immurement; it is this which makes 'the Titan feel...his strength' though he is 'helpless'.

Prometheus' feeling of power makes him shout 'a world's end shout' (*M* 69) that seems to break all sophistry, but which awakens the surprise lying in store for him:

The birds became what birds have ever since been,
Scratching, probing, peering for a lost world—

A world of holy, happy notions shattered
By the shout
That brought Prometheus peace

And woke the vulture.

Hirschberg points out that Prometheus 'is profoundly ambivalent towards a sacrificial communion which both inspires his profoundest hopes and equally violent aversion to the self-mutilation which is the price for a new life. Nothing less than a sacrificial death...must precede a realignment with the life forces'.³⁰ Prometheus' 'shout' brings to mind Christ's ninth hour 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?' (Matthew 27: 46; Mark 15: 34) on the Golgotha and the spirit-yielding cry following it. Prometheus senses that the grand notions he holds are forsaking him; he is about to die in a mysterious sort of way, but it is only thus that he will be resurrected as a god-like human being. When the vulture attacks his body, Prometheus is left utterly helpless. His gift of foresight has not helped him predict this act of mutilation, which challenges his notions of a new beginning (*M* 70):

Each one said the same:

"Today is a fresh start
Torn up by its roots
As I tear the liver from your body."

For Sagar 'The vulture is the holy fire, the energies, but seen...as wholly destructive, dragonish, obscene, perhaps even become these things because denied. The only possible resolution of this conflict is to "unriddle the Vulture"'.³¹ Hence we see that the vulture is to some extent an extension of the White Goddess who appears in a malignant form to those who reject her. Prometheus is a transgressor against the creatress and hence a typically Hughesian immature male character. The vulture is the nature goddess's revenge and it works both physically and through Prometheus' psychological and spiritual confusion. For Hirschberg, the vulture, similar to the bird in 'Hawk Roosting', 'has the character of an overwhelming, devouring, demonic maternal force',³² a product of Prometheus' narrow perception and antagonism towards the female principle.

Prometheus' gift of fire has not solved humanity's problems as is shown by poem 5 (*M* 71), in which despite the hero's belief that 'He had resolved God / As a cow swallows its afterbirth', Prometheus is unable to quell 'The infant's bottomless cry, the mother's lament, / The father's curse', these lines reminding us of Blake's 'London'. Human life and the world are still characterised by confusion, fragmentation and hollow meanings. The last two stanzas of poem 6 (*M* 72) hint at this by means of images that seem to have been lifted from *The Waste Land*:

Below, among car bumpers and shopping baskets,
A monkey of voice, shuffling Tarot
For corpses and embryos, quotes Ecclesiastes

To the clock that talks backward.

The reference to 'a last supper' in the third stanza of this poem is intended on Hughes' part to be an allusion to Christ's final meal before his death and resurrection, a prandial ceremony that was gradually transformed into an immortal ritual. Perhaps Hughes' ambition is to immortalise Prometheus' ceremony of suffering and encourage us to accept it as a necessary ritual whose ultimate reward is transmutation and rebirth. The reference to Harakhty, a minor Egyptian deity who is associated with the diurnal phase of Ra and with Horus, is a further allusion to the rebirth process.

Prometheus is both humanity's saviour and a symbol for humanity, given that he is 'Arrested halfway from heaven / And slung between heaven and earth' (*M* 73). What he stole is partly what causes his great suffering for he has 'Swallowed what he had stolen'. His suffering is symbolic of human suffering, caused by the blend of mortality and divinity. The condition of being 'slung' between earth's numbness and the numinosity of the universe is a unique and envious one, but also one that entails great pain, a condition synonymous with an ever-present wound:

Chains hungered. These chains were roots
 Reaching from frozen earth.
 They sank searching into his flesh
 Interrogating the bones.

And the sun, plundered and furious,
 Planted its vulture.

Prometheus' suffering is not absurd: 'the sun bloomed, as it drank him, / Earth
 purpled its crocus'. He is a sacrificial victim or a martyr; an electrode through
 whom is conducted the intercourse between earth and sky, an act whose fruit is
 beneficial to humankind:

So he flowered
 Flowers of numb bliss, a forlorn freedom—

Groanings of the sun, sighs of the earth—

Gathered by withering men.

In poem 9 (*M* 75), Prometheus realises that the vulture holds the key to his future,
 that by understanding its significance he will learn more about himself and about
 how best to proceed in his thinking. For the moment he cannot understand that the
 suffering it is forcing him to undergo is the answer to his questions:

What secret stays
 Stilled under my stillness?
 Not even I know.

Only he knows—that bird, that
 Filthy-gleeful emissary and
 The hieroglyph he makes of my entrails

Is all he tells.

In the next poem (*M* 76), Prometheus 'Began to admire the vulture', seeing it as a
 symbol for the numinous kind of self-possession that characterises Hughes'
 hawks and horses:

It knew what it was doing

It went on doing it
Swallowing not only his liver
But managing also to digest its guilt

And hang itself again just under the sun
Like a heavenly weighing scales
Balancing the gift of life

And the cost of the gift
Without a tremor—
As if both were nothing.

The 'gift of life' is the fire Prometheus stole and 'the cost' is the suffering he and humanity must incur for it. The vulture binds the two together, teaching Prometheus that knowledge comes at a price and the price must be paid for in full if psychic and spiritual health is to be effected. The Titan grows to appreciate the verity of the following idea expressed in *Voss*: 'true knowledge only comes of death by torture in the country of the mind'.³³

In poem 12 (*M* 78), Prometheus sings 'A song to his wounds'. Even though he sees that 'the smolder of man rose from the cities' he continues singing and in the process 'Drugging the whole earth with bliss'. For Sagar 'The body of Prometheus is the body of humanity, his wounds its smouldering cities. And it is no incomprehensible external evil which has caused the ruin of cities'.³⁴ It is the fact that men lack understanding that has engendered the havoc. Prometheus' songs are an exploration of guilt and pain, a drug that numbs the senses and gives rein to the emotions and the imagination. This is perhaps the first step towards the healing of the wounds, a healing effected by means of art. For Scigaj 'Prometheus's liberation depends upon understanding the significance of what he has done and learning to mediate the opposites of aspiration and pain by developing his imaginative life... The task is to transform self-consciousness into redemptive vision in the mediatory realm of the imagination'.³⁵ Prometheus in the

poem moves from a contemplation of himself and his condition to one of humanity and its misery. For Robinson 'This new development...entails the growth of Prometheus' conception of himself as suffering not absurdly but on behalf of others'.³⁶ In this sense the poem anticipates the moment when 'the trickster, the meddler in creation, becomes the self-sacrificing redeemer'.³⁷ In Aeschylus this awareness of self-sacrifice for others is present from the earliest stages of the Titan's punishment – 'The gifts I gave to man / Have harnessed me beneath this harsh duress'³⁸ – and thus the playwright emphasises the idea that his hero is a born saviour. Compounded with this is the fact that Aeschylus' hero foresaw his punishment but decided to transgress all the same in the name of humanity's liberation. On the other hand, Hughes' Prometheus undergoes a development in his understanding of himself and the reality around him. This helps to make him more human as well as more heroic.

Confronted by the reality of the vulture, which cannot be forgotten for too long no matter how potent the drug one uses, Prometheus starts making conjectures about its meaning and his guilt. In poem 13 (*M* 79) he comes to see the bird as his punishment for giving man the gift of life and in fact the poem's last line credits him with this:

Prometheus on His Crag

Heard the cry of the wombs.
He had invented them.
Then stolen the holy fire, and hidden it in them.

.....

And it seemed
That the vulture was the revenge of the wombs
To show him what it was like,

That his chains would last, and the vulture would awake him,
As long as there were wombs
Even if that were forever,

And that he had already invented too much.

After the vision of the universe as a perpetual whipping of all living and nonliving things in poem 14, a whipping just as merciless and absurd as that witnessed by Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov*, just as unrelenting as that suffered by Dante's gluttonous souls in the third circle of hell, Prometheus comes to see himself as the one who can offer liberation to humanity, only to find himself confronted by the vulture which seems intent upon killing all hope (M 81).

Between the eons—dark nothing. But he could see
Himself wading escaping through dark nothing
From eon to eon, prophesying Freedom—

It was his soul's sleepwalking and he dreamed it.
Only waking when the vulture woke him
In a new eon

to the old chains
and the old agony.

An eon is an infinitely long period of time or a kalpa or age. For the Gnostics it was an emanation from the deity and the medium for its expression. The Titan has not yet learnt to perceive the suffering of his 'new eon' as an invigorating source of energy, has not yet gleaned the fact that freedom cannot ever be attained unless the vulture is embraced as an intrinsic principle of life. Prometheus dreams of a reality entirely different to that of the vulture, whereas what he has to do is accept the vulture since it is only this act that can recompense him with transcendence. However, it is not late before the hero opens his eyes to the truth. In poem 16 (M 82), Hughes purposefully identifies Prometheus with Christ when he depicts the Titan as fully conscious that his suffering is meant to alleviate human misery, to pay the price humanity is either to pay with him or in his place. In this sense the poet starts explicitly drawing Prometheus as a saviour, a figure that will later on complement his idea of the hero as some kind of prototype for a new human form of being:

He yields his own entrails
 A daily premium
 To the winged Death in Life, to keep it from men.

He lays himself down in his chains
 On the Mountain,
 under Heaven
 as THE PAYMENT—

Too far from his people to tell them
 Now they owe nothing.

Somewhat equal to Eliot's idea of Christ in *The Rock*, Hughes conceives of Prometheus as being both the rock upon which the new Church is to be built and the new Church itself. The tragedy of Prometheus' act of self-sacrifice is the fact that people disregard it and the truth the hero personifies. For Robinson 'It is as if Christ took courage and ascended the cross to redeem his people, but no one was there to notice or record the event, and the gospels went unwritten'.³⁹ Even though Hughes portrays Prometheus as possessing the qualities of a Christian saviour it must be kept in mind that what Hughes, like Nietzsche, found attractive in Christ was the idea of a superhuman figure living an independent, spirit-liberating life and not that of a redeemer saving humanity from earthly life. Prometheus saves humanity from 'Death in Life' and not from mortality, which together with suffering must be accepted as an intrinsic part of the wholeness of existence. Prometheus saves humanity by bestowing knowledge upon it, teaching it by means of his own development and transformation. His success as that of Hughes' other superhuman characters is meant to goad us on to achieve our own success in our own way. In this the Titan's tale is dissimilar to Thomas a Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ*.

In poem 18 we are asked to imagine Prometheus' story and the characters populating it in the form of an icon that possesses a 'permanent religious significance',⁴⁰ as Sagar points out. We are also told to pay attention to the minute

symbolic details that, as is the case with most paintings, are often ignored if not completely unseen.

The figure overlooked in this fable
Is the tiny trickle of lizard

Listening near the ear of Prometheus,
Whispering—at his each in-rip of breath,
Even as the vulture buried its head—

“Lucky, you are so lucky to be human!”

The lizard is a symbol of the earth, an earth lacking consciousness, imagination and understanding. It has no hope of transcending its status and mode of being and this is why Prometheus remains adamant in his will to bear the pain. As Sagar claims ‘Even as the vulture buries its head Prometheus asserts his humanity in continuing to defy Zeus and in trying to convert the pain into THE PAYMENT, redeeming his people by teaching them precisely how lucky they are, not simply in spite of pain and death but in a mysterious way *because* of them, to be human’.⁴¹ Robinson points out that ‘Hughes is using the first eleven lines for an *occupatio*, the medieval rhetorician’s device for signalling that he is deliberately reshaping his material and investing it with new significance’.⁴² References to Io, Epimetheus and Pandora are merely meant to indicate their absence from Hughes’ sequence. All this leads us to the poem’s final lines, in which Hughes introduces a character who does not appear in Aeschylus’ play and other sources, but which is more important than those that do appear. The lizard’s words remind the hero that to be human is to possess consciousness and wisdom and thus to be responsible for the proper management of nature and its resources. This is one of the elements that bind this sequence to the one preceding it. Furthermore, to be human means to be able to change and evolve and ‘It is through his own inner development that he will carry out his duties to others on the evolutionary ladder’.⁴³

In poem 19 (*M* 85), the shouting Titan reminds us of Shelley’s eternally crucified Christ in *Prometheus Unbound*, ‘Wailing for the faith he kindled’.⁴⁴

notion that Prometheus and the bird are in many ways inseparable since the vulture is that force which mysteriously conjoins the hero's divinity and mortality:

Or was it his condemned human ballast—
His dying and his death, torn daily
From his immortality?

Or his blowtorch godhead
Puncturing those horrendous holes
In his human limits?

The use of the word 'blowtorch' tells us that the vulture is a force of fire and that healing and transmutation will perhaps be achieved by alchemical means. The manner in which Prometheus perceives the vulture determines whether the emphasis falls upon humanity's divorce from material reality and the individual's divorce from his inner store of energy and the spirit that binds him to numinous nature, or else upon the constant struggle to achieve complete union with the sacred realm and thus attain the quality of wholeness. Even though in the situations Prometheus finds himself in truth seems to be absent, Hughes believes that we have to primarily understand that we can arrive at truth 'only on the simplest terms: through what has been suffered, what is being suffered, and the objects that participate in the suffering'.⁴⁶ This is the meaning of the scenes on the heath in *King Lear*; the purgation and cleansing of vision attained by Shakespeare's psychologically and morally blind king is attained by means of intense suffering. Since the vulture is the instrument of Prometheus' suffering then the element of pain can be seen as that which helps the hero to transcend himself beyond ordinary limitations while always being aware of their presence. For Scigaj 'Prometheus must transform the pain of existence into spiritual illumination. To be human is to exist between the godly and the animal'.⁴⁷ Speaking about Pilinszky's poetry, which concentrates particularly on the Hungarian poet's experiences in Nazi concentration camps, Hughes says that at the 'point when all the powers of the soul are focused on what is final, and cannot

be altered, even though it is horrible, the anguish, it seems, is indistinguishable from joy. The moment closest to extinction turns out to be *the* creative moment. The result is not comforting. But it is healing. Ghastliness and bliss are weirdly married'.⁴⁸

In stanzas eight and nine the vulture is conceived of as the sacred force of knowledge, which while energising is also destructive, especially if misused and profaned:

Was it the fire he had stolen?
Nowhere to go and now his pet,
And only him to feed on?

Or the supernatural spirit itself
That he had stolen from,
Now stealing from him the natural flesh?

In the eleventh stanza Prometheus asks himself whether the vulture is 'his anti-self— / The him-shaped vacuum / In unbeing, pulling to empty him?', thus reminding us of Yeats's 'Ego Dominus Tuus'. According to Hirschberg 'By equating the vulture with Prometheus's "anti-self" Hughes is having the vulture serve as a foil to enable Prometheus discover his true self; thus, the anti-self is a means of promoting a more comprehensive level of awareness than had existed before, through self confrontation'.⁴⁹ Prometheus' thoughts lead his mind to spin and just as in the first poem of the sequence, Prometheus feels himself fly, but now he is not deluding himself or dreaming for the sensation enters him when he posits forward the idea that the vulture is his liberator. It is only when Prometheus comes to the understanding that the vulture is a sort of shamanic guiding spirit intent upon helping him communicate with the hidden other of his psyche and being that he can make possible his rebirth and transformation:

Or was it, after all, the Helper
Coming again to pick at the crucial knot
Of all his bonds...?

Image after image after image. As the vulture

Circled

Circled.

The vulture's spiral flight transforms it into a symbol of wholeness just like an Oriental mandala, the ouroboros or a pentagram, the latter denoting the human divine. The cycles of birth and death, creation and destruction, pain and ecstasy are very important in this sequence as they are in Hughes' entire vision. The emphasis the poet places upon the word 'Circled' tells us that Prometheus has understood how to achieve the healing of his wounds, that he has understood how to pursue wholeness. Prometheus is identified with a shaman who must undergo symbolic death and mutilation in order to be reborn and re-establish a stable relationship with numinous nature and the spirit world for the whole community. The healer of the wound must perforce carry the wound himself. The healer pursues 'alignment', renouncing the known for the unknown. In this poem the hero seems to engage in shamanic flight. In poem 20 it is implied that Prometheus has grown to see himself as the nexus between heaven and earth. An evolution in his thoughts has occurred which has led him to appreciate his intermundane state of being, which is akin to that of a martyr who has attained beatification. He is neither entirely man nor entirely god, but in him we see an ideal to pursue. His state of in-betweenness provides psychic and spiritual rewards besides pain and anguish. Hughes describes his hero as 'fractured. He is the crossroads of eternal life and ecstasy and temporal doom, pain, change and death. Conscious in eternity he has to live in time. And he cannot solve his dilemma. He hangs between heaven and earth almost torn apart, an open wound, immortal'.⁵⁰ He 'is the locus of torment, the cross. He is a living oxymoron, a fractured unity'.⁵¹

Or was it the earth's enlightenment—
Was he an uninitiated infant
Mutilated towards alignment?

The transformed Prometheus harmoniously merges what Scigaj differentiates as self (with its aspirations to a god-like status) and world (to which we belong due to our mortality). Prometheus becomes an ideal through his having achieved a state of being in which the human and the divine are merged into a whole. Hence he symbolises the healing we pursue but never really attain in its absolute form, perhaps due to our inability to recognise how to properly do so. The trap of extreme rationality is one way by which we appease our thirst for transcendence beyond material reality, but it is nothing more than a trap and, as Prometheus shows us, the embrace of nature and the suffering of existence is what leads us closer to the heights we dream of. Consciousness is what distinguishes man from the beasts, but it is a positive force only if used correctly. Consciousness allows Prometheus to understand his condition and to convert his agony into compensation. In poem 20 the Titan starts by positing forward a number of wrong definitions of the vulture until at the end he happens to achieve illumination. His realisation that the vulture is the midwife assisting him in his rebirth is his rebirth.

For Sagar 'Prometheus' quest, like that of all heroes of myth, is ultimately to find himself, that is, to recreate himself and the world'.⁵² In poem 21 (*M* 88) we see him managing to do so:

The mountain is flowering
A gleaming man.

And the cloudy bird
Tearing the shell
Midwifes the upfaling crib of flames.

And Prometheus eases free.
He sways to his stature.
And balances. And treads

On the dusty peacock film where the world floats.

Mount Caucasus could symbolically stand for the 'flame-horned mountain-stone' (CB 24) mentioned in 'The Accused', the altar on which the nameless protagonist (an extension of both Prometheus and Osiris) offers his tainted being in order to be reborn. In the poem the terminology that refers to blooming and sprouting is used for the same purposes for which it is used in 'The Owl Flower' whilst another link with *Cave Birds* is that of 'the shell'. Prometheus is apparently reborn out of an egg and this latter element plays an important part in the rebirth of Hughes' 1978 protagonist. In referring to 'the shell', the poet wants to establish a tie with alchemy. In fact, certain medieval illustrations depict Mercurius in the philosopher's egg, which serves as the alchemical vessel for the god as *filius*, who is frequently portrayed as standing on the sun and the moon, which symbolise his dual or hermaphroditic nature. By the end of Hughes' sequence we come to see Prometheus embracing his dual state of being and prizing it as an optimal condition for existence, this being due to the fact that it denotes unity and harmony through the tension between opposite forces. In the above-quoted penultimate stanza we learn that Prometheus achieves freedom through his rebirth. However, that freedom will only be guaranteed if the hero manages to maintain equilibrium, 'balances' earth and sky, consciousness and the unconscious, body and spirit and all the other dualities that feature repeatedly in Hughes' poetic cosmogony. For Hughes, Prometheus is a healer and this is something we find in Aeschylus, too: 'I / Revealed the blends of gentle medicines / Wherewith they arm themselves against disease'.⁵³

The word 'crocus' in the tenth line of the poem is intriguingly coupled with the word 'evangels'. According to Graves' *The Greek Myths* the crocus is a 'potent flower [that] first sprang from the blood of the tortured Prometheus'⁵⁴ and as an antidote was meant to safeguard Jason while on his quest for the Golden Fleece. The crocus grows from a corm, a thick, bulb-like stem. The interesting thing about the crocus for the purposes of Hughes' poem is that new corms form on top of old ones and that corms require a period of wintering, that is, a bout of

dark and cold conditions in which the roots are produced. This supplies us with a metaphor for Prometheus' ordeals and re-blossoming, which is meant to have the same didactic and hopeful message as the gospels. The reference to the 'peacock' in the last stanza elicits the notion of wholeness and in fact in alchemy the bird is a symbol of that quality, partly because its feathers are a manifestation of the *cauda pavonis*, a combination of all colours symbolising wholeness. The peacock's tail is also a symbol of cyclicity since every year its colours fade and re-splendour. The peacock symbolises immortality, longevity and love, as well as apotheosis. Many drawings in Hermetic literature represent a peacock rising from a retort flask. This gives added weight to our interpretation of Prometheus' rebirth as having been effected by alchemical means and for alchemical, spiritual and psychological purposes. Jung explains that 'The peacock is an early Christian symbol of the redeemer' and 'is second cousin to the phoenix, a Christ symbol'.⁵⁵

The first line of poem 21 describes how

His mother covers her eyes.
The mountain splits its sweetness.
The blue fig splits its magma.

For Sagar 'Prometheus' mother is the mountain, the whole earth, and the fruit of the earth. The earth itself, the chestnut, the fig, all are covered with a shell or skin within which is the magma... This "slow mire" of unrealized life at the same time imprisons and cradles, entombs and enwombs that which is always waiting to be born'.⁵⁶ In order to achieve a state of being in-between divinity and mortality, Prometheus must somewhat break free of the earth's grip and focus upon maintaining a balanced relationship between it and the sky's allure. It is imperative that while pursuing the never-wholly-attainable treasures of the sky, Prometheus never forgets his roots. As Sagar puts it, 'Prometheus sheds his human ballast. He is neither nailed to the world nor flying free of it. Prometheus gleams with newness, but the world itself is also renewed. Prometheus "balances" the gift and the cost, humanity and godhead, heaven and earth'.⁵⁷ Prometheus

attains the liberty he yearned for throughout the whole sequence, however, it is a freedom bound to the reality of his existence and not one outside it as he had dreamt of in the first few poems.



'Earth-Numb' is the lengthiest part of *Moortown* and it consists of a number of occasional poems written in the styles of *Wodwo* and *Crow*, as well as ones that recall the poetry of *Remains of Elmet*. In this section one also finds some mini sequences, the best of which reflect the concerns of *Cave Birds*. In a 6 February 1980 BBC Radio 3 reading of poems from 'Earth-Numb', Hughes, referring to two modes of being, antithetical and on the course of confrontation, stated that 'The boundary...runs between awareness, and unawareness, between the life of the one and the mere circumstances of the other, and the baffled sort of collision between them'.⁵⁸ The state of awareness is intrinsically bound to life, whereas that of unawareness is indistinguishable from a complacent, mechanical mode of existence. Poetry is one of the forces that grants awareness to human beings and for Scigaj 'it is clear that what Hughes means by "awareness" and "the life of the one" concerns the ability of words to produce magical, incantatory effects that liberate repressed energies while strengthening and deepening our sense of self, our grasp of deeper powers and levels of awareness'.⁵⁹

'Earth-Numb' contains a number of portraits of people who live on the other side of the frontier, people who are satirised for being impotent and pusillanimous and unable to free themselves of the shackles and evils of the commercial, enervative mode of existence propagated by urban society. However, in deep contrast to these personas, the speaker of the title poem (*M* 91-92) of 'Earth-Numb' is a participant in a sacred, ritualistic activity that fuses together earth and sky and all other binary forces. The language of the piece is one of the factors soldering together the human individual and the natural environment. In the *Norwich Tapes*, Hughes says that the poem's 'title refers to the strange

unconscious sort of consciousness in which...all hunting and angling operations take place'.⁶⁰ For West, Hughes here is speaking about the 'frame of mind needed to participate mythically in experience, to be on the same "wavelength" as Nature's "consciousness" or energetic process'.⁶¹ The poem opens with an emphasis on the same kind of stillness that reigns over 'The Horses' and just like in the latter poem, the speaker of 'Earth-Numb', together with the world surrounding him, reverently awaits the 'smoldering fume' of dawn while casting his line into the river in order to fish for salmon. The act of fishing is described in religious and epiphanic terms and this makes the poem a preamble to the kind of poetry we find in *River*:

Hunting salmon. And hunted
And haunted by apparitions from tombs
Under the smoothing tons of dead element
In the river's black canyons.

The lure is a prayer. And my searching
Like the slow sun.
A prayer, like a flower opening.
A surgeon operating
On an open heart, with needles—

While the last two lines remind us of 'The sharp compassion of the healer's art'⁶² in 'East Coker', we cannot help noticing that an aura of electric tension runs through the first four stanzas of the poem until 'bang! the river grabs at me'. The speaker is entrapped by the energy in the dark depths of the river, metaphoric for subliminal, spiritual and natural depths. Like the child in 'Pike', he has intentionally collided with a realm of ego-shattering, regenerative forces. Consequently the speaker becomes the conduit between two anagogic dimensions, the loop conjoining one to the other, the umpire stabilising their interaction:

A mouth-flash, an electrocuting malice
Like a trap, trying to rip life off me—
And the river stiffens alive,
The black hole thumps, the whole river hauls

And I have one.

A piling voltage hums, jamming me stiff—
 Something terrified and terrifying
 Gleam-surges to and fro through me
 From the river to the sky, from the sky into the river

Uprooting dark bedrock, shatters it in air
 Cartwheels across me, slices thudding through me
 As if I were the current—

This explosive event cannot be experienced perdurably. The human individual is too frail for that to happen. He is unlike the jaguar, but this does not decrease our admiration for him because his significance lies in the fact that he has managed to find the means by which to transcend his being. As West points out, 'Always remaining true to the stages of catching his salmon, Hughes succeeds also in tracing the process by which one grows "earth-numb", or hooked on one's own prayer for a fish, a prayer which has the same power over the salmon as the power of a faith healer or witch doctor can exert over his patient'.⁶³ The cataclysmal events described in 'A Dream of Horses' and 'Earth-Numb' as well as other poems are important as a means of energising one's being, but like the speaker of James Stephens' 'The Shell' after an encounter with nature's feral energy we all feel that it is 'sweet / To hear a cart go jolting down the street'.⁶⁴ Hence in 'Earth-Numb' the fish's death marks the moment when the fisherman is drawn back into everyday reality, potent with the energy the depths inject into him by means of the captured salmon that looks at him and the sky beyond him with 'eyes of incredulity'.

The mini sequence 'Seven Dungeon Songs' (M 124-130) follows the same kind of formula utilised by Hughes in *Cave Birds* and 'Prometheus on His Crag'. For Gifford and Roberts it 'narrates the murder and disintegration of the nature-goddess, an individual's frustrated attempt to achieve a reintegration in his own body, his debilitating perception of the earth as a prison, his unanswered longing for the earth itself to speak, and finally his recognition that the only adequate

speech (which he still has not achieved) is that of his own body's earthliness'.⁶⁵ This sequence owes something to Popa's *Wolf Salt*, in which the wolf is utilised as a totem of the ancient Slav tribes. For Popa the 'lame wolf' stands for pre-Christian beliefs while the wounded she-wolf represents the Serbian land. Popa depicts the lame wolf as something that in spite of all threats lives on, a force the people, upon their conversion to Christianity, find they cannot reject but must nurture within themselves if they are to remain plugged into the circuit of atavistic energies of the earth they live on. Furthermore, it is important to point out that the wolf in symbology, among other things, stands for the earth and that in alchemy it symbolises 'the dual nature of Mercurius, the philosophical mercury, the *nous*'.⁶⁶ For the purposes of Hughes' poems, the wolf can also represent the unconscious, which swallows consciousness in an alchemical manner and after sublimation leads to the rebirth of the latter psychic dimension. The number seven in the title is significant since it connotes totality, reintegration and synthesis. Cooper points out that 'With the three of the heavens and the soul and the four of the earth and the body, it is the first number which contains both the spiritual and the temporal'.⁶⁷ She also says that amongst other things it is 'the number of the Great Mother' and that in magic 'There are seven knots in a cord for "spellbinding", and incantations are sevenfold'.⁶⁸

All these elements are highly pertinent to Hughes' sequence, which opens with a poem that presents us with a difficult interaction between the two opponents of the third section of *Moortown*. The wolf is symbolic of life whereas the infant is the unawareness that will make all kinds of efforts to strangle the wolf's being. In some ways 'The Wolf' echoes the poem 'The Howling of Wolves' from *Wodwo*, however, what distinguishes the former piece is the fact that 'the poem becomes, from its first lines...a bringing together of balanced and equal opposites'.⁶⁹ The wolf is a savage predator, a complete contrast to the fragile baby and yet their encounter promises to be bountiful to the human child:

The beast's gangrenous breath

Clouded the *tabula rasa*.

The wolf was wounded in the jaw.
The blood dripped
Onto the babe's hands.
The babe reached towards the pretty creature,
Laughing a baby laugh,
A soft-brained laugh.

The wolf
Picked up the babe and ran among the stars.

The wolf's eye was icy with pain
And milk dripped from its tits.

The child's hands are bloodied with the wolf's blood, an indication that it is the human race that is to blame for the creature's wounds and diseases, yet at the same time the wolf is also baptising the child, marking him as a possible new start, plenishing his Lockean infant's head with nature's wisdom. We are to suppose that this wolf is similar to the one that nourished Romulus and Remus and thus helped in the birth of a great civilisation; in this she is unlike the disheartening she-wolf encountered by Dante. The pain in its eyes is perhaps a sign that the new civilisation desired by this wolf is one devoid of violence against nature, one in which man can rise to new heights while at the same time not trampling the order below him. However, the poem that comes after 'The Wolf' clearly shows us that the wolf's efforts have failed, her wishes have remained unfulfilled due to their rejection by the very infant whom the wolf has fostered. Robinson notices that there exists a 'narrative gap' between the first and second poem, a gap that 'stands for the long-term human failure to develop a potential which lay in the baby as it never could in the wolf. The potential is that which man alone enjoys for transcending the limitations of animal vision and going beyond the wolf's lot – the potential, that is, for higher human consciousness'.⁷⁰ This gap is symbolic of 'the false development of human

potential and its disastrous diversion into the sterilities of masculine-scientific-Christian thinking'.²¹

Hughes' wolf is probably related to the wolf in Pilinszky's 'Fable', who like Frankenstein's monster observes people whose beauty he admires but who cannot accept him. As in Hughes' poem, Pilinszky's wolf is slaughtered. In the sequence's first poem, the wolf is not destructive in regard to the infant, but in its second poem we see human destructiveness manifesting itself in full force:

But her murderer, mad-innocent
Sucked at her offspring, reckless of blood,
Consecrating them in fire, muttering
It is good to be God.

The killer exhibits the psychopathic human need to be absolutely powerful and the word 'Consecrating' tells us how blindly he believes in the necessity of eradication. Being at one with nature, the mother-wolf returns to it in much the same way as the bird in 'The Hawk in the Rain':

Dead, she became space-earth
Broken to pieces.
Plants nursed her death, unearthed her goodness.

The murderer 'borrowed mouths, leaving names / Being himself nothing', because after all what he represents is the mentality currently prevalent in the Western world. However, the poem's last six lines can be read as signifying that even the murderer's being is part of the cosmic feminine principle:

Being himself nothing

But a tiger's sigh, a wolf's music
A song on a lonely road

What it is
Risen out of mud, fallen from space
That stares through a face.

For Gifford and Roberts this poem pushes forward 'the recognition that the resurrection of the goddess can and must be achieved within the "murderer" himself'.⁷² Mother Nature embraces him while at the same time goads him to transform himself and this is the redemptive process that is unfolded in the subsequent poems.

In the third Dungeon Song the speaker reassembles himself and comes to perceive his unity, however, he has not yet attained the state of perfection evoked in 'The Risen':

Only still something
Stared at me and screamed

Stood over me, black across the sun,
And mourned me, and would not help me get up.

For Robinson what blocks the light 'is the she-wolf, the figure of life who has been the victim, and then becomes the ultimate goal, of the male presence'.⁷³ Elements of his past self burden his emergent being, but the fundamental thing is that the persona wants to achieve transfiguration. In fact, in the fourth poem we see the persona yearning for the light that is being held away from him by the castigating wolf, which is also the earth:

His lips pressed to its coolness
Like an eye to a crack

He tasted the tears
Of the wind-shaken and weeping
Tree of light.

It is necessary for the male figure to suffer because it is solely in this manner that he will gradually attain the wisdom that the light and the earth are one. The dungeon he perceives is probably as depressingly enthralling for the protagonist as is the bell jar of Esther Greenwood's breakdown in Plath's novel. The protagonist must cease to recognise the earth as a tomb without an opening, but

must grow to appreciate it as a womb that will nourish his renewal. The light he yearns for is 'Between sky and earth', a form of energy that binds all nature's dimensions together. The tree, symbolic of the mystical ladder and of the Buddha's *bodhi* or enlightenment tree, weeps due to the pain let loose by the murderer's past actions and also because the persona is still tainted with the kind of mental attitude he harboured in previous times.

In the fifth *Dungeon Song* the restrained mobility of the previous poem is contrasted by a fervent kind of activity whose purpose is the securing of a new form of being:

I walk
Unwind with activity of legs
The tangled ball
Which was once the orderly circuit of my body

The 'tangled ball' reminds us of Prometheus' 'crucial knot' (*M* 87), which is undone by the vulture after the hero's redemption and acquirement of wisdom. However, even though this poem possesses a consolatory element of hope in that the male protagonist is keenly seeking transformation it ends rather gloomily since he fails 'To jerk out the knot / Or snap it'. What he fails to glean is the fact that lacking the female principle as a guide through the maze of his knots his efforts are futile and desperate. No one can help him apart from the victim of his rout: 'People's fingers snarl it worse'.

I hurl myself
To jerk out the knot
Or snap it

And come up short

So dangle and dance
The dance of unbeing

This dance can be one knowing no termination as is indicated by the lack of punctuation. The persona can everlastingly strive at undoing the knot of his being,

living in the guise of some Kafkaesque character who cannot find a way by which to exit his absurd condition, that is, unless he realises the truth of what he has to do: get over his pride and seek the she-wolf's help. Even though the sequence's protagonist can be seen as 'tangled in the knotted mesh of causes', he is not 'helpless' (*O* 52) like Oedipus: his consciousness and free will can help him save himself.

For Scigaj the final two poems of 'Seven Dungeon Songs' 'suggest the possibility of wholeness should the persona recognize the self as the originator of one's experience of the world'.⁷⁴ In fact, the sixth Dungeon Song marks a vivid change in the protagonist's perception. Nature is no longer a prison, but something to communicate with even though it adamantly refuses to snap out of its reticence. It seems as if sound is an intruder, a destructive presence in this sacred realm in which silence connotes understanding:

A bird cried out in the sky
As if the great crystal of silence
Suddenly split across.

But the rubbly dust at his feet
Could not utter
What it was humbled to.

And the great crystal of light
Healed, as before,
And was silent.

'The oracle' in the first stanza and 'The human eyes, jammed in flesh, / Which seemed to know' are silent, indicative of the fact that speech as a medium by which to convey wisdom in this place, in which the persona rewardingly finds himself, is either unnecessary or else unsuitable. The silence in the sixth and seventh poems is earth's language, a language the persona must learn to communicate in if he wants to interact with the feminine principle.

The final poem of this brief sequence is constructed upon parataxis and mentions a number of conditions that must be met with in order for the

denouement to the process of transformation to ensue. Various parts of the body are associated with elements in the material world and this suggests that re-union can finally be achieved. The poem is in the form of a declaration by the speaker, a declaration hinting to us the possibility that the persona has been illuminated. He seems to know that the silence of nature is laden with significance and that its sacredness can only be fully respected by means of the kind of silence or numbness that is paradoxically evoked by the articulateness of such a poem as 'The Horses'. However, the fact that he addresses us in the first person and exhibits a strong urge to break the silence, as well as the fact that he uses conditional clauses may be found to be somewhat disturbing; they evince the idea that the speaker has arrived quite close to his goal but has not yet managed to achieve it entirely. Various critics appositely choose to see this poem as being similar to a prayer of redemptive hope, comparable to the ending stanza of 'Lupercalia' and to some of the poems in the 'Epilogue' of *Gaudete*.

As he does in such a poem as 'A Sparrow Hawk' from *Wolfwatching* and in various pieces from his early work, Hughes in 'Tiger Psalm' (M 157-158) celebrates in epiphanic terms the purity of the creature's predatory act, which like that of the bird in 'Hawk Roosting' is devoid of hypocrisy, sophistry and nonsensical, rational justifications. In symbology the tiger is 'Ambivalent as both solar and lunar, creator and destroyer' and most significantly 'it can be a manifestation of the Earth Mother'.⁷⁵ In shamanism the tiger stands for 'Superhuman powers; it is a messenger of the forest gods and is ridden by gods, immortals and exorcists'.⁷⁶ Sagar points out that the poem 'was originally conceived as a dialogue between Socrates and Buddha. Gradually Buddha's side of the argument resolved itself into a tiger and Socrates' into the principle of machineguns'.⁷⁷ The tiger's foe is the Socratic frame of mind that decimates for the mere joy of decimation instead of for those of beatification and transfiguration:

The tiger kills hungry. The machine guns

Talk, talk, talk across their Acropolis.
 The tiger
 Kills expertly, with anesthetic hand.
 The machine guns
 Carry on arguing in heaven
 Where numbers have no ears, where there is no blood.

Like the hawk, the tiger is 'The god of his own salvation', whereas 'The machine guns / Proclaim the Absolute, according to Morse'. The tiger's act is creative, whereas the Socratic one is wasteful:

The tiger
 Kills with beautiful colors in his face,
 Like a flower painted on a banner.
 The machine guns
 Are not interested.

.....

The tiger
 Kills and licks its victim all over carefully.
 The machine guns
 Leave a crust of blood hanging on the nails
 In an orchard of scrap iron.

As an agent of divine destruction, the tiger is comparable to the lions and leopards in Jeremiah 5: 6 and Hosea 13: 7, the leopards featuring also in 'Ash Wednesday' as 'having fed to satiety / On my legs my heart my liver and that which had been contained / In the hollow round of my skull'.⁷⁸

Scigaj remarks that 'The tiger for Hughes represents an analogous human power—the seizure accomplished in the act of perception itself. More exactly, it is the Oriental act of perception that annihilates discrete objects by transforming them into a unitive vision of allness'.⁷⁹ In the poem we are told that the tiger 'kills exalted', transfigures its prey and the rest of material reality by means of its contact with it, by means of its energetic and harmony-establishing presence. Hence the tiger's violent act is not so much destructive as procreative:

The tiger

Kills like the fall of a cliff, one-sinewed with the earth,
Himalayas under eyelid, Ganges under fur—

Does not kill.

The final stanza of the poem is truly written in the form of a psalm, a prayer celebrating the wonder of this creature's numinosity, much in the same way that Blake celebrates his tiger. The tiger, to which Rilke's description of the Buddha — 'in you is the presence that / will be, when all the stars are dead'⁸⁰ — fits quite appositely, is a force waiting to be discovered, a force that blesses with its touch those who allow it to devour them, to embrace their being:

Does not kill. The tiger blesses with a fang.
The tiger does not kill but opens a path
Neither of Life nor of Death:
The tiger within the tiger:
The tiger of the Earth.

O Tiger!

O Brother of the Viper!

O Beast in Blossom!

'Earth-Numb' concludes itself with 'A God' (*M* 164-165), a potent description of Christ's crucifixion, even though Hughes' Christ is much more similar to that of Nietzsche than to the Christian Christ. The achievement of the crucified man in the poem is his heroic acceptance of pain and of the reality of his death and it is this that converts him into a god, standing head and shoulders above those too weak to find the will to effect a similar transmutation. We are told that he is 'helpless as a lamb / Which cannot be born' and yet this helplessness is due to the fact that as an ideal superhuman figure he is rejected by the community. He is not allowed to bloom and to lead, but instead 'Pain was pulled down over his eyes like a fool's hat'. The poem implicitly refers to the crown of thorns, the spear and the nails, but it also subtly evokes the picture of a man strapped to an electric chair. In the reference to 'a fool's hat' one finds a resonance of the executionary practice of hooding both executioner and executed so that in this

way the former can protect his identity and shield himself from any feelings of compassion elicited by the humanity of his victim, this recalling Shakespeare's Abhorson, the abhorred whorson engendered by the hypocritical legal system and who abhors the latter for imposing upon him the task of enacting its injustices. The idea of the jested Christ or the Ecce Homo in the praetorium is also hinted at.

The crucified Christ is 'on display' and in this we find a jibe targeted at society's thirst for all the forms of violence and humiliation the human mind can conceive of in order to maim and liquidate others, especially those judged to be a threat to its foundations and practices. However, Hughes' Christ, wise enough to play the fool, is beyond the inane preoccupations of his herd of tormentors:

His patience had meaning only for him
Like the sanguine upside-down grin
Of a hanging half-pig.

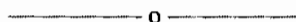
By means of these lines Hughes seems to draw some form of a parallel between Christ and the slaughtered creature in 'A View of a Pig' from *Lupercal*. But most importantly, they remind us of the bull's 'beheld future / Founding in his quiet' (L 30) in 'The Bull Moses'. However, Hughes' Christ is unable to fully realise what his death has transformed him into:

He could not understand what had happened

Or what he had become.

Christ cannot acknowledge the fact that he has become the God of the Christian religion, whom the poet views as being as despicable and as murderous as Socratic rationality. The poem reminds us of the Elder Zosima's view in *The Brothers Karamazov*: 'The human race fails to accept its prophets and does them to death, but men love their martyrs and honour those whom they have martyred'.⁸¹ For Hughes, this love and honour is merely a perversion and weakening of the dead hero, a way of twisting him to one's desired shape. What

Hughes' Christ probably knows about himself is that through his *ubermenschlich* acts of endurance he has become an ideal figure on a par to the gods; he has transcended himself beyond human limitations, metamorphosised himself by means of suffering and self-sacrifice. In this aspect he is comparable to the falcon-like persona of 'The Risen', but whereas the latter strikes us as having become entirely divine and thus impossible, Hughes' Christ is nothing more than a transfigured human being.



Moortown ends with a sequence of twelve poems whose aim is to put forward a message of hope in the individual's ability to transcend himself beyond the stagnancy of a life geared towards the constant repression of spiritual and psychic potential. 'Adam and the Sacred Nine' according to Scigaj 'testifies to the power of human speech to transform the self and to ascend beyond the mundane. Here Hughes adapts the shaman's ecstatic flight to enlist supernatural aid for the purpose of creating one's "world" anew and healing self and community'.⁸² The nine birds sent to Adam by God, as Hughes points out, constitute 'his guardian exemplary spirit' and they are meant to goad him to 'pull himself together and get moving'.⁸³ The birds are shamanic guiding spirits and they help Adam 'to abolish profane historical time and return to the reempowering prelapsarian moment of unity with all creatures'.⁸⁴ Each bird in the sequence is characterised by a quality that is also shared by the spiritual and psychic being of human individuals. Each bird seeks to revivify these qualities inherent in Adam but buried deep within him or denied. Adam, the navel-less omphalos, is the father of humankind, but he is also the unevolved self in all of us, a self awaiting development and perfection. As Robinson germanely remarks, Adam's 'Fall is to be understood not in its biblical sense, as a once-and-for-all event at the start of history, but as a psycho-spiritual metaphor indicating a recurring state of maladaptation and lack of attunement and purpose'.⁸⁵

In the first poem (*M* 169) we are told that the song's wish is not to possess material reality 'Through which its vibrations ran' nonetheless and 'nevertheless ruffled'. In material nature the song exists already; what it seeks is that which presently is bereft of its magic: the human individual who without it lacks reality:

The song made of joy
Searched, even like a lament

For what did not exist

Pouring out over the empty grave
Of what was not yet born

In 'Adam' (*M* 170) we see the male persona 'defeated, low as water'; he lies prostrated in the mud, and the earth for him is as much a prison as it is for the protagonist of 'Seven Dungeon Songs'. Like Prometheus he dreams of artificial glory not realising that what he dreams of is not consistent with the reality of his being, which he has yet to learn to accept and transfer into a unity with the dimension that has procreated him:

Rigged only with twigs
He dreamed advancement of bulldozers and cranes.

Wrapped in peach skin and bruise
He dreamed the religion of the diamond body.

We are told that 'even his morse had ceased' and this reminds us of the destructive limits of the Socratic machine guns in 'Tiger Psalm'. Adam's dreams are visions of lofty and dynamic states of being that are completely antithetical to his inert position. The reference to 'the diamond body' in one such vision is not entirely meant to exhibit Adam's foolishness since it is a sort of premonition of the hero's final state in poems 11 and 12. Jung points out that the Oriental idea of the diamond body is similar to the alchemical notion of the '*corpus subtile*, a transfigured and resurrected body, i.e., a body that was at the same time spirit'.⁸⁶ The diamond body is 'in other words, the attainment of immortality through the

transformation of the body'.⁸⁷ Adam dreams of 'flying echelons of steel', but he is 'Open as a leafless bush to wind and rain'; he is 'Like a bitten black-wet vole' and unless this frailty is accepted as the truth about his being, Adam will trudge in misery everlastingly, dreaming and weeping. However, he is saved from such a fruitless condition by the birds' arrival, which are meant 'to remind man of his destiny and obligation', man being 'the pinnacle of the evolutionary process'.⁸⁸ Robinson points out that 'Whereas throughout pre-human evolution life developed as though automatically, now the burden of further development has settled in part onto man's shoulders. He himself has been charged with the task of fulfilling nature in himself'.⁸⁹ Adam is saved and gains clear-sightedness thanks to the fact that he manages to overcome his hubris.

The first bird to visit Adam is the Falcon (*M* 171), which in 'The Risen' symbolises the transfigured, perfect state of being. The Falcon is characterised by determination, strength and a sense of endurance. Nothing is impossible for it and every goal can be achieved, every limit can be surpassed, even by force of will alone.

The gunmetal feathers
Of would not be put aside, would not falter.

The wing knuckles
Of dividing the mountain, of hurling the world away behind him.

With the bullet brow
Of burying himself headfirst and ahead
Of his delicate bones, into the target
Collision.

Juxtaposed with this description, Adam strikes us as a complete contrast, a vessel of weakness and frivolity, a dreamer lacking the will to make dreams come true. However, Adam and the Falcon share a common origin: they are both creatures arisen out of the earth; when 'the loose, hot flutter of earth' is broken down 'To its component parts' one can still achieve 'the reconstitution of Falcon'.

The Skylark in the fourth poem (*M* 172) is a symbol of joy and this divine joy emanates from it by means of its song, something that Adam has yet to discover within himself:

With its song
A labor of its whole body
Thatching the sun with bird joy

.....

With its song
Erected between dark and dark

The lark that lives and dies
In the service of its crest.

The Skylark beautifies the universe, dispels the bleakness, and as its sole intent this is most sufficient. In *Wodwo* the skylark's tenacity is glorified; it is a quality which puts the speaker of 'Skylarks' (*W* 168-171) ill at ease: 'My idleness curdles / Seeing the lark labour near its cloud'. The bird is 'leaden / With muscle' and it incessantly battles gravity in order to reach upwards. It is

A towered bird, shot through the crested head
With the command, Not die

But climb....

In the *Wodwo* poem the birds attain transcendence only after the 'plummeting dead drop', an annihilating ordeal that the human is terrified of, but which the skylarks, like the hawk and the acrobats, can endure due to their being 'Conscience perfect'.

The Wild Duck (*M* 173) like most of Hughes' creatures is a bridge between earth and sky, between dualities, given that Hughes' idea of healing is partly that of obsessively reconciling binary opposites. The Duck's main characteristic is that of constantly journeying forward to new horizons, unflinchingly leaving behind her the darkness in favour of the light.

The Wild Duck, fracturing egg-zero,
 Left her mother the snow in her shawl of stars
 Abandoned her father the black wind in his beard of stars

Got up out of the ooze before dawn

Now hangs her whispering arrival
 Between earth-glitter and heaven-glitter

.....
 And flies into dew
 Through the precarious crack of light

Quacking Wake Wake

The command at the end of the poem has the purpose of encouraging the hero to open his eyes and face the truth about himself and the world he lives in. The Wild Duck, one of only three female birds in the sequence, urges Adam to shake himself free of the pinions he has attached to himself by means of his adherence to a belief in the 'echelons of steel'. Adam must become like Adonais 'awakened from the dream of life',⁹⁰ he must journey out of 'the frosty dark', discovering in himself the means by which to find the doorway of light. One of the first things that Adam must learn to accept as an intrinsic part of human reality is the actuality of death.

The Swift in poem 6 (*M* 174-175) possesses the ability to transcend itself beyond its physical make-up in order to pass 'through the lightning-split in the great oak of light'. This constitutes a loop with the previous poem and reminds us of the 'Tree of light' in 'Seven Dungeon Songs'. The Swift's existential condition is the one Hughes perceives to be the target for true human endeavour:

Casts aside the two-arm two-leg article—
 The pain instrument
 Flesh and soft entrails and nerves, and is off.

.....

One wing below mineral limit
One wing above dream and number

Shears between life and death....

This state of being endows the Swift with the power of communicating with the anagogical: 'Meteorite puncturing the veils of worlds'. Its journey through the sacred realm, like the shaman's ecstatic flight through the spirit world, rewards the swift with that kind of wisdom and energy that is unprovided by any other means.

Till the Swift
Who falls out of the blindness, swims up
From the molten, rejoins itself

Shadow to shadow—resumes proof, nests
Papery ashes
Of the uncontainable burning.

In 'The Unknown Wren' (*M* 176-177) we are told that the Wren is 'A blur of throbblings' and 'A battle frenzy, a transfiguration'. He sings and 'His song sings him, every feather is a tongue / He is a song-ball of tongues'. The Wren has achieved that state desired by the male protagonist of 'Seven Dungeon Songs'. The fact that the 'Wren is singing Wren—Wren of Wrens!' makes the bird 'more Wren-like / As harder sunlight, and realer earth light', an amplification or defamiliarisation of the ordinary. The bird in the poem is the prototype of his species, 'Wren of Wrens', just like Adam is the prototype of all human beings. However, whereas the Wren is symbolic of a perfect harmony with the material world and of a complete understanding of his being, qualities that make 'the lifted sun and the drenched woods rejoice with trembling', in Adam all this is presently absent. Cooper points out that the wren 'in the West...is often called the King of Birds' and that 'it can take the place of the dove as representing Spirit'.⁹¹

In the next poem (*M* 178), the Owl possesses the same kind of mythic stillness as the birds in 'The Hawk in the Rain' and 'Hawk Roosting'. The bird symbolises self-possession and a potent sense of fulfilment. The Owl is almost an embodiment of the universe or of the cosmic natural energy at the core of space:

Only the center moves.

Constellations stand in awe. And the trees very still, the fields very still
As the Owl becalms deeper
To stillness
Two eyes, fixed in the heart of heaven.

We are told that 'Nothing is neglected, in the Owl's stare'; the fixed patterns and cycles of life and existence are respected for they are essential and 'inescapable':

Heaven screams. Earth screams. Heaven eats. Earth is eaten.

And earth eats and heaven is eaten.

Both the Owl and the Falcon are predators, but whereas the latter kills because killing is inbuilt within its very nature much like the thrushes and the shark, killing for the Owl signifies pain. Death is the meaning of its existence, however, it seems to be uncomfortable with it. It seems able to detach itself from an 'automatic / Purpose' (*L* 44), just like man is able to contemplate upon his actions and not blindly pay heed to instinct. Hence killing for the Owl is its suffering. Robinson remarks that 'The silent floating and listening between kills is a healing destined never to be complete; each kill is a reopening of the wound of existence, as in a Titanic punishment'.⁹² In this we can perceive a parallel with man's own pursuit of healing. Hughes' poem tries to bind together the ambivalent aspects of the Owl as a symbol. In such traditions as the Amerindian and Graeco-Roman ones, the bird symbolises wisdom and divination, whereas in the Christian, Chinese, Hindu and Mexican ones, the owl is the bird of death and darkness.

In 'The Dove Came' (*M* 179) we see how throughout history every time this bird entered the human realm with 'Her breast big with rainbows / She was

knocked down'. She is knocked down over and over again, but her resilient maternal instinct and her *uberrima fides* in man cannot be subdued; as a symbol of love and peace she sacrifices herself incessantly.

She gave the flesh of her breast, and they ate her
She gave the milk of her blood, they drank her....

These lines remind us of Christian transubstantiation, the dove being the Christian symbol for the Holy Spirit, while the Dove's 'voice of thunder' reminds us of Eliot's *The Waste Land* and it is interesting to suggest that Hughes' bird like Eliot's God is demanding charity, self-control and sympathy. In the poem's seventh stanza we are told that the 'Mouth was a disembowelled bird / Where the tongue tried to stir like a heart'. This connotes the idea of the disembowelled shaman who like the dove seeks the redemption of humankind, or of the artist who heals by means of his creations. In the next stanza we are told that 'the Dove alit / In the body of thorns' and the image of Christ attaining the status of saviour through suffering and sacrifice springs to mind. In the poem's final stanza the images that helped construct the symbolism of the Dove are compressed together into one subtle statement telling us that the divine bird has immersed her beauty into pain out of her love for and faith in Adam. Her numinousness is generated by her act of absolute sacrifice:

Now deep in the dense body of thorns
A soft thunder
Nests her rainbows.

In the sequence's tenth poem (*M* 180), Adam is awakened and nudged out of contemplation and into action by the Crow that 'lifted his eyelid / And whispered in his ear', achieving that which the Wild Duck had striven for by means of its 'Wake Wake'. This poem posits to us two enigmatic questions:

Who has divined the Crow's love whisper?
Or the Crow's news?

For Scigaj 'the Crow whispers survival'⁹³ and this answer is tenable if one looks at Hughes' 1970-1972 unfinished sequence.

The penultimate poem of the sequence is 'And the Phoenix Has Come' (M 181), whose tone is a prophetic and mystical one. The Phoenix is a revelation: 'Its voice / Is the blade of the desert, a fighting of light'. The speech of the Phoenix is a glorious annunciation: 'Its voice burns in a rich heap / Of mountains that seem to melt'. The lush and powerful imagery is meant to accentuate language's ability to revitalise the imagination. The Phoenix's 'Flesh' is 'The altar of its death and its rebirth' and the most striking thing about this bird is that 'it offers itself up' willingly, desiring to be continuously blessed and regenerated by the fire that blinds the jaguar. Unlike Lawrence's phoenix, Hughes' bird is referred to by no gender specific pronoun. This is one important point of dissimilarity between the Phoenix and the other birds in the sequence and all the other creatures in the rest of Hughes' oeuvre. The poem pushes forward the idea of androgyny or hermaphroditism, the condition in which dualities are combined into wholeness. Furthermore, the title and the poem are written in the present form, connoting the idea that the Phoenix is a phenomenon that is constantly available, that comes to us whenever we deign to call for it. The poem's final stanza speaks as much about the reborn Phoenix as about the reborn Adam, who has now embraced as part of his humanity the divine qualities revealed to him by the nine mystical visitants:

And naked the newborn
Laughs in the blaze

'Adam and the Sacred Nine' and *Moortown* itself come to a conclusion with 'The Sole of a Foot' (M 182), a poem that shares with us the idea that in spite of all the heights the human individual may ascend to he will always remain rooted to the earth, 'Pressed to world-rock, flat / Warm'. The latter gesture is similar to that of Prometheus when he 'treads // On the dusty peacock film where the world floats'. Adam's transmutation is indicated by the acts of getting up on

his feet and speaking. As Robinson points out 'standing and walking are man's way of flying, an equivalent, not an opposite, to the birds' quintessential activities'.⁹⁴ Having discovered the value of speech the hero can now sing and thus effect healing for others and for himself. In a way he is posited as having pioneered the use of poetry for the latter purpose. The earth, which Adam perceived as a prison in the second poem and beyond which he dreamt of transcending himself, is greeted as his genuine place and source of meaning. The earth is the womb from which Adam emerged and it is only with the nurturing of the feminine force of nature that evolution and development are possible. The 'meeting' between earth and man is 'Comfortable'. Man is the rock's 'first acquaintance', its 'first host', and he greets it and feels 'gladdened' and 'grateful / To the rock'. The rock was once 'star-blaze' and is now earth-numb; the cycle continues in that it is the earth that boosts Adam to ascension, even though he knows that the earth will always be a true home for him:

I am no wing
To tread emptiness.
I was made

For you.

Notes

- ¹ Vasko Popa, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Anne Pennington and Francis R. Jones (1997; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 2003), p. 250.
- ² C.G. Jung, *The Collected Works: Psychology and Alchemy*, trans. by R.F.C. Hull, ed. by Herbert Read and others, 2nd edn, vol. 12 (1953; London: Routledge, 2000), p. 54.
- ³ *Ibid.*, p. 449.
- ⁴ J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (1978; London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 124.
- ⁵ Jung, p. 104.
- ⁶ Craig Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 147.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁸ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers – G. K. Hall, 1991), p. 122.
- ⁹ Craig Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd: Moortown Elegies', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), p. 262.
- ¹⁰ Robert Frost, *Selected Poems*, ed. by Ian Hamilton (1971; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 43.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Thomas West, *Ted Hughes* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 96.
- ¹² Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd: Moortown Elegies', p. 269.
- ¹³ Nicholas Bishop, *Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 219.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 224-225.
- ¹⁵ Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 249.
- ¹⁶ Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd: Moortown Elegies', p. 262.
- ¹⁷ Scigaj, p. 123.
- ¹⁸ Robinson, 'The Good Shepherd: Moortown Elegies', pp. 278-279.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 275.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 281.
- ²² Scigaj, p. 122.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.
- ²⁴ West, p. 105.
- ²⁵ Bishop, p. 222.
- ²⁶ Cooper, pp. 186-187.
- ²⁷ Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*, trans. by George Thomson (1932; New York: Dover Publications, 1995), pp. 20-22.
- ²⁸ Scigaj, p. 125.

- ²⁹ Jung, p. 169.
- ³⁰ Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes: A Guide to the Poems* (Portmarnock, County Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1981), p. 134.
- ³¹ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 158.
- ³² Hirschberg, p. 130.
- ³³ Patrick White, *Voss* (1957; London: Readers Union, 1959), p. 475.
- ³⁴ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 151.
- ³⁵ Scigaj, p. 125.
- ³⁶ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 160.
- ³⁷ Ibid.
- ³⁸ Aeschylus, p. 6.
- ³⁹ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 162.
- ⁴⁰ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 152.
- ⁴¹ Ibid, p. 153.
- ⁴² Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 163.
- ⁴³ Ibid, p. 165.
- ⁴⁴ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Complete Poems* (London: The Softback Preview, 1993), p. 174.
- ⁴⁵ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 156.
- ⁴⁶ Janos Pilinszky, *The Desert of Love*, trans. by Janos Csokits and Ted Hughes (1976; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1989), p. 11.
- ⁴⁷ Scigaj, p. 126.
- ⁴⁸ Pilinszky, pp. 12-13.
- ⁴⁹ Hirschberg, p. 140.
- ⁵⁰ Quoted in A.C.H. Smith, *Orghast at Persepolis* (New York: The Viking Press, 1972), p. 94.
- ⁵¹ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 154.
- ⁵² Ibid, p. 155.
- ⁵³ Aeschylus, p. 21.
- ⁵⁴ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (1955; London: The Folio Society, 1998), p. 544.
- ⁵⁵ Jung, p. 419.
- ⁵⁶ Sagar, *The Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 156.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Quoted in Scigaj, p. 127.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid.
- ⁶⁰ Quoted in West, p. 96.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962* (1963; London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 201.
- ⁶³ West, p. 102.
- ⁶⁴ Richard Church and Mildred Bozman, eds, *Poems of Our Time: 1900-1942* (1945; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1950), p. 67.

- ⁶⁵ Gifford and Roberts, p. 244.
- ⁶⁶ Cooper, p. 194.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 117.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 117-118.
- ⁶⁹ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 170.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid, p. 171.
- ⁷¹ Ibid, p. 172.
- ⁷² Gifford and Roberts, p. 245.
- ⁷³ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 175.
- ⁷⁴ Scigaj, p. 129.
- ⁷⁵ Cooper, p. 172.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid, p. 173.
- ⁷⁷ Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 158.
- ⁷⁸ Eliot, p. 97.
- ⁷⁹ Scigaj, p. 130.
- ⁸⁰ Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Rose Window and Other Verse from New Poems*, ed. by Ferris Cook (Boston and New York: Bulfinch Press – Little, Brown and Company, 1997), p. 145.
- ⁸¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. by David McDuff (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1993), p. 371.
- ⁸² Scigaj, p. 131.
- ⁸³ Quoted in Ibid.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, pp. 131-132.
- ⁸⁵ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 181.
- ⁸⁶ Jung, p. 427-428.
- ⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 428.
- ⁸⁸ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, pp. 184-185.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Shelley, p. 314.
- ⁹¹ Cooper, p. 195.
- ⁹² Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 191.
- ⁹³ Scigaj, p. 132.
- ⁹⁴ Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being*, p. 193.



Figure 3 – Baskin's drawing of a phoenix
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CHAPTER 4

Epically Poised in Heaven's Machinery: *River* (1983)

The water is deep. Sometimes from far
down invisible messages arrive.
Often it seems it is for more than fish
that we seek; we wait for the

withheld answer to an insoluble
problem. Life is short.

R.S. Thomas – 'Fishing'¹

By means of *River*, Hughes once more underscores the importance of a holistic mode of perception and ecologically attuned way of life. In terms of the idea that poetry can provide one with some of the necessary guidelines and means by which to attain the healing of one's psychic and spiritual being and transcend oneself onto a plane that exists in concordance with external reality, *River* marks a high peak of Hughes' lifelong project.

More than any other collection by Hughes, *River* is mainly concerned with attesting the importance of the preservation and love of nature. Some comments of his from 1970 in regard to conservation exhibit a need to believe that contemporary civilisation is truly engaged with caring for the material world:

The time for Conservation has certainly come. But Conservation, our sudden alertness to the wholeness of nature, and the lateness of the hour, is only the crest of a deeper excitement and readiness. The idea of nature as a single organism is not new. It was man's first great thought, the basic intuition of most primitive theologies... Suddenly, within the last few years, it has re-emerged...this is what we are seeing: something that was unthinkable only ten years ago, except as a poetic dream: the re-emergence of Nature as the Great Goddess of mankind, and the Mother of all life (*WP* 132-133).

With hindsight we can judge the poet's remarks as being equal to wishful thinking, a 'poetic dream' that peradventure will remain unfulfilled. Even though people have grown much more aware of the significance of conservation still it remains true that no great leaps have been made since the late hour in which Hughes expressed his rather hasty views about the environmental revolution he sensed taking place around him. Presently, 'the lateness of the hour' is much more preponderant. In spite of the scientific discoveries in the field of subatomic physics, showing how everything is in a way bound together, with the slightest change in one variable leaving an impact on other variables, our civilisation still harbours a potent sense of *laissez faire* and complacency, a collective strain of *Oblomovitis*.

River was written over a six-year period and the earliest poem in the sequence is 'Whiteness', which dates from 1977. The first Faber edition carries a number of photographs by Peter Keen and in this the book is the second such endeavour by Hughes, the first being his collaboration with Fay Godwin on *Remains of Elmet*. Keen's photographs help to further consolidate the sequence and in spite of the fact that 'the poet and the photographer hardly work together, page to page...the mood that settles over *River*, in pictures and words, is unified'.² *River* is probably a reanimation of a dead project by Hughes, 'a long poem about England...centring on a river as the bloodstream of England, and an adder as the repressed elemental life of the country'.³ In the present sequence the poet 'retain[s] the adder as earth serpent, and the river itself as the blood and lymph of the land's body'.⁴ The volume's contents are structured round the concept of the solstitial year, which is a predominant feature of many religions and aboriginal belief systems. In this, the sequence was heralded by *Season Songs*. According to Skea 'The natural rhythms of the river's year provide [Hughes] with a unifying theme and a rich source of natural imagery: and by linking these rhythmic patterns to events of the cosmic year, and weaving into them allusions to common religious and mythological epics, he achieves a broader, healing purpose and

makes this work an extension of the shamanic/alchemical task he undertook⁵ in earlier work. Scigaj remarks that 'As *Crow* is Hughes's *Iliad*, an account of a destructive battle with the environment caused by scientific objectivity and alienated instinct, so *River*...is his *Odyssey*, an absolutely stunning poetic voyage that teaches us how to refresh our senses and, more importantly, save our planet'.⁶ For Bo Gustavsson if 'The function of myth is precisely to reintegrate man through ritual into the sacred order of the universe', then *River* 'stands as the fulfilment and logical outcome of his whole career because here Hughes finally succeeds in his enterprise to reestablish contact with the sacred order of the universe'.⁷ This is due to the fact that 'Seeking to regain contact with the sacred Hughes descends in his early work into the unconscious and into nature, and in his later work he goes through a series of initiations that finally lead to the long-sought for illumination in *River*'.⁸

Central to the overall conceptual framework of this sequence is the idea of animism, the belief that the material world possesses a spiritual reality that human beings must constantly respect and stay in contact with. Shamans possess the ability of tapping the energies emanated by this reality for the benefit of the whole community and this is one of the reasons for which the poet often has recourse to shamanistic concepts. To a small extent animism is related to the alchemical idea that all matter including metal has an organic life and thus is capable of growth. The advent of a Christian-Newtonian-Western ideology in those societies in which animism was woven into the very foundations of culture was of shattering impact. The Western mentality that nature was something to be usurped and exploited for purely utilitarian purposes ridiculed the antithetical position of love and respect for and responsible co-operation with sacred nature. God's command to conquer and reign over the material world and all its creatures in the first chapter of the Genesis was and still is being interpreted literally by those who should see it as an encouragement to utilise their gift of consciousness for the purposes of recovering and perpetuating the paradise lost soon after the inception

of humankind. For Scigaj '*River* is an ecological primer about learning to perceive the animistic energies that the fisherman persona experiences in nature',⁹ and for Gustavsson 'In our secular age Hughes has the courage as well as the ability to take on the archetypal role of the hierophant: the revealer of the sacred. And by so doing he opens up a source of spiritual renewal for modern man'.¹⁰ Hughes says that 'Streams, rivers, ponds, lakes *without fish* communicate to me one of the ultimate horrors – the poisoning of the wells, death at the source of all that is meant by water' (*TB* 184). He admits that in his childhood 'rare trout' in the canal 'preoccupied me, as a lifeline might'. Throughout his life the poet always felt the need to ensure the flourishing of nature as the lifeline par excellence and *River* is one of the most potent ways by which Hughes tries to guarantee the survival of this lifeline. The volume is most similar to the farming poems of *Moortown* because whereas in 'Prometheus on His Crag', 'Adam and the Sacred Nine' and *Cave Birds* we find a male protagonist journeying from a fallen state to heroic superhuman proportions, the personas of *River* and 'Moortown' are mythic admirable figures from the very beginning of these sequences. However, in spite of this we never see them resting on their laurels, but always constantly pursuing wholeness, managing to imbibe of it through the very pursuit itself. Unlike Hughes' other questers, the fisherman persona of *River* is conscious of his flaws, he is a 'pilgrim' willing to mend his ways and attain spiritual rejuvenation and a fusion of opposites. Fishing is an activity by which he can arrive closer at the desired lapis and the salmon's ability to rediscover its birthplace is analogous to the fisherman's quest for the source of wisdom and wellbeing. Just as one individual salmon manages to guarantee only one turn of an unending cycle, so humanity's representative can only manage to achieve a portion of all that is on offer. Just 'like the salmon, his journey, his struggles and the sacrifice, must be constantly repeated'.¹¹

In symbology the river represents both death and life. In its former aspect, the river, in a Heraclitean manner, stands for the flux and mutability of the

microcosm, whereas the River of Life is associated with the divine, the macrocosm. The river as a symbol of death or of the point of transition between one realm and the other features strongly in Dante's *Inferno*. Cooper points out that 'The "return to the source", symbolized by the river flowing upstream, is the return to the pristine, paradisaical state, to find enlightenment'.¹² In this we are reminded of *Alastor*, in which at first the Poet attempts to sail upstream in order to pursue his vision back to the origins of human consciousness and beyond. However, when he realises that the goal of his quest is impossible to achieve he goes downstream towards death, his failure plunging the world in further misery. Just like a mystical doorway the river's mouth provides one with 'access to another realm, to the ocean of unity'.¹³ In Revelations 22: 1-2 the river of life issues from the throne of God and of the Lamb and it nurtures the tree of life, which produces a single fruit every month and whose leaves are for the healing of nations. In Qabalism the higher realm provides the lower one with spiritual nourishment by means of the rivers of life, while in Hinduism rivers confer purification once the individual immerses himself in a ritualistic fashion. In some shamanistic cultures the Axis Mundi conjoining the three cosmic levels takes the form of a river. For example, the Evenks, Tungus-speaking people living around the Yenisey and Lena rivers in Siberia, believe that the mythical Clan River, which originates in the upper world and extends to the lower one, is the vertical axis. Whereas in his previous volumes Hughes focused primarily on the earth as symbolic of elemental and subliminal energies, in *River* water fully represents the spiritual dimension of nature as well as being symbolic of the unconscious and of the archetypal female, the anima. In this sequence the *unio mystica* celebrated in the form of a marriage in *Cave Birds* once more 'stands as the goal of both the mystic way and the mythic quest'¹⁴ and attesting to this is the fact that a number of poems utilise matrimonial and bridal imagery and metaphors. In other pieces the river is imaged as a goddess, a maternal force that inspires the initiates and acolytes of its cult, blessing them with its energy. For Skea the volume exhibits

'the inspirational influence'¹⁵ of the Celtic Brigantia, who was associated with the therapeutic effects of river water. She is related to the goddess Brigid, who for the Celts was a goddess of both rivers and poetry. However, whatever the representation of the river, union with the sacred, primeval other and the healing this bestows remains one of the poet's and the volume's topmost priorities.

In 'Four March Watercolours' (R 22-28), the speaker presents us with a picture of a river coming back to life after having lied frozen during the winter. Everything awaits it, most especially the earth that without the river is like an enervated lover:

The blue

Is a daze of bubbly fire – naked
 Ushering and nursing of electricity
 With caressings of air. Earth,
 Mud-stained, stands in sparkling beggary.

.....

The land hangs, tremulous.
 It pays full attention to each crow-caw,
 Turning full-face to the entering, widening,
 Flame-cored, burrowing havoc of a jet.

The river is the 'intricate engine' whose 'full-bore, underground' is regenerative for everything on earth. Its power is explosive – 'Bursting bales of river' – and grows with the auguring of spring. When spring finally makes it we are told that this is the 'first morning / Of real convalescence'. After having gone through another winter, the trees 'relax, / Enjoy the fraternity of survival, / Even a hope of new leaf'. But for the river there is no rest; it must churn out its energy for the benefit of the environment it snakes through. Images of purgation and redemption are compounded together in the description of the river's activity:

The river's hard at it,
 Tries and tries to wash and revive
 A bedraggle of dirty bones. Primitive, radical
 Engine of earth's renewal. A solution

Of all dead ends – an all-out evacuation
 To the sea. All debts
 Of wings and fronds, of eyes, nectar, roots, hearts
 Returning, cancelled, to solvency –
 Back to the sea's big re-think.

The river's 'power-coils' provide 'replenish[ment]', but due to 'the snow-melt', which 'Is an invisible restraint', the salmon 'are in a coma' within the river. In order to free themselves and join the rhythm of the water

They have to toil,
 Trapped face-workers, in their holes of position
 Under the mountain of water.

When the salmon manage to overcome their concussion then the water and the light merge harmoniously with the fish at the centre, the result of this bounteous transaction, which throughout *River* has the semblance of a rhythmic ritual:

And the long ropes of light
 Hauling the river's cargo
 The oldest commerce.

According to Scigaj 'Most often Hughes portrays the spiritual component of the river's animistic energy through light imagery. Light imagery coalesces with river water regularly to imbue riverscapes with a numinous aura, a sense of the sacredness of the hydrological cycle'.¹⁶ In 'Flesh of Light' (*R* 16) the river is described as having been spilled 'From a core-flash, from a thunder-silence / In the sun'. Like a gift from the gods it has 'fallen' to earth in order to resuscitate the spirit of nature and infuse all beings with energy:

Cattle stumble into it. Lift muzzles
 Unspooling the glimmer.
 Dark bodies dense with boiling light.

Something new-born crawls, a phosphorescence
 Illuminates the underleaves of stolid
 Oak and the quivering iris.

Everything is 'magnetised by light // In these coils of aura'. When the human individual 'peer[s] down' into it he sees 'a self reflected, a spectre', he recognises the insubstantiality of his present self as well as a future, much better evolved self that does not yet exist but can do so if the individual allows the river to heal him. The river is 'the sun's oiled snake', comparable to Aesculapius' healing serpent, the kundalini and the alchemical salamander and therefore it is 'The medicinal, mercury creature' with 'rainbow scales', connotive of the *cauda pavonis*. In this we find an allusion to the caduceus, the staff of Mercury or Hermes and an emblem of the medical profession, as well as to Moses' rod which became a powerful serpent. According to Campbell, Numbers 21: 5-9 is 'to be read as a prefiguration'¹⁷ of John 3: 14-15, in which Christ compares himself to Moses' serpent, both Christ and the serpent being meant to provide healing or salvation. Christ on the cross is to some extent comparable to the caduceus and it is noteworthy that in Ophitic doctrine, Christ is the serpent. The river mutates and transforms itself, is constantly reborn: 'it sheds // And refreshes, spasming and whispering'. Coming from the sky it fetters together opposite dimensions and acts as a fundamental part of the overall structure:

Spinal cord of the prone, adoring land,
Rapt

To the roots of the sea,
To the blossoming
Of the sea.

The river can be wild and ugly, as it is described in the first few lines of 'Salmon-taking Times' (R 34):

After a routing flood-storm, the river
Was a sounder of loud muddy pigs
Flushed out of hillsides.

However, in the same poem is also described the river's most characteristic appearance, which is brought out by means of bridal imagery. In *River* Hughes frequently swathes feminine beauty and daintiness in a religious aura when referring to water:

the river emerges
In glistenings, and gossamer, bridal veils,
And hovers over itself – there is a wedding
Delicacy –

so delicate
I touch it and its beauty-frailty crumples
To a smear of wet, a strengthless wreckage
Of dissolving membranes – and the air is ringing.

It is like a religious moment, slightly dazing.

It is like a shower of petals of eglantine.

The reference to 'a religious moment' suggests the idea that unity between dualities and creative wholeness is possible solely through ritual. A link between *River* and Hughes' earlier sequences is found in the fact that in this opus 'The female personification of the landscape is frequent...so that the poems in which this happens cannot be considered apart from the realignment of our religious sensibilities towards the feminine which is attempted in *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*'.¹⁸

In the volume's eponymic poem (*R* 74) we find that the river is comparable to a saviour sent by heaven in order to preach the truth, and even though this mission is one steeped in torment there is nothing that can restrain the spirit from infusing the earth with goodness:

Fallen from heaven, lies across
The lap of his mother, broken by world.

But water will go on
Issuing from heaven

In dumbness uttering spirit brightness
Through its broken mouth.

Biblical imagery is an intrinsic part of this poem and its purpose is to draw parallels between Christ's regenerative function and that of nature in the form of its hydrological systems. The above-quoted first stanza is an unmistakable allusion to something like a pieta, a Christian one most probably. By means of it, Hughes is putting forward the notion that even though Christ was compelled to prematurely terminate his redemptive task on earth, another heavenly phenomenon will not be so easily subdued. The river may be 'Scattered in a million pieces and buried', but this shall not annihilate it, for its ability to resurrect itself 'at a sign in the sky' is everlasting. In this way the river destroys death's dominion and just like Prometheus pays the price for the sins of humankind:

It will rise, in a time after times,
After swallowing death and the pit
It will return stainless

For the delivery of this world.

Like all of nature, the river desires humanity's salvation and that is why it is constantly 'watching men', 'a god' constantly willing to revitalise our putrefying spiritual, psychic and physical being. The poem's final stanza informs us of what this saviour is able to offer us once we choose to follow its course of life and in this Hughes might be alluding to the river as a forgotten or unworshiped god in the first part of 'The Dry Salvages'. The final lines of Hughes' poem are an echo of an idea expressed in Revelations 21: 4, but which must be interpreted in terms of nature's plan for all beings, which is dissimilar to that of a Christian afterlife since the latter entails a complete detachment from material reality:

It is a god, and inviolable.

Immortal. And will wash itself of all deaths.

The river's regenerative properties in regard to the creatures that depend upon it are celebrated in 'The Merry Mink' (R 32), in which the mink 'topples into the river' and the latter invigorates him, gives him the energy to 'Make...love / Eight hours at a go'. In consequence he seems 'deathless', entirely perfect:

My doings and my pelt,
He says, are a Platonic idea

Where I live with God.

In his poetry Hughes emphasises the idea that all living things and phenomena in the natural world possess both a physical and an anagogical dimension, just like the dual reality of the elements used in such a ritual as that of transubstantiation. In 'West Dart' (R 58), for example, it is pointed out that the river

spills from the Milky Way, spiked with light,
It fuses the flash-gripped earth –

The spicy torrent, that seems to be water
Which is spirit and blood.

In 'Under the Hill of Centurions' (R 36), 'The river is in a resurrection fever' and the ones to benefit from this are the cock minnows who 'have abandoned contemplation and prayer in the pool's crypt' and have been regaled with transfiguration and a blessing by the mystic power of the river:

A wrestling tress of kingfisher colour,
Steely jostlings, a washed mass of brilliants

Labouring at earth
In the wheel of light –

Ghostly rinsings
A struggle of spirits.

Skea claims that the salmon and the trout in the sequence are 'shamanic guides which move at will through the fluid, mercurial interface between this world and the Otherworld of the imagination... They are the familiars of the Goddess, gaining their life and energy from her waters, absorbing her magical and sinister powers, and sharing her duplicity'.¹⁹ 'Strangers' (R 60) presents us with trout that seem 'Substanceless, flame-shadowed, / Hang in near emptiness of sunlight', even though 'they actually are, under homebody oaks'. The speaker finds it difficult to reconcile their numinous qualities with their biological actuality. The trout, 'fixed and pouring, / Lean in the speed of light', inhabit 'a heaven'. Their symbiosis with nature and the river is complete; they require nothing else and seem to be perpetually mesmerised by the energy of the medium they swim in, that is, until they find themselves yanked out of their element by the fisherman. It is then that their magic starts dissolving while they battle to flee the penurious realm they have been pulled into.

The sea-trout, upstaring, in trance,
Absorb everything and forget it
Into a blank of bliss.

And this is the real samadhi – wordless, levitated.

Till, bulging, a man-shape
Wobbles their firmament.
Now see the holy ones
Shrink their auras, slim, sink, focus, prepare
To scam like trout.

In Hinduism and Buddhism the samadhi is a state of concentration induced by yoga, in which the individual experiences the absolute oneness of the universe. It is also a state attained by the holy man after physical death. Looking at his reflection in the water, the fisherman in a Lacanian fashion becomes aware of his self or, given the context of the poem, becomes aware of his destructive human potential. This awareness marks the first step in the psychological and spiritual growth or transformation process that is unfolded in other poems. In regard to

'Strangers', Bishop remarks upon 'the re-combination of latinate discourse...and the Norse-Celtic inheritance...which Hughes foresees as a linguistic barometer of the attempt at psychological re-combination in poetry', a psychological re-combination of 'the two elements of the Natural firmament, "higher" and "lower"',²⁰ the divine and the physical or instinctual that the 'man-shape' seeks to keep asunder. The poem's final stanza synthesises the trout's numinousness and creaturely fear, positing this as a paradigm of true wholeness.

'An Eel' (R 104), which reminds us of Heaney's 'A Lough Neagh Sequence', presents us with a portrait of a creature that lives in perfect symbiosis with its element. The reverence exhibited by the cock minnows is the eel's speciality and her total identification with the river makes her identity as an eel a mere ornament:

Her whole body
Damascened with identity. This is she
Suspends the Sargasso
In her inmost hope. Her life is a cell
Sealed from event, her patience
Global and furthered with love
By the bending stars as if she
Were earth's sole initiate. Alone
In her millions, the moon's pilgrim,
The nun of water.

The description appended to the eel in the last of the above-quoted lines suggests that the fish is a votaress of the primeval energies of the ocean and the river. Notably, the Egyptian deity Nun represented the chaotic source of life that was imaged as the ocean and which can be seen as being analogous to the *nigredo*. In return for her veneration and submission, the river rewards the eel with distinct, rare qualities, the first of which being found in the suggestion that the fish possesses a hermaphroditic nature: 'The strange part is his head. Her head'. In the speaker's eyes 'The strangely ripened / Domes over the brain' are quite special. Their purpose seems to be that of storing 'some large containment' handed to the

fish by the reality she forms part of. They are described as 'Lobed glands / Of some large awareness' and are not altogether different from the jaguar's burning eyes. The most significant characteristic of the eel is its ability to see what others are constrained from seeing:

And ringed larger
With a vaguer vision, an earlier eye
Behind her eye, paler, blinder,
Inward.

For the speaker, the eel marks a step forward in the evolutionary process. The fish is similar to the hawk in that both creatures 'possess an energy, a power of concentration, and a singleness of purpose that at times makes them superior to humans'.²¹

Eerie the eel's head.
This full, plum-sleeked fruit of evolution.
Beneath it, her snout's a squashed slipper-face,
The mouth grin-long and perfunctory,
Undershot predatory.

The above-quoted lines recall the pike's 'malevolent aged grin' (*L* 48) and the thrushes' ability to be 'Triggered to stirrings beyond sense' (*L* 44).

The speaker's instant of confusion as regards which gender pronoun to use in the poem's opening line is probably not only meant to suggest hermaphroditism, which in alchemy is connotive of a divine state of being, but also to allude to the fact that during its life span an eel undergoes two processes of metamorphosis, the first from a *leptocephalus* into a glass eel and the second from a yellow eel into a silver eel. Furthermore, the fact that the female eel as an elver changes from a seawater fish to a freshwater fish much more readily than the male elver, could contribute to the speaker's choice of pronoun. However, the determining factor is the poet's habitual perception of the river as a female entity and therefore any creature which is inferred to identify entirely with the water is obviously ascribed the river's gender. The reference to the Sargasso Sea is made

because both American and European eels spawn and hatch in this particular area of the Atlantic Ocean. After breeding, adult eels die and it is up to their progeny to continue the millions of years old cycle that began when the Atlantic was but a narrow strait.

In the second part of 'An Eel', the speaker forbears from describing the creature and instead contemplates upon its origins and significance within the overall cosmic pattern. For him the question 'Where does the river come from?' is intrinsically bound to if not synonymous with that concerning the eel: 'The night-nerve of water?' The second stanza refutes the suggestion that eel and river originate from such a source as the 'brimming sun' and in a way this goes counter to the ideas proposed in 'Flesh of Light'. The answer put forward by the speaker of 'An Eel', however, is not all that discrepant. Both speakers see the river and its creatures as fruit of a numinous or divine dimension and both their portraits are apposite metaphors for such a sacred realm.

Where from?

From the bottom of the nothing pool
Sargasso of God
Out of the empty spiral of stars

A glimmering person

The lack of punctuation in these final few lines is meant to suggest the same idea of endlessness to the processes of death and rebirth, renewal, depuration and healing as that suggested by some of the poems in *Cave Birds*. If 'An Eel' together with the rest of *River* was meant as a reminder of how precious is external reality and as a warning that we should desist from engaging in behaviour that is ruinous in its regard, then Hughes' words have to a substantial extent fallen on deaf ears.

The element of the river's watchfulness that is encountered in 'Low Water' and 'The River' is also found in 'After Moonless Midnight' (R 62). The

fisherman steps into the river and seems to enter a ghostly dimension in which everything is scrutinising his every movement:

I waded, deepening, and the fish
Listened for me. They watched my each move
Through their magical skins. In the stillness
Their eyes waited, furious with gold brightness....

It is clear that the speaker is immersing himself in depths unaccustomed to human presences, subliminal, spiritual and natural depths that are unknown to man. The fish's eyes possess the same kind of light we see in the eyes of other creatures illustrated by Hughes. The way the speaker describes his experience elicits the idea that the fish and the river possess evil intents, even though we know from other poems by Hughes that this is merely typical of the human fear of those phenomena that emanate an energy alien to the human world:

And in their thick sides
The power waited. And in their torpedo
Concentration, their mouth-aimed intent,
Their savagery waited, and their explosion.

We are told that the river

blind,
Invisibly watched me. And held me deeper
With its blind, invisible hands.
'We've got him,' it whispered, 'We've got him.'

We are meant to ask ourselves whether this is a variant of the blindness that characterises the jaguar, a blindness that even though impossible and undesirable for humans to attain is symbolic of the profuse amounts of energy possessed by all the creatures intrinsically bound to nature's heart beat. The idea of the hunter being transformed into the hunt's quarry reminds one of the short story 'The Harvesting', in which the hare-hunter Grooby undergoes a sudden metamorphosis which changes him into the very same creature he was firing at. The river captures the persona in the sense that it transforms him into a participant of its hierophantic

events. The Celts believed that the act of eating salmon and trout was inspirational for the poet. In fact, in the legend of Finn McCool, Finn acquires his gift of omniscience after eating salmon fished from beneath the Tree of Knowledge, where the salmon had been feeding on the hazelnuts dropped by the tree. However, Hughes' personas derive inspiration not so much from the act of eating the fish as from that of pursuing them.

As in the poem 'Earth-Numb', in *River* hunting is seen as a means by which to communicate with and imbibe of the mana energy of nature and the source of life. Fishing is symbolic of an act of ritualistic participation in sacred experiences and what the speaker ends up catching after he allows himself to be captured is a portion of the river's vitalising powers that possess him with the same intensity of a spirit. In 'After Moonless Midnight', Hughes further explicates his idea that angling and hunting are a means by which the human individual can solidify a bond with the hidden powers of nature. The encounters Hughes' fisherman persona has with his prey 'provide a new, energising exposure to the dangerous, scalp-prickling, necessary, primordial and primeval powers', and by 're-enacting' them in verse Hughes 'attempts to share his experience with others by involving them imaginatively in the process and, thereby, transmitting to them some of the fishes' power'.²² In this sequence, the fisherman's observations manifest an entirely comprehensible enthusiasm and 'on a deeper level' transform him into 'a fisher of the sacred'.²³ For Hughes, hunting and fishing are on a par to a struggle with the duende and in fact he uses both activities as metaphors for the kind of thinking that allows us to 'break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it' (*PM* 57). According to him, 'the inner life, which is the world of final reality...goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heartbeat' (*PM* 57). Poetry is a means by which this thinking process can be put into gear, a thinking process without which 'our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish' (*PM* 58).

Two of the most excellent fishers of the sequence are portrayed in 'A Cormorant' and in 'The Kingfisher' (*R* 70). In the latter the speaker's description of the bird is meant to capture the condensed potency of his flight. The bird is comparable to a phenomenon our sluggish, not yet fully developed cognition can only register belatedly:

Now he's vanished – into vibrations.
A sudden electric wire, jarred rigid,
Snaps – with a blue flare.

He has left his needle buried in your ear.

.....

Leaves a rainbow splinter sticking in your eye.

For the speaker the bird is a manifestation of God's opulence as well as of nature as an implement by which God can equally bless the human race and the slime of the earth:

Through him, God, whizzing in the sun,
Glimpses the angler.

Through him, God
Marries a pit
Of fishy mire.

The sacredness of the kingfisher is attested to by the fact that among the Yakut a dead kingfisher fastened to a birch tree helps the shaman on 'his ecstatic journey to escort the soul of a sacrificed animal to the sky'.²⁴ In order to ascend into the sky, the shaman imitates a bird flying and the purpose of this ritual is that of healing a sick person. The kingfisher is the harbinger of the halcyon days, in which idyllic tranquillity and prosperity shall reign supreme. In Hughes' poem the bird is capable of 'cutting the one straight line / Of the raggle-taggle tumbledown river / With a diamond'. When it dives into the water the bird is rewarded with the river's blessings: 'The Kingfisher / Erupts through the mirror, beak full of ingots'.

The fisherman wading through the water is displaying a similar kind of confidence and reverence and undoubtedly like the bird he shall have his reward. The bird as an angler heightens our acknowledgement of the mythic purposes of the quester-fisherman in *River*.

'A Cormorant' (R 38) presents us with a portrait of an intensely concentrated attitude that features in many other poems about river creatures in the volume. In this poem the fisherman builds up a contrast between himself and the 'sea-serpentine' bird. The speaker cuts a ludicrous figure and he knows how out of place he is wading in the water accoutred with all sorts of unnecessary implements. He is 'Optimistic' about the possibility of tricking nature's creatures by means of his human intelligence and while petitioning external reality, indifferent as to what this is, he seems to know that his devotion is fake:

pray

With futuristic, archaic under-breath
So that some fish, telepathically overpowered,

Will attach its incomprehension
To the bauble I offer to space in general.

However, a redemptive pathway opens up for him while observing a cormorant. He learns what qualities are needed of a fisherman to find himself yielded with the river's prizes. The necessity for the human individual's transformation of the self into a unity with nature is brought home to him by the bird's behaviour. The cormorant is unafraid of getting itself wet, of participation; unafraid of its engulfment by the river, which apportions its energy only to those who are fully willing to assimilate it whilst allowing it to assimilate them:

He dives.

He sheds everything from his tail end
Except fish-action, becomes fish,
Disappears from bird,

Dissolving himself

Into fish, so dissolving fish naturally
Into himself. Re-emerges, gorged,

Himself as he was, and escapes me.
Leaves me high and dry in my space-armour,

A deep-sea diver in two inches of water.

Just as the bird 'has both a soul of water and a soul of air', this dual nature making him analogous to the otter and other creatures in Hughes' bestiary, in a parallel fashion 'the mystic quester must be able to enter the sphere of the spirit to gain redemptive knowledge and then return again to the world of daily life'.²⁵

If in 'A Cormorant' the bird is described as being a faithful disciple of its master the river, in 'A Rival' (R 90) a completely divergent portrait is set up before us:

The cormorant, commissar of the hard sea,
Has not adjusted to the soft river.

He lifts his pterodactyl head in the drought pool
(Sound-proof cellar of final solutions).

The dinosaur massacre-machine
Hums on in his skull, programme unaltered.

That fossil eye-chip could reduce
All the blood in the world, yet still taste nothing.

The speaker describes the voracious bird as an apathetic implementer of a Nazi-like programme of mass destruction. The cormorant's black plumage is seen as an allusion to the blackshirts of Benito Mussolini and the S.S. The bird is a 'Cancer in the lymph, uncontrollable'. Besides resonating of the 'dripping bagful of evidence' (CB 12) mentioned in 'The Interrogator', the bird's description reminds us of Josef Mengele and other angels of death:

An abortion-doctor Black bag packed with vital organs

Dripping unspeakably.

The regimes instituted by Fascism and Communism are blended together, seen as a common symbol of evil and destabilisation:

Then away, heavy, high
Over the sea's iron curtain —

The pool lies there mutilated,
face averted,
Dumb and ruined.

By facetiously vesting the sea with such negativity, the speaker is implying that the sea is the river's rival because whereas one is suggestive of a Neptunian and thus despotic maelstrom, the other is synonymous with tranquillity and motherly love. However, the most significant idea conveyed by this poem is that anything beautiful can easily be transformed into its antithesis when either perceived through jaundiced eyes or else when compelled to sink into the quagmire by forces beyond its control.

The above concept is elaborated upon in 'Last Night' (R 76), in which the river is no longer a beneficent entity, but we are told that the 'The river seemed evil'. It 'Lay dark and grew darker. An evil mood / Darkened in it'. The reason for this 'evil' is not stated explicitly, even though the speaker's choice of adjectives, similes and metaphors, given the present condition of most rivers throughout the world, does not leave too much room for the imagination:

Evil came up
Out of its stillest holes, and uncoiled
In the sick river, the drought river of slimes –
Like a sick man lying in the dark with his death.
Its darkness under roots, under old flood-battered boles
Was dark as blood,
Rusty peaty blood-dark, old-blood dark.

Something evil about the sunken river
 In its sick-bed darkness. I stood in a grave
 And felt the evil of fish. The strange evil
 Of unknown fish-minds. Deep fish listening to me
 In the dying river.

The 'unknown fish-minds' are probably the polluters of the river whose lack of respect for nature stems out of their greed for wealth and power. These people are characterised by a lack of vital intelligence or human conscience; an inability to foresee the consequences of their actions upon the world, their lives and the future of humanity. The reference to 'old-blood dark' tells us that the evils of pollution have been going on for a long time now, are ancient in a way. The reiteration of the word 'blood' indicates to us that, just like Jean Paul Marat in his bath, the bleeding river has no hope of surviving its murder. The bloody river is the river's very 'grave', a grave in which the luminous fish of the other poems are nothing more than 'evil'. The river is 'dying' because the polluter's sacrilegious darkness has penetrated beneath the very roots of the sacred realm, has profaned the other kind of darkness, the darkness of the subliminal and spiritual depths whose wisdom and energy seem to have been choked and thus deprived of the ability to heal and renew humanity. The river is sunken, but soon to follow it will be the perpetrators of its submergence. Like the speaker of Stephens' 'The Snare', humanity is seemingly unable to realise that the victim of man's horrific methods of destruction is ultimately man himself.

Hand in hand with 'Last Night' goes the poem 'If' (TB 137) from the *River* section of *Three Books*. In it the idea of the cyclicity of pollution is stated in an emphatic manner. The use of the second person is meant to lay the blame squarely on the reader's shoulders because his humanity makes him a member of the polluters' party. It is implied that no one is innocent and that everyone bears the responsibility of acting in one way or another for the welfare of the material world. Those who wash blame off their hands are disdained with the same vehemence Dante shows towards the *ignavi*.

If the sky is infected
The river has to drink it

If earth has a disease which could be fatal
The river has to drink it

If you have infected the sky and the earth
Caught its disease off you – you are the virus

.....
Where will you get a pure drink now?

Already – the drop has returned to the cup

Already you are your ditch, and there you drink

Closely bound to 'Last Night' is the children's tale *The Iron Woman*, in which Hughes depicts an act of vengeance unleashed upon human beings for their pollution of ponds, rivers and other waterways, however, unlike 'Last Night', *The Iron Woman* ends auspiciously. The moral Hughes wishes to convey is that just as humans possess the potential to destroy, they also possess the potential to ameliorate the world. The solutions to their needs and problems are found within themselves.

In *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes compares a poet's ability to focus and concentrate deeply on one single subject or object to the angler's fixed gaze on the float. For him angling is an activity that refreshes the spirit and induces one to ponder upon his surroundings and his place within nature's plan. The energy granted by the river is not reserved solely for its creatures, for as is indicated by a number of the above-discussed poems even man can partake of it. In 'Riverwatcher' (R 108), which seems to resonate of R.S. Thomas' 'Sea-watching' since both poems pursue the same idea, we find an illustration of such an occurrence. When the ornithologist or the angler stand inert, staring at the river, in a pose reminding us of that of the saint in Heaney's 'St Kevin and the Blackbird',

who sacrificially petrifies himself when 'finding himself linked / Into the network of eternal life',²⁶ their minds are transported into another realm, their perception is widened to absorb that which is otherwise denied to the human cognitive faculty. They become communicants just like the grooms in 'A Dream of Horses'. In this spiritual and mental state, the individual experiences something on a par to a dervish's trance and becomes aware of what Huxley describes as 'the sacramental vision of reality'²⁷ in *The Doors of Perception*, something that was made possible for him by means of mescaline.

(the epileptic's strobe,
The yell of the Muezzin
Or the 'Bismillah!'
That spins the dancer in

Her whole body liquefied
Where a body loves to be
Rapt in the river of its own music) –

The river is imaged as a dervish performing acts of gyromancy, even though Hughes might also be alluding to the dancers of Cadiz on whose bodies Lorca saw working the magical power of the duende and whose dance is thus a form of religious expression. The Muezzin is an official in a mosque who summons worshippers to prayer from the top of a minaret, while the 'bismillah' is the first word of the Koran signifying 'In the name of God', which as an exclamation is used as a blessing formula before any undertaking. The riverwatcher is being convoked to participate in the ritual being celebrated before his eyes, for in order to be blessed one needs to assume an active attitude not merely an observant one. This reminds us of some of the central tenets of the Kabbalah as laid down in *Sepher ha-Zohar* or *The Book of Splendour*. Kabbalah means 'receiving', but for earthly man to partake of the inner light by which he can perceive the eternal he must be spiritually attuned to a high degree. We cannot help but agree with the idea that 'By referring to different religious traditions [Hughes] wants to imply that the sacred ground of being is common to all

religions and that the task of the mystic quester in a secular age is to recover that common sacred ground'.²⁸ The speaker refers to 'the epileptic's strobe' because, as Huxley points out, hallucinations are possible by means of a stroboscopic lamp. Furthermore, during a partial seizure affecting an area of the brain controlling sight or hearing, brief visual or auditory hallucinations are experienced. This reminds us of Myshkin's exposure to what is comparable to the Blakeian Eternal Moment just before an epileptic fit in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, a sensation of wholeness that is interwoven with that of self-annihilation. Additionally, it must be pointed out that epileptoid seizures, together with trance states and extraordinary dreams, are recognised features of the shamanic experience.

In 'Eighty, and Still Fishing for Salmon' (R 100), the old fisherman is described as a sage, 'An old rowan', who 'holds / The loom of many rivers'. Watching the river he is faced by the actuality of all the damage committed by humanity in regard to external reality, an unmerciful destruction that was unthinkable back in the youth of the aged fisherman:

Estuary nets
Empty. The river fishless. He's a trophy
Of the Great Days....

The poem's persona is different from contemporary fishermen who are motivated solely by greed. For him, angling is an activity akin to a rite, but in spite of his reverence for the river and its creatures, modern fishing practices still manage to incessantly bereave him of what he loves. All that is left to him are his memories, now that their subject has suffered forfeiture. But even the world of his memories is dissolving due to old age and the man is quickly becoming 'roots for grave':

Both worlds have been lost

By the ritual mask
That hangs on its nail.

However, the fisherman has not yet given up and he strives to make the river yield him with its treasures. He cannot really digest the idea that all that he considers sacred has suddenly been profaned and deprived of its energy. The poem's final lines have a tragic tone to them indicating to us just how hollow human beings become once they scoop out all life from nature:

Soon he'll be out there, walking the sliding scree
Of the river – and over and over

His fly will come round on the vacant swirl.

An old Noh dancer, alone in the wind with his dance.
An air-fed, mountain prayer-wheel
Loyal to inbuilt bearings, touch of weather,
Though the heavens fail.

These final lines are saturated with the pathos generated by our realisation that the old man's rituals are ineffectual, that the beautiful rites of the past have been compelled to 'fail', that a 'Great' world has been violently extinguished.

One of the major figures of the entire volume is the salmon whose ordeals in life reward it or its 'spiritual essence' with the 'return to a supratemporal Source, for throughout *River* a Spiritual Master illuminates and invigorates all with its animistic energy. Water is chrism for survival and light is revelation of the Source'.²⁹ Gustavsson claims that Hughes' 'special achievement is that he uses natural symbols that in an effortless way fuse the natural and spiritual realms'.³⁰ Even though 'The book traces the life cycle of the salmon...as a symbol the salmon also stands for the soul's journey to the source of being'.³¹ Cooper points out that the salmon symbolises fecundity and wisdom. For the Celts the fish represented 'the foreknowledge of the gods; otherworld knowledge'.³² The salmon is thus a nexus with the anagogic realm and its prophetic powers and awareness of mortality are what boost its quest for procreation. Some cultures recognise the salmon as a quasi-divine or sacred creature that sacrifices itself in the fishing season in order to unite the whole community. Both salmon and lake trout

undergo an amazing life cycle that includes among other feats the act of swimming upriver from the ocean and discovering the exact spot in which they hatched. In Hughes' poems, the fisherman's acknowledgement of the ordeals for survival undergone by the salmon 'promotes a deeper, more sympathetic bond between hunter and hunted'.³³

Whilst going through the poems it becomes quite obvious that Hughes' fisherman 'has a deep curiosity about this marine survivor from the Palaeolithic; he wants to...learn its ways, and discover what the salmon have to teach him—what wisdom from prehistory they can impart'.³⁴ The fisherman is an outsider and he acknowledges this fact, but at the same time his respect for the interconnectedness of all natural elements grants him the possibility of transcending himself beyond this status. The epiphanic language the speaker uses in 'That Morning' (R 72) is a confirmation of the notion that the human individual can truly refresh his perceptions and amalgamate his being with that of nature.

Solemn to stand there in the pollen light
Waist-deep in wild salmon swaying massed
As from the hand of God. There the body

Separated, golden and imperishable,
From its doubting thought – a spirit-beacon
Lit by the power of the salmon

That came on, came on, and kept on coming
As if we flew slowly, their formations
Lifting us toward some dazzle of blessing

One wrong thought might darken.

The salmon are 'the imperishable fish // That had let the world pass away', too heavily engrossed in a world beyond ordinary human experience. The speaker's contemplation of the salmon yields him with the precious notion that in spite of mortality and atrophy nature is absolute. The world of rush and pressing engagements is obliterated by the salmon's numinous qualities until the speaker

and his fishing partner themselves have been made 'imperishable', at one with outer and inner reality: 'It had happened'. Proof of this is found in the fact that 'Two gold bears came down and swam like men // Beside us'. The destructive nature of the bears has been quelled and the creatures institute a bond with the fishermen by means of the ritual enfolding in the river, a ritual of which fishing plays a fundamental part. The antagonistic facets of creation and destruction converge harmoniously into a state of illumination. The fishermen have arrived at their destination and in compensation for their having endeavoured and succeeded in achieving the means by which their 'journey' was made possible they are beatified by the luminous river:

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.

As in other poems, Hughes resorts to the use of biblical language in order to forward the ideas of death and sacrifice, resurrection and salvation.

In 'Gulkana' (*R* 78-84) the river is described as something almost surreal or hypnotic. The lines 'Swung, jade, out of the black spruce forest, / And disappeared into it' seem to allude to the Greek god of sleep and dreams, Hypnos, whose father was Nyx (night). His twin brother was Thanatos (death), with whom he lived in hypogeal darkness. Hypnos was recognised as a benefactor due to the fact that he alleviated the suffering of those in pain and gave them respite. The poem's speaker narrates the events in the poem as though he were in a dream. He and his partner are 'Not properly awake' and 'a weird light — a bombardment / Of purplish emptiness' confronts them. The rocks are 'Hypnagogic' and an Indian village 'Was comatose — on the stagnation toxins / Of a cultural vasectomy'. The latter two lines are of course an indicting comment upon the usurpatory practices of the United States in regard to the original natives of North America. The grandeur of the Indians' religion and value system can presently only be

experienced in dreams, even though it must be said that dreams have always formed part of the spiritual and intellectual fabric of the Indian way of life: 'They were relapsing / To Cloud-like-a-boulder, Mica, Bear, Magpie'. The river, 'A Lazarus of water', is purportedly that force which yet offers some hope for these despoiled people, as well as for others like the speaker and his partner, who suffer from spiritual embezzlement due to their daily urban lives.

The fishermen are not yet ready to yield themselves entirely to the river's embrace but the latter's tug is unrelenting:

We hobbled along a tightrope shore of pebbles

.....

Gulkana –
Biblical, a deranging cry
From the wilderness – burst past us.
A stone voice that dragged at us.

.....

Something I kept trying to deny

With deliberate steps. But it came with me
As if it swayed on my pack –
A nape-of-the-neck unease.

In the above-quoted lines the river is being compared to John the Baptist seeking to baptise unbelievers with the truth. It is only by yielding to its love that the speaker can imbibe of its transfiguring power, a power that gives birth to 'Miraculous fossils' that once a year are 'Resurrected through it, in a blood-rich flesh'. West points out that 'just as the salmon obeys the call of a mesmerizing eros and thanatos, back to the pool of its birth, so our Dante-of-the-fiddling-ways moves magnetically up the Gulkana river towed onwards by the Virgil Nature, to where all things originate and return'.³⁵ The fishermen are 'Pilgrims for a fish! / Prospectors for the lode in a fish's eye', but before they are granted the lapis they

seek they have to realise how much and in what way is it significant and valuable. The poet shows himself to agree with Don Juan's definition of the hunter in *Journey to Ixtlan*: 'A hunter uses his world sparingly and with tenderness...he's not squeezing his world out of shape. He taps it lightly, stays for as long as he needs to, and then swiftly moves away leaving hardly a mark'.³⁶ Hughes' anglers have to abandon their avaricious, pleasure-focused mentality; that is why the speaker feels 'hunted' by something entirely alien to his ordinary state of mind: 'In that mercury light, that ultra-violet, / My illusion developed'. The river possesses him and becomes analogous to or liberates some pristine, ancient self, the speaker's archetypal self that has for long been exiled in the individual's unconscious, a self that is made of wisdom and energy:

one inside me,
A bodiless twin, some doppelganger
Disinherited other, unliving,
Ever-living, a larva from prehistory,
Whose journey this was, who now exulted
Recognising his home,
And whose gaze I could feel as he watched me
Fiddling with my gear – the interloper,
The fool he had always hated.

In using the term 'doppelganger', Hughes could be alluding to an untitled poem by Heinrich Heine, whose speaker, like that of Hughes' poem, is derided by his double. Hence we see that the individual, like the salmon he is angling for, possesses primordial roots and that inside him is found an entity that if allowed and encouraged to metamorphosise in the proper manner develops into a higher self, quite distinct from the one he presently possesses, which is an aberration engendered by contumaciousness. Furthermore, as is emphasised in Jon Stallworthy's 'The Trap', those who try to eradicate their dark inner self end up destroying themselves. Hughes' words echo Jung's idea that the human psyche, just like the body, is a product of evolution and thus every civilised human being is still an archaic man at the deeper levels of his psyche. The speaker's fear in

‘Gulkana’ is the manifestation of an awareness that something from within is rising up to take control. This element cannot be tamed by means of any rational explanations; it compels the persona to push forward along the path that takes him to the point in which the encounter with nature’s spirit is to be made. Bishop claims that ‘*River* habitually attempts to examine Nature from its own point of view’³⁷ and in relation to this West says that in ‘Gulkana’ “‘Revelation’...is simply diaphanous experience, less a special kind of knowledge than a state of being. In this sense the poem is itself a vision seen through the eye of Nature, the extraordinary sensuous and active eye that unifies sensation and movement and which seeps right into the fiddling angler’s optical nerve’.³⁸

Salmon are famous for their fighting spirit when it comes to swim upriver and when hooked and in this the poet sees something admirable, a quality that needs to be fostered by the human individual if he wants to grasp what he desires. Whilst fishing the two anglers feel 'underpowered' until the moment when the speaker makes his catch and starts pondering upon the significance of his pilgrimage.

But there was the eye!
I peered into that lens
Seeking what I had come for.

The speaker gleans the truth in a similar fashion to that of the persona of the poem 'Earth-Numb' and that is why he decides to free the angelic fish back into the majestic realm they had been pulled out from:

Arks of an undelivered covenant,
Egg-sacs of their own Eden,
Seraphs of heavy ore

They surged away, magnetised,
Into the furnace boom of the Gulkana.

Bliss had fixed their eyes
Like an anaesthetic. They were possessed

As if a small boy held it
Making its noise.

The speaker has been reborn after his act of communion with the river and its creatures and attesting to this is the fact that he feels within himself that quality which transfigures the fish in the water:

Word by word
The voice of the river moved in me.
It was like lovesickness.
A numbness, a secret bleeding.
Waking in my body.

Some critics choose to identify the poet with the fisherman-persona of *River* and rarely make any distinction between the two. If in some cases this identification is to be granted a measure of validity as one relevant interpretative approach then we can say that 'Gulkana' is symptomatic of the kind of poem in which the fisherman-poet sojourns through the wilderness with a strong sense of trepidation but succeeds in 'confronting and conquering his fears like a questing hero, and returning, ultimately, to create poetic order from a chaos of sensations and thoughts'.³⁹

'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan' (*R* 44-50) presents us with the fisherman's willingness to make a gruelling journey in order to come in contact with the fish he reveres, even if his catch will yield him only with the most puny specimen. Whilst fishing, he knows that he is 'Peering into that superabundance of spirit' in front of which he feels 'a little bit giddy / Ghostly'. This reminds us of the 'spectre' in the previous poem and it is implied that the speaker needs to partake of some of the river's inexhaustible energy if he must add substance to his being. The salmon are his 'fellow aliens from prehistory' and the persona's feeling of a strange kind of kinship with the fish makes him put forward the notion that what he and the salmon pursue is essentially the same mystical goal, even though pursuing it perhaps by different means:

Those peculiar eyes
 So like mine, but fixed at zero,
 Pressing in from outer darkness
 Eyes of aimed sperm and of egg on their errand,
 Looking for immortality
 In the lap of a broken volcano, in the furrow of a lost glacier,
 Those shuttles of love-shadow?

When he comes to 'the last pool', the speaker encounters a fish to which he attaches the following description: 'magnified, a Medusa, / Funereal, phosphorescent'. In spite of the pool's 'warning' he gives in to his 'temptation' and whilst caressing the salmon his emotions and those of the pool of water, which like a vagina extends for his entry, build up to an orgasmic climax:

Eerie how you know when it's coming –
 So I felt it now, my blood
 Prickling and thickening, altering
 With an ushering-in of chills, a weird onset
 As if mountains were pushing mountains higher
 Behind me, to crowd over my shoulder –

Then the pool lifted a travelling bulge
 And grabbed the tip of my heart-nerve, and crashed,

Trying to wrench it from me, and again
 Lifted a flash of arm for leverage
 And it was a Gruagach of the Sligachan!
 Some Boggart up from a crack in the granite!
 A Glaistig out of the skull!

The fact that the salmon is 'a travelling bulge' is highly significant because it gives weight to the idea that both fish and speaker are undergoing the same arduous journey to the same special destination. The persona experiences 'a supernatural, beautiful fright' and the causal agent of this experience that has lifted out of the pool's 'eye-pupil darkness' only to sink back 'disembodied' is 'Only a little salmon', which is described as 'The loveliest, left-behind, most-longed-for ogress / Of the Palaeolithic'. The previously discussed idea of being 'Watched' is found once more in the poem's penultimate stanza. The result of the

salmon's scrutiny of the speaker 'through her time-warped judas-hole' is that he is transcended beyond ordinary reality very much like what happens to the persona of 'Roe Deer', but with the difference that there is no definite conclusion to the fisherman's experience since the line describing it happens to be the last one: 'As I faded from the light of reality'.

In 'River Barrow' (*R* 56) a strange, seemingly metagnostic reality is revealed to the speaker and his partner while fishing in 'the smooth healing' of the 'Heavy belly / Of river, solid mystery / With a living vein'.

We sprawl
Rods out, giant grasshopper antennae, listening
For the bream-shoal to engage us.

.....

It's an ancient thirst
Savouring all this, at the day's end,
Soaking it all up, through every membrane,
As if the whole body were a craving mouth,
As if a hunted ghost were drinking — sud-flecks
Grass-bits and omens
Fixed in the glass.

The fifth line quoted above suggests that communion with the river's energy should be something practised on a regular basis, just as if it were a ritual whose total efficacy depends on frequency besides other equally important factors. This binds with Hughes' notion that absolute healing is a phenomenon that must be constantly pursued. The eight line expresses the same idea found in 'Gulkana': the hunter feeling hunted when coming in contact with an energy and a genuine self that tends to be repressed in the ordinary world. Whilst flies are 'twanging their codes / In and out of my ear's beam', the river, described as 'living honey' and 'syrupy strength', rewards the patience and endurance of the fishermen, their 'Hair itching with midges, blood easy' and their bodies covered with 'Midge bites

itching and swelling', with some of its 'heavy wealth'. The fishermen get to imbibe of a transcendental, transfiguring experience.

According to Scigaj, in 'River Barrow' 'Hughes suggests that the best way for humans to refresh their perceptions and experience psychological renewal is to achieve a consciousness of [ecological] relatedness'.⁴⁰ The speaker tells us that 'the flushed ash-grey sky lies perfect' and that 'Trees inverted / Even in this sliding place are perfect'. This aura of perfection is created by the fact that everything fits together like a pattern of consummate excellence formed by the interweaving of multitudinous threads. The temporal dimensions become whole when we see 'Future, past, / Reading each other in the water mirror'. The substantial is united with the ethereal: 'Great weight / Resting effortless on the weightless'. Earthly sounds and empyreal movements resonate in 'internestled metals' and 'interfolded underseas'. Paradoxical images abound in this poem in which 'Mercury' is 'light' and silence is a 'Dog-bark stillness'. The fishermen's participation in and exposure to sublimity and absoluteness cannot possibly be an everlasting event. As is suggested by the sentence 'All evil suspended', ordinary reality together with its illnesses and problems can be deferred briefly, but not evaded altogether. However, the intensity of the energy partaken of compensates for the brevity of the experience. The whole event has a metabatic effect on the speaker who describes himself as 'Half-unearthed, an old sword in its scabbard, / Happy to moulder'. He has rediscovered an aspect of himself which has long lied buried in the depths of his being. In this he is similar to the salmon, which swims upstream in order for it to rediscover its natal place. His old age seems to dissuade him from pursuing the full reinvigorating effect that has infused him momentarily. He is happy to rest in the knowledge that 'the river moves'. However, at what is seemingly the end of his mystical experience of this abstruse reality 'the river widens', as it did when Moses touched it with his staff. The speaker, like 'A long-armed spider readjusts his gunsights' for he knows that the river is not going to allow him to moulder. The two anglers touch the river by means of their rods and

when contact is made with the river's spiritual dimension 'A big fish, / Bream-roll or evening salmon, crashes / A crater of suds'. Everything around the two fishermen wants to reward them: 'Honeysuckle / Pouring its horns of plenty over us'. The anglers' being has been regenerated by the wholeness they have communed with. Their fragmented, spectral urban selves have come in contact with nature's healing touch, which has released the agents of healing imprisoned within their inner nature.

In 'August Evening' (R 92-94) matrimonial imagery is employed once more to describe the fish's union with the river's energy:

The sea-tribes are here,
They've come up for their weddings, their Michaelmas fair,
The carnival on the gravels.

Even though the Christian festival of Michaelmas is dedicated to the archangel Michael, who expelled Lucifer out of heaven, in the poem one finds a number of echoes of pagan harvest festivals. Whilst observing the ceremony 'crammed with religious purpose', the speaker manifests his willingness to suffer the hardships of the climate in order to become an exercitant:

Wet fog midnight,
A sheathing sea-freeze, hardens round my head,
Stiffens my fingers.

This act of endurance regales him not only with a vision he would not have been able to partake of by any other means, but also with a portion of the blessings and energy of the river, which symbolises the numinousness of nature:

They will not play tonight.

Their procession kneels, in God-hush.
Robed in the stilled flow of their Creator
They inhale unending. I share it a little.

Slowly their white pathway sinks from the world.

The river becomes terrible.

Climbing out, I make a silent third
With two owls reassuring each other.

Besides the image of a nuptial cortege, the above-quoted lines also evoke the image of a string of whitely clad, hooded penitents and devotees, a typical feature of Good Friday processions, with the last stanza being somewhat enigmatic. It points out the notion that the speaker after his baptism has become a new person whom he yet cannot recognise as himself, a new kind of hunter, similar to the owls whose predatory nature is entirely in consonance with the rites taking place in the water, even though their act of 'reassuring each other' alludes to the fact that the owl is symbolic of wisdom besides death and thus seems to require a period of contemplation upon its actions before actually enacting them out. For Bishop 'the "silent" subject – cleansed of his own judgements – keeps the humility of his collective point of view intact, re-affirming a "religious" attitude long after the dazzle of the specific religious occasion has vanished'.⁴¹ The speaker's immersion into the river seems to have quenched all thirst for wisdom and reassurance and this makes him somewhat comparable to the resurrected Christ accompanying the two disciples travelling to Emmaus, who happen to be conversing about the disappearance of Christ's body from its tomb.

Two potentially intertwined themes in *River* are those of 'Copulation and death' (*R* 88). Many of the poems in the volume portray the struggles of the river's creatures to survive and perpetuate their species. The fish onto which the poet focuses much of his attention as concerns this theme is the salmon. The very first poem of the sequence, 'The Morning before Christmas' (*R* 8-12), poignantly describes the cruel fate of salmon caught in fishing nets:

Already
They were slinging the dead out, rigid in the net,
Great, lolling lilies of fungus, irreplaceable –
Eggs rotten in them, milt rotten. Nothing

So raggy dead offal as a dead
 Salmon in its wedding finery. So
 After their freakish luck in the lottery –
 Their five thousand to one against survival –
 Dead within days of marriage.

This poem is not merely an indictment of rampant overfishing practices, but more significantly a means of praising those fishermen who take great pains to maintain alive the salmon population by means of fish hatcheries. The fishermen apply 'A long, deep-kneading / Oily massage' to the live fish they catch in order to extract their 'wealth of eggs'. The fishermen's efforts yield them with 'a vital broth', which seems unable to produce new salmon unless human intervention is at hand. In fact, those fish that fail to produce any eggs for the fishermen will doubtfully manage to secure any offspring:

With luck
 In natural times, those six, with luck,
 In five years, with great luck, might make nine.

The speaker's point is that these are not 'natural times', that compounded with the harshness of the material world, pollution and usurious fishing practices are so powerful that fish cannot hope to survive without human aid. The fishermen, 'pictured as priest-like obstetricians',⁴² are fulfilling the same fruitful form of intervention and supervision lauded as the goal of husbandry in *Moortown*. The fishermen involved in the re-stocking of the river's salmon supply act 'lovingly' while in a 'solemn' mood. At the time of the celebration of Christ's birth and the new order promised by his arrival, they manage to preserve some of the splendour of 'A world / Wrought in wet, heavy gold. Treasure solid'. Consequentially, they are infused with the magic of this world they want to save at all costs. Like Christ and the whole of nature, the salmon can only exist as a saviour if human beings allow it to do so. The speaker himself exhibits what is experienced when one acts in concordance with nature's pattern; the event has scarred him with an indelible precious mark:

That morning
 Dazzle-stamped every cell in my body
 With its melting edge, its lime-bitter brightness.

A flood pond, inch-iced, held the moment of a fox
 In touch-melted and refrozen dot-prints.

Campbell points out that the date on which Christmas is celebrated 'was exactly that of the birth of the Persian saviour Mithra, who, as an incarnation of eternal light, was born the night of the winter solstice (then dated December 25) at midnight, the instant of the turn of the year from increasing darkness to light'.⁴³ This is particularly significant given that Hughes describes the salmon as 'creatures of light'. In this poem we have two simultaneous conceptions, that of the New Year and that of the new salmon. Hence this poem latches onto the celebration of birth that is found in the volume's last poem. It is also linked to 'Flesh of Light' since in both poems 'Hughes uses poetic ritual to re-enact creation',⁴⁴ in one describing something outside human intervention while in the other celebrating the creativity engendered by human intervention. The actions in 'The Morning before Christmas' are ritualistic and they are meant to guarantee renewal and resanctification. The poem's final stanza is an allusion to the prints or verses left by the creature in 'The Thought-Fox'. Bishop states that 'At the end of the poem, the results of the poet's endeavour are stamped into future natural possibilities just as the exterior events have been "dazzle-stamped" into his own body; he occupies the same "third" position in giving a helping hand to the union of the sexes in the outer world as he did when assisting the "alchemization" of male and female within the self, in his earlier work'.⁴⁵

In 'An August Salmon' (*R* 64) the cock fish in a pool of the 'closed' river is described as 'A holed-up gangster', patiently 'Waiting for time to run out on him'. He seems to know he has to die for the good of his species, a 'bridegroom, mortally wounded / By love and destiny'. The idea that he is comparable to the spouse of the White Goddess is made quite obvious when we are told that he

sinks to the bed
Of his wedding cell, the coma waiting
For execution and death
In the skirts of his bride.

'With the clock of love and death in his body', he offers himself entirely and while being dissolved back into the source 'his eye stays rapt'. This act of sacrifice is not in vain, he dies like a martyr who is immediately reconciled with the cosmic spirit that created him in payment for his faith and selflessness:

Monkish, caressed
He kneels. He bows
Into the ceaseless gift
That unwinds the spool of his strength.

As in 'An August Salmon', the fish in 'September Salmon' (R 98) 'is becoming a god, / A tree of sexual death, sacred with lichens'. The first line tells us that he is 'Famously home from sea' and this is an allusion to three celebrated lines from Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Requiem'. The salmon is oblivious of everything that surrounds him, preoccupied solely with fulfilling his role, getting his job done, that is, helping in his own little way in maintaining the dynamic flow of the cycle.

He serves his descendants. And his homage
Is to be patient, performing, 'slowly, the palsy
Of concerted autumn
In the upside-down cage of a tree.

Religious imagery is used in this poem for the same purpose as in the sequence's other poems: to emphasise the bondage there exists between the environment and its creatures, sacred nature and its equally sacred offspring. The sun in the poem symbolises the numinous source of all life, to which the salmon pays homage and adds something to its splendour by his very existence and role in the patterns of material reality.

Mid-morning,

At the right angle of sun
 You can see the floor of his chapel.
 There he sways at the altar –
 A soul
 Hovering in the incantation and the incense.

Over his sky the skeeters traffic, godlike and double-jointed.
 He lifts
 To the molten palate of the mercurial light
 And adds his daub.

In 'October Salmon' (R 110-114) the fish rests in 'his graveyard pool'. His fate is cruel, but he accepts it patiently and uncomplainingly. The goddess demands his sacrifice and he shows himself willing to comply, she is 'reclaiming his sea-metals' and 'He hangs there, patched with leper-cloths'.

About six pounds weight,
 Four years old at most, and hardly a winter at sea –
 But already a veteran,
 Already a death-patched hero. So quickly it's over!

So briefly he roamed the gallery of marvels!
 Such sweet months, so richly embroidered into earth's beauty-dress,
 Her life-robe –
 Now worn out with her tirelessness, her insatiable quest,
 Hangs in the flow, a frayed scarf –

We are told that 'Death has already dressed him / In her clownish regimentals' and the speaker asks 'Can the caress of water ease him?' The answer immediately follows, assuring us that even though age and coming death have made him wear 'a ghoul-mask', have transformed 'his whole body' into 'A fungoid anemone of canker', the salmon shall not be denied the consolatory and reassuring presence of the sacred river while he makes his final journey: 'The flow will not let up for a moment'. In regard to this, Scigaj's reference to the Animal Master myth described by Campbell in his *Power of Myth* is particularly helpful. For the Palaeolithic hunting tribes there existed 'a spiritual realm that received the departing spirit of the animal who has lost a mortal body of little importance'.⁴⁶

For Scigaj 'The poignant irony of the salmon's end—to die so soon after mating—is mediated by the hope for the continuance of the inhabiting spirit in a transcendent realm, the abode of a Spiritual Master'.⁴⁷

All throughout his life, the salmon was 'the armature of energy' and 'the savage amazement of life'; he possessed 'strength like light'. Yet now he is a 'shroud in a gutter' and 'suffers the subjection, and the dumbness, / And the humiliation of the role!' However, we are asked not to judge nature as being stony-hearted and ungrateful, for like the salmon we must understand that this atrocious condition complements the balmy one that he was born into and enjoyed for a brief span of life and shall enjoy when his spirit deliquesces in absolute union with the master spirit:

Yet this was always with him. This was inscribed in his egg.
This chamber of horrors is also home.
He was probably hatched in this very pool.

And this was the only mother he ever had

.....

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

Out of the horrific old salmon beauty and energy are born and in this we find a metaphor for the reconciliation of the dual aspects of divine nature. As Hughes explains in 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly', art is also the product of an experience of horror and suffering. The mana energy released by art is inseparable from an acknowledgement of the vital existence of death and pain. 'The epic poise' is what distinguishes the salmon as a mythic creature wholly entwined with the epic processes of the material world and its spiritual dimension. The phrase 'machinery of heaven' was also used in 'Poor Birds' (M 7) from *Moortown*, in which the creatures, suffering all the hardships of existence in the wild, 'dream

the featherless, ravenous / Machinery of heaven'. The pursuit of energy is an epic endeavour and as Skea points out *River* blends together the three forms of epic recognised by Hughes in his essay: the 'religious quest', the 'heroic epic' and the 'shaman's dream' (*WP* 100). For Hughes 'Epic is the story of *mana*. The morphology of epic, its recurrent pattern of recognizable episodes, emerges wherever the saga tells, in one metaphor or another, of the search for and the finding of *mana*' (*WP* 100). The idea that beauty and healing can be generated by existential suffering is accentuated by some lines in the poem 'Photostomias' (*M* 106-108) from *Moortown*:

Blossoms
Pushing from under blossoms—
From the one wound's
Depth of congealments and healing.

The sacrificial victims in 'An August Salmon', 'September Salmon' and 'October Salmon' resemble the heroine in *Alcestis*, who offers her life so that her husband may live, but is then rewarded with rebirth or re-emergence from Hades in compensation for her love and faith. The play appositely ends with the line 'Let this give man hope' (*A* 103). The fish are also analogous to the sacrificed gods and kings described by Frazer, sacrificing themselves for the purposes of regeneration. All three salmon languish under the reflection of a tree and this could very well stand for the tree in the sacred grove of Diana Nemorensis, beneath which the priest of Nemi waited for his slayer and successor. The old salmon in Hughes' poems are as frail and age-scarred as Tithonus, the only difference being that immortal youth is not begrudged them but will be granted to them upon their reunion with the source. The emphasis upon the dragonish and ogreish appearance of the salmon is meant to echo *Moby Dick* and the Leviathan and thus to suggest the brutishness in which the divine usually masks itself.

The volume comes to an end with the poem 'Salmon Eggs' (*R* 120-124), in which the speaker is dissolved and made one with the river's spiritual and

material being. The persona observes the river and feels himself communing with it:

I lean and watch the water, listening to water
Till my eyes forget me

And the piled flow supplants me....

The description of the salmon grouped together in one place in the river resonates of the Pentecostal descent of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles:

The salmon were just down there –
Shivering together, touching at each other,
Shedding themselves for each other –

Now beneath flood-murmur
They peel away deathwards.

Both the salmon and the speaker lose something of themselves upon witnessing and participating in the river's revelation, but this is not physical death: 'Something else is going on in the river // More vital than death'. Death is 'a superficiality', however, the phenomenon being enacted out in the river is even 'More grave than life'. It is described as

these tidings of plasm –
The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
Dumb with immensity.

In the temple-like river, the speaker discovers the 'Time-hewn, time-riven altar' on which the holy celebration is being performed:

And this is the liturgy
Of Earth's advent – harrowing, crowned – a travail
Of raptures and rendings. Perpetual mass
Of the waters
Wells from the cleft.

The poem contains a number of oxymorons that are meant to fuse opposites together and 'There is constant punning, too, by means of which physical and metaphysical concepts are linked... The inter-relationship between physical reality and the metaphysical, which such punning embodies, is the fundamental message of Hughes' work'.⁴⁸ The poem's speaker comes to acknowledge the presence of 'the eternal within the temporal'⁴⁹ and we cannot but agree with the statement that 'The deeper motivation of *River* is a search for a hierophany: the manifestation of the sacred in time', which allows us to read the entire volume 'as one long ritual'.⁵⁰ 'Salmon Eggs' marks the apex of this ritual and in it the river is a doorway transporting its exercitants into a transcendental realm that is not separate from material reality, but which is not ordinarily available to human perception. It transfigures the speaker, the fish and everything; the river's spirit is an all-pervasive presence:

This is the swollen vent
Of the nameless
Teeming inside atoms – and inside the haze
And inside the sun and inside the earth.

We realise that 'the poet-quester at last succeeds in gaining his hierophanic vision. It is a hierophany of water involving the salmon as the mystagogues of the sacred'.⁵¹ As Gustavsson points out, in this poem the sequence's human quester achieves 'the *unio mystica* or union with the Divine' and by means of 'his vision of the sacred he can at last propose a remedy to the spiritual disease of modern man pointing the way back to the archetypal source of being and to spiritual regeneration'.⁵² The reason for which the spirit permeates everything it comes in contact with during the ritual is that of guaranteeing that life and its cycles will keep on being perpetuated:

It is the font, brimming with touch and whisper,
Swaddling the egg.

Only birth matters

Say the river's whorls.

For Bishop *'birth'* appears to be nothing less than the principle of transformation...within the self and in external Nature... Only the collective imagination can reach up towards this ideal of the term "birth".⁵³ His point is that 'Man grows *out of* the world, *out of* his collective psychic origin, he was not dropped into it self-sufficiently, with the freedom to do as he – or rather his lower self – pleases. He had better be centred in that origin, and in the higher region of negotiation, if he wants to survive the crash of a collapsing culture'.⁵⁴ Bishop is here referring to what Hughes calls that 'something deeper than what you lose if civilization disappears completely'.⁵⁵ Ultimately we see that the river succeeds in creating a place of silence 'Where sun rolls bare, and earth rolls, // And mind condenses on old haws'. The heart beat of existence has been revitalised and the human individual has rediscovered the value of regular moments of stillness and contemplation that like any ritual encourage one to cleanse one's vision and reinvigorate oneself by means of the transfiguring power of nature, before launching oneself back into the flurry of non-stop speech and activity. Another meaning of 'haw' is that of an enclosed garden and this allows us to read the last line in terms of the speaker's rediscovery of a long-lost sheltered place or *temenos* in which to bind together divergent forces.

Even though Hughes did not choose to conclude his sequence with it, 'Go Fishing' (R 42) is one of the most pivotal poems in *River* and in Hughes' entire oeuvre. The poem is constructed out of imperatives or incitants that climatically pile upon each other in imitation of the flow of liquid. This twenty-seven-line poem contains not a single full stop and only seven commas. It asks the reader to lose his ego and dissolve into nature's numinous dimension, one of whose portals is the river. The poem asks us to aim for evanescence within saturated nothingness, to dispose of human language and communicate in ineffability:

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

Gulp river and gravity

Lose words

Cease

Be assumed into glistenings of lymph

As if creation were a wound

As if this flow were all plasm healing

In the poem it is fundamental to notice the absence of the personal pronoun and this is something prompted by the fact that we are being asked to disperse our egos in the immense flow of nature's processes, a condition preliminary to that of rebirth. The command to 'Lose words' recalls the 'wordless' state of samadhi mentioned in 'Strangers'. Hughes' emphasis in 'Go Fishing' falls upon the significance of action and this indicates the idea that the human individual must blend himself with the dynamic wholeness of the universe's reality. If we allow ourselves to be 'supplanted', 'cleft', 'Displaced', 'Dissolved' and 'Dismembered', terms alluding to shamanistic and alchemical processes of transformation, we shall

Become translucent – one untangling drift

Of water-mesh, and a weight of earth-taste light

Mangled by wing-shadows

Everything circling and flowing and hover-still

As in all Hughes' major sequences the goal of dissolution and of the entire quest is rebirth and transmutation. In relatively few lines 'Go Fishing' condenses all the processes and stages preceding the attainment of this particular end. It unequivocally points out what the individual must do and what he achieves after his ordeals. His re-entrance into the ordinary world, a lazaretto pervaded with a constant logomachy that produces a furious babeldom with no visible cure except that external to it, stuns him and dries his mouth of words until he finds that the only way to communicate is by using the language he learnt from 'rainbow monster-structures', the 'earth-wave, the soft sun-shock' and 'sun-melt'. This allows him to play the part of a saviour whose fulfilling life is beneficial for

others in the sense of pointing out to them that healing is truly possible if the human individual wills himself to achieve it:

Crawl out over roots, new and nameless
Search for face, harden into limbs

Let the world come back, like a white hospital
Busy with urgency words

Try to speak and nearly succeed
Heal into time and other people

Notes

- ¹ R.S. Thomas, *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (1993; London: Phoenix – Orion Books, 2000), p. 327.
- ² Thomas West, *Ted Hughes* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 117.
- ³ Craig Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 203.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest* (Armidale, New South Wales: University of New England Press, 1994), p. 219.
- ⁶ Leonard M. Scigaj, *Ted Hughes* (Boston: Twayne Publishers – G. K. Hall, 1991), p. 133.
- ⁷ Bo Gustavsson, 'Quest for a Hierophany: A Reading of *River*', *Studia Neophilologica*, 59 (1987), 209-216 (p. 209).
- ⁸ Ibid, pp. 209-210.
- ⁹ Scigaj, p. 134.
- ¹⁰ Gustavsson, p. 212.
- ¹¹ Skea, p. 220.
- ¹² J.C. Cooper, *An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols* (1978; London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1999), p. 139.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Gustavsson, p. 212.
- ¹⁵ Skea, p. 209.
- ¹⁶ Scigaj, pp. 136-137.
- ¹⁷ Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (New York: MJF Books, 1974), p. 296.
- ¹⁸ Robinson, p. 201.
- ¹⁹ Skea, pp. 210-211.
- ²⁰ Nicholas Bishop, *Re-Making Poetry: Ted Hughes and a New Critical Psychology* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), pp. 241-242.
- ²¹ Scigaj, p. 137.
- ²² Skea, pp. 211-213.
- ²³ Gustavsson, p. 212.
- ²⁴ Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. by Willard R. Trask, Bolligen Series 76 (1964; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 232.
- ²⁵ Gustavsson, p. 213.
- ²⁶ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 20.
- ²⁷ Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception and Heaven and Hell* (1954, 1956; London: Grafton – Harper Collins, 1977), p. 19.
- ²⁸ Gustavsson, p. 215.
- ²⁹ Scigaj, p. 135.
- ³⁰ Gustavsson, p. 212.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Cooper, p. 144.

³³ Scigaj, p. 141.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 139.

³⁵ West, p. 119.

³⁶ Carlos Castaneda, *Journey to Ixtlan: The Lessons of Don Juan* (1972; Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 86.

³⁷ Bishop, p. 241.

³⁸ West, p. 120.

³⁹ Skea, p. 212.

⁴⁰ Scigaj, p. 138.

⁴¹ Bishop, p. 241.

⁴² Gustavsson, p. 212.

⁴³ Campbell, p. 33.

⁴⁴ Skea, p. 217.

⁴⁵ Bishop, p. 248.

⁴⁶ Scigaj, p. 140.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 142.

⁴⁸ Skea, p. 233.

⁴⁹ Scigaj, p. 144.

⁵⁰ Gustavsson, pp. 211-212.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 215.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bishop, p. 249.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 250.

⁵⁵ Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and Crow', *London Magazine*, January 1971, p. 19.

CONCLUSION

Incessantly Aimed at the Zenith'

And this is why I learned to walk! For these
belated bitter steps.

Janos Pilinszky – 'Apocrypha'²

Our faces and figures are reflected in the black lake,
no one sees its depths:
whatever is, was once in them,
whatever was once in them, falls back there,
and this is the eternal return.

Sandor Weores – 'The Secret Country'³

At the end of his epic journey, the quester realises that he has merely reached a new beginning and that the arduous quest for wholeness, fulfilment and renewal must perforce never be given up. The health and wisdom gained by means of an immersion in the nethermost recesses of the self, in the purifying font waters of the spirit and energies of nature is one firmly rooted in the acknowledgement that human existence and the individual himself are analogous to a wound that can never be sewn up, for if this were to happen man would lose an essential segment of his human meaning. Hence the act of allowing this fact to manifest itself entirely in one's consciousness is already a step towards the healing of one's being. For Hughes, poetry is not a consolatory device meant to strip man of an awareness of the actuality of human mortality or to bolster his illusion that the latter state can be surpassed, since the pressing reality of death serves the function of intensifying the struggling spirit of those yearning for authenticity. One of poetry's true purposes is that of fostering in the individual a sense of appreciation for the fact that his being is a variegated one, constituted of diverse contrastive

facets. It is only by subscribing to the idea that we are essentially creatures traversing the tightrope between what we take for granted and what we desire that we can learn to accept suffering as a necessity and to live in concord with ourselves and others. Mana is possible only once the imperativeness of the latter idea is embraced.

Poetry for Hughes is also a means by which the deficiencies of modern civilisation and its denizens can be pointed out and criticised, paraded in all their ugliness when placed in contrast to what possesses balance and energy. In his work he emphasises the idea that the individual should maintain contact with the origin of all energy and this is something that should be undertaken at all costs even though for the majority of those inhabiting the sprawling cosmopolitans of the contemporary world this feat is equal to that of trying to establish contact with an extraterrestrial form of life. The means by which this return to the source can be effected is that of the devalued proportionate matrices of rituals, comprised of sacrifice and of the will to transform oneself and achieve renewal in others. The quester's journey toward the source is not one away from external reality. For Hughes inner and outer reality coalesce once the individual discovers the means by which to effect the confluence. Behind Hughes' poetry pulsates the idea that the principle that informs reality is that of wholeness, which must be acknowledged and embraced if the human individual wants to transcend himself beyond the quagmire of fragmentation and neurosis. His poetry strives to show us that everything in this world is multidimensional, composed of physical and numinous states, rooted in more than one realm that are all simultaneously part of the same oneness. Saluting the veracity of this concept allows the human individual to heal himself of his schizophrenic mode of perception and existence. Poetry and ritual are capable of manifesting the essential intertwinement of the manifold dimensions and once wholeness is appreciated as the genuine guise of the cosmos, its germination can be achieved in one's own being. Poetry is a tool by which the individual can harness inner and outer energies and channel them

into the task of ensuring a level of wellbeing for himself and the entire community. Hughes' poetry heals because it puts us in touch with the sacred realm, the origin of all energy and because it presents us with mythic paradigms of journeys from exile to redemption, from fragmentation to wholeness. Such heroes as Prometheus, Jack Orchard, Adam and the anonymous protagonists of *Cave Birds* and 'Seven Dungeon Songs' indicate how renewal and fulfilment can be achieved. Hughes' protagonists are in a way saviours functioning by means of the poetry that enwombs them. They seem to follow the exact bidding of God to the newly reborn visionary in 'The Prophet' (CP 1194), a version of a poem by Alexander Pushkin and one of the last of Hughes' poems:

Between my frozen lips
 Inserted the fork of a wise serpent.
 He split my chest with a blade,
 Wrenched my heart from its hiding,
 And into the open wound
 Pressed a flaming coal.
 I lay on stones like a corpse.
 There God's voice came to me:
 'Stand, Prophet, you are my will.
 Be my witness. Go
 Through all seas and lands. With the Word
 Burn the hearts of the people.'

Hughes' poems act as doorways leading us to all that we have gradually alienated ourselves from due to obduracy and ablepsy. What we call 'progress' is to some extent a crab-like backward movement, whereas the return to the source is the impetus behind the real breakthrough and advancement. The message is that man must learn to journey onwards, to suffer and reform his perception and behaviour. Even though the U-turn halting the collective dead-plunge or apostasy has long been delayed, when effected it will still ensure the regeneration of humanity's being and of the material world it inhabits. Nature in Hughes' poetry is symbolic of the source of all cosmic energy, which is both outside the individual and deep within his being. When healing is effected in the individual's

psychic and spiritual dimension, it also becomes a possibility in the material world and the problems that threaten us all shall no longer be ignored as if invisible, but shall be confronted and tackled in the most expeditious and responsible manner possible. Hughes' vision is very much concerned with Earth's ecology and his poetry apprises us of the fact that human beings are the guardians of equilibrium in all existential spheres, including that comprised of the material world; they have a quasi divine responsibility towards ensuring the perpetuation of life and the congruity among the parts constituting the whole. One of the sources of the tightrope walker's anxiety, as well as a major source of his pride, is his knowledge that besides maintaining balance himself he has to ensure that his Atlas-like grip on the planet remains steadfast, a grip not meant to suck the world dry but to ensure that its bounty is perdurable. Hence in his farming poems, Hughes stresses the importance of human supervision and proper management of life and nature's resources, issues that do not apply solely to the rural world given that man's actions affect the whole planet. A sense of co-operation should reign supreme in humanity's transactions with its natural environment. The individual whose ego obfuscates the significance of the material world and disdains to acknowledge cyclicity and man's undeniable place in the cycles and processes of nature is insensitive to the gravitational forces hauling him into the abyss. Humanity finds its reflection in nature and the state of health of either one is a sure indicator of that of the other; indeed once the fragmented mode of thinking is invalidated the actuality of the universe's cohesiveness becomes irrefragable, a novelty we will have just become cognisant of and yet something deeply and endlessly buried in our understanding. Every single element affects the general state of the totality and every single element owes its existence to the totality from which it can never be entirely divorced, in spite of all the efforts to effect such a separation.

Hughes' poetry pivots on the concepts of healing and transformation and along his fifty-years-long career his vision and distinct voice underwent only

temporary upheavals. This is mainly due to the significance accredited to the idea that healing is part of a cycle that must subsist since existential meaning is derived from it. Perfection is an impossibility, however, the constant pursuit of it guarantees authenticity and fulfilment. In the above discussion we have demonstrated that Hughes' poetry is an intrinsic part of this pursuit, a poetry that in spite of evincing an intense faith in its potential to unleash human potential can only function in such manner once an apposite form of human endeavour is at the origin of the ensuing chain reaction.

Notes

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- ¹ The title is partly taken from the poem 'Evening Thrush' (CP 607-608), in which are found the following three lines: 'Now, serious, stretched full height, he aims / At the zenith. He situates a note / Right on the source of light'. The idea is that the aspiration to achieve perfection should form an intrinsic part of the human individual's existential endeavour. However, he cannot afford to engage in such an activity on an infrequent basis since he is not on a par to such a creature as the thrush who 'Plunges shuddering into the creator - // Then comes plodding back' proud of his 'virtuoso's joke'. For the human quester the pursuit is a relentless one and the attainment of the pursued quality is always postponed, even though other equally fundamental qualities eventuate in the process.
- ² Janos Pilinszky, *The Desert of Love*, trans. by Janos Csokits and Ted Hughes (1976; London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1989), p. 40.
- ³ Sandor Weores and Ferenc Juhasz, *Selected Poems*, trans. by Edwin Morgan and David Wevill (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 66.

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