Chapter 4 The Worst Moment: *Crow, Prometheus on his Crag*

Several writers helped Hughes to awaken from his 'long nightmare', particularly Lorca, the Eastern European poets, especially Vasco Popa, whose work Hughes discovered in 1964, and Mircea Eliade, whose *Shamanism* Hughes reviewed in October of that year. Lorca's essay 'Theory and Function of the *Duende*' first became generally available in English in the Penguin *Lorca* in 1960. I do not know when Hughes came across it, but he later described it to me as the most important essay he had ever read. Recommending it strongly to Ehor Boyanowsky, he stressed its importance to him

> first as a kind of muse, which if I feel is not kindled within me when working on a poem, I discard it and begin again. But once I feel it, I struggle until the work is done regardless of how difficult and exhausting it is. Second, as an effect, once the poem is finished and read aloud. … The power to move many people regardless of their education or culture — that is the mark of true art. Art with and of *duende.*[1]

Lorca describes *duende* as 'the spirit of the earth' [127]. It is a spirit of struggle, never far from death, and very like the spirit of the moors above Mytholmroyd as Hughes described it in 'The Rock'. No authentic art can exist without it, and it cannot be faked. *Duende* spurns craftsmanship and forms derived from old structures. It is not concerned with beauty or enjoyment, but with suffering. It drives a painter such as Goya 'to paint with his knees and with his fists horrible bitumen blacks' [129].

Lorca tells the story of a dancing contest where

> an old woman of eighty carried of the prize against beautiful women and girls with waists like water, merely by raising her arms, throwing back her head, and stamping her foot on the platform; in that gathering of muses and angels, beauties of shape and beauties of smile, the moribund *duende*, dragging her wings of rusty knives along the ground, was bound to win and did in fact win. [132]

The image of wings as rusty knives must have reminded Hughes of the bird drawings and etchings of Leonard Baskin, whose sense of the nature and purpose of art was close to Lorca's.

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[1] Boyanowsky, Ehor, *Savage Gods, Silver Ghosts,* Vancouver, Douglas & McIntyre, 2009, 148.

> In idea, in sound, or in gesture, the *duende* likes a straight fight with the creator on the edge of the well. … The *duende* wounds, and in the healing of this wound which never closes is the prodigious, the original in the work of man. [136]

Lorca was killed in 1936. The following year the bombing of Guernica dragged from Picasso his finest painting.

The *New Lines* poets had responded to the horrors of the Second World War with dumbness, but the young poets of Eastern Europe, who had seen their countries devastated, and starved, who had lain on the cobbles with bullets spraying around them, did not:

> It was common in those days to hear how all poetry had died at Auschwitz, but theirs seemed not only to have taken full account of it and survived it, but to have created a new moral being out of the experience, already adapted to the worst imaginable future.[2]

In his 'frozen' years, Hughes' vision had come close to that of Samuel Beckett, but the Eastern European poets made that vision look like capitulation:

> At bottom, their vision, like Beckett's is of the struggle of animal cells and of the torments of spirit in a world reduced to that vision [of disaster], but theirs contains far more elements than his. It contains all the substance and feeling of ordinary life. And one can argue that it is a step or two beyond his in imaginative truth, in that whatever terrible things happen in their work happen within a containing passion — Job-like — for the elemental final beauty of the created world.[3]

Like Baskin and Lorca the Eastern European poets were not interested in displaying technical mastery, or in the aesthetic. Such a vision as Popa's generates its appropriate style, or non-style:

> The air of trial and error exploration, of an improvised language, the attempt to get near something for which he is almost having to invent the words in a total disregard for poetry or the normal conventions of discourse. [226]

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[2] *Selected Translations*, ed. Weissbort, Faber and Faber, 2006, 206.
[3] *Winter Pollen,* ed. Scammell, Faber and Faber, 1984, 221.

Hughes had already discovered such a style for himself, in, for example, ‘Wodwo’. He now saw this as the way forward.

In August 1964 Hughes wrote to Lucas Myers that he had been sent a ‘magnificent book’ to review, Mircea Eliade’s *Shamanism*:

> You’ll be glad to know that your (& my) obsession with physical disintegration, being torn into fragments & fitted together again, is the great Shaman initiation dream. [*Letters* 235]

In his review Hughes described the shaman visiting the spirit realm (where he meets, among other phenomena, ‘the queen of animals’), and returning ‘with some display of healing power, or a clairvoyant piece of information’ [*Winter Pollen* 57]. He homed in on the striking similarity between the vocation of the shaman and that of the poet:

> The shamans seem to undergo, at will and at phenomenal intensity, and with practical results, one of the main regenerating dramas of the human psyche: the fundamental poetic event. [58]

These influences, coming together at the nadir of his life, helped Hughes to recover and strengthen his commitment to what he considered to be ‘the spirit of poetry’:

> The inmost spirit of poetry … is at bottom, in every recorded case, the voice of pain — and the physical body, so to speak, of poetry, is the treatment by which the poet tries to reconcile that pain with the world. [*Letters* 458]

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When in 1966 Leonard Baskin sent Hughes some crow drawings and suggested that he should write some poems to go with them, it was a poetic strategy he admired in Popa which seemed to him the way to do this:

> It is in this favourite device of his, the little fable or visionary anecdote, that we see most clearly his shift from literary surrealism to the far older and deeper thing, the surrealism of folklore. [*Winter Pollen* 225-6]

Thus Hughes embarked on his great Crow project, *The Life and Songs of the Crow,* intended eventually to become an ‘epic folk-tale’ studded with hundreds of poems.

Hughes had come to realize that his portrait of nature as dragon, serpent, monster, maw, was in fact a portrait of his own nightmare, his own psychic disturbance, projected onto the face of nature. The idea was that Crow would recapitulate all Hughes' own mistakes, which, he now realized, were not purely subjective, but a manifestation of the perverse relationship of Western man to the female for thousands of years. He hoped to cope imaginatively with the death of Sylvia Plath by putting himself (as representative of his gender and culture) in the dock, finding himself guilty of crimes against the female (wife, mother, anima, Nature herself), and correcting himself by undergoing an ego-death and rebirth. If he could thus heal himself, something of the healing power of the poetic process might pass to the reader.

Crow's every move damages his mother: 'when he laughed she wept' ['Crow and Mama']. His hubris is such that he is unable to learn the word 'love'. But he is intelligent and perceptive. 'He stared at the evidence' and 'shivered with the horror of Creation' ['Crow Alights']. In 'Crow Tyrannosaurus' he acquires a conscience about his own contribution, as a predator, to the universal suffering:

> Crow thought 'Alas
> Alas ought I
> To stop eating
> And try to become the light?'

But his head is trapsprung to stab, so he becomes deaf to the 'screeching finales' of his victims.

In 'Quest' and in 'Gog' Hughes had adopted the role of doomed dragon-slayer. Now he questioned the myth of St. George. Would the killing of the dragon not be a destruction of the tree on which mankind is a leaf?
In 'Crow's Account of St George' St George is seen as the prototype of the modern scientist unpicking nature. He is beset by monsters, which he slaughters, only to find, as he recovers, that 'his wife and children lie in their blood'. Nietzsche wrote: 'He who fights with monsters should be careful lest he thereby becomes a monster'.[4] Did St George create the monster which he slew? Had Hughes created the monsters of his earlier works from his own 'sickly' vision? Is Crow recapitulating Hughes' own experience in retelling the Oedipus story:

> Oedipus took an axe and split
>   The Sphynx from top to bottom

[4] *Beyond Good and Evil,* (Apothegm 146).

The answers aren't in me, he cried
Maybe your guts have got em
Mamma Mamma[5]

In killing the sphinx, Oedipus had, in effect, killed his own mother.[6]

With a serendipity which seems to have been almost the norm in Hughes' life, sheer chance gave him the opportunity to translate Seneca's *Oedipus* for Peter Brook at exactly the moment that the Crow poems were in full flow. To produce what Brook wanted he was obliged to strip down Seneca's grandiloquence to a vocabulary of some 250 words, to discard sentence structure, leaving a language as raw and barbaric as the story itself. He applied the same technique (or anti-technique) to Crow's 'songs', which shed the dressing of everything conventionally 'poetic'. It served, in Hughes' phrase, to 'crack something open in himself'[7].

The plan for Crow was that he would gradually come to sympathize with man, to admire him, to desire to become a man. He meets an Eskimo shaman who adopts him as an apprentice, and teaches him to invoke nature as his familiar:

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood.

In the part of the story which was never written, Crow's progress was to have brought him eventually to a river where a huge ogress bars his way — yet another embodiment of the female transformed by Crow's own disordered psyche into a monster. A manuscript decribes her as twice the size of a man and wearing 'a raw, stinking cowskin'. He must cross the river to reach the Happy Land where his bride, his former victim, awaits him. But the ogress will allow him to cross only if he carries her on his shoulders, and answers the seven dilemma questions she asks him. These questions in fact require him to recapitulate his previous relations with the female. At first he gives the old, wrong answers, recapitulating all his previous disastrous encounters with the female; but gradually he learns from his mistakes and gives new and better answers. The worse his answers are the heavier the ogress gets, so that he cannot move. But as his answers improve her weight decreases until he can stagger forward a few more steps.

The first question is 'Who paid most, him or her?' Crow's worst answer was probably to have been 'The Lamentable History of the Human Calf', where Crow

[5] All quotations from Hughes' poems for adults are from *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems*, ed. Keegan, Faber and Faber, 2003.
[6] See pp. 33-40 in 'The Curse of the Sphinx' in my *Literature and the Crime Against Nature.*
[7] ABC interview, March 1982.

presents himself as the innocent victim of the rapacious man-eating female.[8] A better answer is 'Lovesong', where the lovers pay equally for their mutual mistakes, or rather for being in the same trap. In 'Actaeon'[9] the fault has shifted to the man, who intends the woman no harm, but simply cannot 'see her face'. Actaeon here is a modern husband for whom reality consists of furniture, gadgets, wallpaper, carpet, hooverdust, decoration. He sees his wife as part of that same 'reality', a possession he has paid for. Her true face, her complete being, the goddess within her, is a blank to him:

> The jigsaw parts of her face, still loose in their box,
>
> Began to spin.
>
> Began to break out.
>
> Openly they became zig-zagging hounds.
>
> Their hunger rang on the hills.
>
> Soon they were out of control.

Here Crow overcompensates for his previous error, by claiming that being torn to pieces was only what he deserved for his blank inability to understand her true self, and to see how a dangerous situation needed to be handled. (This was to be a major theme in *Birthday Letters.*)

'The Lovepet' is one of Crow's answers to the second question: 'Was it an animal, a bird or a fish?' It is, perhaps, an improvement on 'The Lamentable History', 'Actaeon' and 'Lovesong' in that after a few lines the pronouns 'he' and 'she' are replaced by 'they', and there is no more blame, only weeping and ruin, leaving them both numb and dumb.

Hughes never got as far as deciding on any of the remaining questions except the last. The manuscripts list many possible questions, to several of which he attached specific poems: 'Who is the strongest?' ('The Contender'). 'Is the shark's fang a

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[8] In a 1987 letter to Lucas Myers [*Letters* 535] Hughes expressed with the phrase 'lamentable history of the human calf!' his discomfort with the role of Plath's victim given him in memoirs by Myers and Dido Merwin, both of which were subsequently reprinted as appendices to Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame.*

[9] Hughes described 'Actaeon' as part of 'continued Crow', a term which (in a letter to me) he applied to the whole of *Cave Birds.*

shape of life or a shape of death?' ('Crow Rambles'[10]). 'Which is happier? The grin of a bridegroom or the grin of a gambler?' ('Criminal Ballad'). 'Who has dealt the worse death, Socrates asking questions or the tiger in mid-air?' ('Crow's Table Talk'[11]).[12]

These seven questions required Crow to imagine something beyond weeping and ruin, something, when enough had been paid, equivalent to the reconciliation of Lear and Cordelia. The last question was 'Who gave most, him or her?' to which Crow's triumphant answer was 'Bride and Groom' where all the mutual damage is finally repaired.

These poems, like most of the Crow poems, have been widely misunderstood, not least by critics. David Holbrook, for example, based much of his attack on Hughes on the assumption that Crow's horrible errors and wrong answers represented Hughes' own considered views. Hughes himself came to realize that by publishing as *Crow* a selection of Crow poems with no narrative context, he had asked too much of his readers. He provided such a context in his recordings and public readings, and authorized me at the end of his life to publish as much of this background material as I could find and conflate.[13]

'Tiger-psalm', when first published in 1969 as 'Crow's Table Talk', contained the line: 'Kills with the strength of madness, kills possessed'. This line was surely a throwback to the attitude to nature which had been dominant in *Lupercal* and *Wodwo,* where wild creatures were mindless automata. If Hughes read Lawrence's *Phoenix II* (published in 1968), he would have found the passage:

> The tiger, the hawk, the weasel, are beautiful things to me: and as they strike the dove, the hare, that is the will of God, it is a consummation, a bringing together of two extremes, a making perfect one from the duality.[14]

Whether influenced by Lawrence or not, Hughes changed the line to: 'Kills with the strength of five tigers, kills exalted'. Animals were from now on to become for him, as they were for Lawrence, standards of sanity and atonement, 'possessed' only by the goddess.

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[10] In *Moortown* as 'Life is Trying to be Life'.
[11] In *Moortown* as 'Tiger-psalm'.
[12] Emory, box 62:13.
[13] See 'The Story of Crow' in *The Laughter of Foxes.*
[14] *Phoenix II,* eds. Roberts and Moore, Heinemann, 1968, 407 .

The tiger has been demonized as an extreme example of 'Nature red in tooth and claw'. Tennyson concluded, quite logically, 'then let the ape and tiger die'.[15] For Crow (Hughes) the tiger represents the sanity of nature, especially when set against the insane mechanical violence of machine guns. Hughes stated at a reading that the poem was originally conceived as a dialogue between Socrates and Buddha. It is an argument, in Blake's terms, between single vision and fourfold vision. Gradually, through the drafts, Buddha's side of the argument resolved itself into a tiger, and Socrates' into the principle of machine-guns, 'as if the whole abstraction of Socrates' discourse must inevitably, given enough time and enough applied intelligence, result in machine guns'. The tiger, unlike the machine guns, is carrying out a perfectly rational, restrained and sacred activity. The tiger:

> Kills expertly, with anaesthetic hand.
>
> …
>
> The tiger
>
> Kills frugally, after close inspection of the map.
>
> …
>
> The tiger
>
> Kills like a fall of a cliff, one-sinewed with the earth,
>
> Himalayas under eyelid, Ganges under fur —
>
> Does not kill.
>
> Does not kill. The tiger blesses with a fang.
>
> The tiger does not kill but opens a path
>
> Neither of Life nor of Death:

[15] Forty years ago, when this poem was written, tigers were still being hunted for 'sport'. It is interesting that the tiger has now been transformed in public perception, largely thanks to television, from savage predator to splendid (almost sacred) victim.

The tiger within the tiger:

The Tiger of the Earth.

O Tiger!

O Brother of the Viper!

O Beast in Blossom!

We must distinguish between the use he makes of animals in the early poems and in the later. Most of the earlier animals are conscripted as cannon-fodder in the doomed battle of vitality against death. They are in the same trap as man, but Hughes prefers to write about them because they bellow the evidence which man, except in moments of extremity, tries to hide. Norman O. Brown takes Freud to task for what he calls his 'metaphysical vision of all life sick with the struggle between Life and Death':

> We need, in fine, a metaphysic which recognizes both the continuity between man and animals and also the discontinuity. We need, instead of an instinctual dualism, an instinctual dialectic. … Man is distinguished from animals by having separated, ultimately into a state of mutual conflict, aspects of life (instincts) which in animals exist in some condition of undifferentiated unity or harmony.[16]

Thus, as he gradually struggled free from his dualism, Hughes began to see the animal world as offering not primarily images of violence and struggle, but rather images of harmony even between predators and their victims.

> And already the White Hare crouches at the sacrifice,
> Already the fawn stumbles to offer itself up. [‘Eagle’]

As in almost all Hughes’ animal poems, there is, in ‘Tiger-psalm’, in addition to a perfectly accurate evocation of the real animal, a human drama. In Michael J. Harner’s words (though not speaking of Hughes):

> This involves the battle of opposites and eventually their reconciliation or fusion, after giving way to death and destruction, be this by fire, tigers, drowning, or devouring snakes. The beauty of fluid fire, the graceful

[16] Brown, Norman 0., *Life Against Death*, Wesleyan University Press, 1970, 83.

> tiger, the subtle and wise reptile, these seem most expressive for the synthetic experience of accepting life as a whole, or, better, accepting existence as a whole, life and death included; evil included too, though from a given spiritual perspective it is not experienced as evil any more. Needless to say, the process is essentially religious, and it could even be suspected that every myth presents us one particular aspect of the same experience.[17]

This, certainly, is the controlling myth of Hughes' whole career. Only thus can Tennyson's agonized question, 'Are God and Nature then at strife', be answered. They are not at strife, and to let the tiger die is to let both God and Nature die.

Other questions Hughes considered, without specifying poems, are: 'Which is strongest, a crowbar or a woman's spinal column?'; 'Is a stag's antler a shape of life or a shape of death?'; 'Which is happier, the grin of a gambler at a gaming table, or the grin of a skull?'; 'Who works hardest, the woman who makes a child that she leaves on a doorstep or the mosquito that killed Alexander?'; 'Who is further from the Creator, the maggot buried in the dog's carcase or a nun looking in a mirror?'; 'Which ages fastest, care or the carer?'; 'If I am so horribly ugly, why am I loved so much? Am I really a beauty?'; 'What is beauty? What is not?'; 'What does love think about life?'; 'If there's hammer, anvil, iron, & furnace in love, what is being made?'; 'What is there, besides love & music?'; 'What is love? — what did Don Giovanni finally find?'[18]

The ogress' seventh and last question is subtly different: 'who gave most, him or her?' In 'Crow's Song About England' the girl's gifts are spurned, and she is ruthlessly violated. But Crow finally produces the perfect answer, the total reconciliation of 'Bride and Groom', where Crow and his former victim, with infinite care, reassemble each other, and bring each other to perfection. At the point where he has at last paid in full, become capable of seeing her as she is, 'she gives him his eyes'. Reaching the far bank, the Happy Land, the ogress leaps from his shoulders transformed into a beautiful naked woman, his intended bride. (Ancient depictions of the sphinx show her as a beautiful maiden.)

The Crow project was in full flow, about to move into the phase of enlightenment, reconciliation and rebirth, when a second tragedy, the deaths of his partner Assia and their daughter Shura in March 1969, threw Hughes back into the pit. In his poems for adults Hughes never allowed himself any 'up-beat' endings which he felt he had not verified, not fully paid for, in life. The Crow project was

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[17] Harner, Michael J., *Hallucinogens and Shamanism*, Oxford University Press, 1973, 189-90 .

[18] Emory, box 62:13.

aborted. *Crow* (1970) was just a selection of the Crow poems already written, from about the first two-thirds of the projected whole.

In March 1970 Hughes wrote to Ben Sonnenberg:

> I finished my CROWS — or rather, I stopped writing them. I got him right to the bottom of the inferno where in piecing together the fragments of the beloved he himself is reduced to a scattered skeleton — and at that point the world intervened. So there his bones still are. [*Letters* 304]

Lacking the narrative framework with its intended happy ending the poems were widely and wildly misinterpreted, most notably by David Holbrook, Ian Hamilton and Claude Rawson, all of whom read Crow's mistakes and wrong answers as expressions of Hughes' own current beliefs and attitudes. Hughes himself came to regret not having provided a narrative framework or introduction or notes.

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The tragedy had left Hughes in a state of numbness:

> So just let your brain give up and stare back empty
> At eyes that are simply raw holes and full
> Of nothing but blood and bacteria. ['The Ship']

The Happy Land that Crow was to have reached now seemed a fond delusion:

> And so Firstman wept on his rock of hunger
> And the Mother of All Things wept.
> Her tears fell. Only her tears fell. Nothing could be born.
> ['Snow Song']

In this limbo the only alternative to suicide or despair seemed to be absurdist revolt, as advocated by Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus*:

> The absurd man can only drain everything to the bitter end, and deplete himself. The absurd is his extreme tension which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth which is defiance.[19]

[19] *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Hamish Hamilton, 1955, 49.

In ‘The Contender’ Hughes imagined another Titan, Prometheus, enduring just such a ‘senseless trial of strength’.

But Hughes was not content to remain crucified on that rock. His lifeline was the example of Leonard Baskin, especially in his life-size woodcuts of a hanged man, which revealed to him the possibility that the agony and depletion might actually release the flow of healing *mana*. Hughes refers to the mythological motif 'that the wound, if it is to be healed, needs laid in it the blade that made it':

> As if the blade might cut to a depth where blood and cries no longer come — only *mana* comes. Baskin writes, somewhere, that his subject is the wound. One could as truly say that his subject is *mana*. His real subject is the healing of the wound. [*Winter Pollen* 95]

Like Lorca's *duende*, such *mana* is 'the goddess of the source of terrible life', but also of all blossoming and beauty. It is also 'the real substance of any art that has substance, in spite of what we might prefer' [93]. Baskin’s art transforms an image of agony and death into ‘a chrysalis. A giant larva’ [97]. It is a sacramental process, a beatification, lifting agony and death ‘into the force-field of cosmic law — which only incidentally, and to our unaccustomed eyes, wears the illusion of horror’. We may speak of this healing and rebirth as a divine gift, but we may equally speak of it in biological terms, as demonstrating 'the biological inevitability of art, as the psychological component of the body's own system of immunity and self-repair' [98].

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I first read *Prometheus on his Crag* in the Rainbow Press edition of 1973, and wrote my account of it in *The Art of Ted Hughes* on the strength of that edition. ‘Strength’ is an appropriate word. The book has strong boards in a strong purple colour, and from the title page onwards the print, bold Bodoni cut deeply into thick Italian paper, hits you in the eye. I had previously seen private press editions as beautiful artefacts and collectors’ items, having no bearing on the contents. It was only when the same poems appeared in *Moortown* in 1979 that I realized how much that ugly edition had diluted the poems; or rather diluted the attention and respect the reader brings to them. The critical reception of the volume was correspondingly muted. When I put this to Hughes, he agreed:

> It’s true for me too, the printing counts for a lot — the distinctness of the visual impact is inseperable from my sense of the actuality and organic

fullness of the poem. The same part of the brain enjoys both. [*Letters* 431]

Prometheus on his Crag was written in Persia during Hughes' visit with Peter Brook's company for a performance of Hughes' *Orghast* at the Shiraz Festival in 1971. Hughes tried to replicate Baskin's art. Here the blade (Baskin's etching knife), which must be laid in the wound is the beak of the vulture, returning every day as emissary of Zeus to gorge itself on the liver of the crucified Prometheus. As a Titan, he does not have the option of death.

According to Hughes' synopsis of *Moortown*, the Prometheus poems represent an attempt to 'waken up' inside a world made of mud, death and seeds. But Prometheus is far from being asleep. He could not be more agonizingly awake. And mud, death and seeds do not figure in the Prometheus poems. Nor do they at all adequately represent the themes of the farming poems. If we restore these sequences to the order in which they were written — the earliest of the farming poems being three years later than the Prometheus poems — a quite different interpretation of both sequences emerges.

The words Prometheus speaks are harsh and cold. They are forced through gritted teeth. It is a language perfected for the expression of pain. He shares with normal humans only the ability to suffer. Suffering is both centre and circumference of his death in life. The sequence follows closely the path through suffering to enlightenment described (just four years earlier) by Ronald Laing:

> From the point of view of a man alienated from his source creation arises from despair and ends in failure. But such a man has not trodden the path to the end of time, the end of space, the end of darkness, and the end of light. He does not know that where it all ends, there it all begins. We are not able even to *think* adequately about the behaviour that is at the annihilating edge. But what we think is less than what we know: what we know is less than what we love: what we love is so much less than what there is. And to that precise extent we are so much less than what we are. Yet if nothing else, each time a new baby is born there is a possibility of reprieve. Each child is a new being, a potential prophet, a new spiritual prince, a new spark of light, precipitated into the outer darkness. Who are we to decide that it is hopeless?[20]

In defying Zeus in the name of freedom, Prometheus has not only alienated himself from his source, but by giving man the means and the encouragement to make himself independent of the source, he has, in effect, taught him to live

[20] Laing, R.D., *The Politics of Experience* (Penguin, 1967).

without his soul. In Hughes' version of *Alcestis,* (in a passage with no equivalent in Euripides), God says to Prometheus:

> You think you freed him? You separated him
> From the illumination of heaven,
> From the wisdom and certainty of heaven.
> You freed him
> To grope his way into the mine shaft, into the bank vault
> Of his own ego, his selfishness
> And his pride.
> …
> You cut the nerves
> That connected him to his own soul.[21]

This suggests that Hughes regarded the soul as part of the nervous system, that part which enables us to bypass ego and pride and become one with the source, which is Nature.

The vulture, which visits Prometheus daily to tear out his liver, at the start seems to him simply an agent of God's injustice and cruelty.

In poem 5 Prometheus dreams himself reborn as a mortal. His Titanic awareness of 'the hook-faced majesties of revelation' streams back into his heart like a genie into its lamp, as though all the evils escaped from Pandora's jar could be poured back and sealed in. He feels he has 'resolved God / As a cow swallows its afterbirth', but finds that those evils have now become the human condition itself:

> But over the dark earth escaped
>
> The infant's bottomless cry, the mother's lament,
>
> The father's curse.

Poem 12 stands at the centre of the sequence. Here, for the first time, Prometheus is no longer screaming or incoherent. He is able to sing a song to his wounds even as the vulture reopens them.

> But he went on singing -
>
> A pure

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[21] *The Alcestis of Euripides,* Faber and Faber, 1999, 58.

Unfaltering morphine

Drugging the whole earth with bliss.

This is the beginning of Hughes' attempt to convert pain into art, a form of art which, being fully paid for, and omitting nothing, constitutes a healing balm — *mana*. It is a difficult concept which he was to struggle with again twelve years later, when he devoted three months to writing 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly': 'I've sweated blood — as never'. That essay was a response to the etchings of Leonard Baskin, and an attempt to reconcile the two extremes of Baskin's art, the searing pain of his life-sized 'Hanged Man', and the delicate beauty of his tiny dragonfly. It expands into an attempt to explain how the alchemy of art can transform the one into the other, the crucifying spike into the blessing of a butterfly, atonement and joy, by means of seeing, with revelatory clarity, 'into the life of things'. [22]

The first nineteen of the twenty-one poems express Prometheus' pain and helpless and hatred of Zeus and his vulture. Hughes leaves himself only two poems for the healing and rebirth. In poem twenty he recapitulates all the explanations he has pondered for the vulture. He has accumulated so many alternative hypotheses for the vulture's mystery that his mind circles like the vulture, seems to be bound on a wheel or confronted by an infinite recession of horrors. His first hypotheses are purely negative, but gradually they become more ambiguous — his 'blowtorch godhead', his 'prophetic familiar', 'atomic law', 'the fire he had stolen', 'the supernatural spirit he had stolen from', 'the earth's enlightenment' — culminating in his first glimpse of a wholly positive possibility: that he deserves the vulture, that it brings enlightenment, alignment

Or was it, after all, the Helper

Coming again to pick at the crucial knot

Of all his bonds...?

In *Orghast* the vulture reaches into the womb saying:

come from darkness

come through nothingness

[22] For an extended commentary on this essay, (which is in *Winter Pollen*), see Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes,* Liverpool University Press, 2000, .22-5.

come into peace

I am the god from beyond division

it is your fate

your fear your truth is your terror

this is your nothingness

come into light

and be devoured by truth

give yourself to god

surrender to me your god of truth

of light your god of light your light

come and lose your darkness

Hughes at this time was certainly influenced by the Manichean vision of one of the neglected masterpieces of this century, David Lindsay's *A Voyage to Arcturus* (1920). There the protagonist, an Everyman figure called Maskull, goes to the planet Tormance in the system of Arcturus in search of the source of Muspel, a pure white radiance which is God. As he crosses the continents of Tormance he meets with life in an amazing variety of forms. He meets with beauty and love and kindness in purer forms than they are ever known on earth, but he has to learn to reject them all, since they are all deceiving manifestations of Crystalman, whose obscene rictus disfigures even the most beautiful face at the moment of death. (The grin has a similarly independent existence in several Hughes poems.) The Crystalman principle is precisely the attachment to self and to the created world, whose varied colours and forms have been produced by Crystalman (also called Shaping) casting his shadow across the face of Muspel so that the white radiance is split and stained as by a prism, broken down into colours, shapes, phenomena, the whole material universe. Maskull is accompanied on his quest by Krag, who is pain, and who puts him through many ordeals.

Lindsay himself had seen the relevance of the Prometheus myth. Panawe, the first man Maskull meets on Tormance, identifies him with Prometheus. At the half-way stage of his journey Dreamsinter says to him; 'You came to steal Muspel-fire, to give a deeper life to men.' And Maskull's last vision before he dies

and is reborn as Nightspore is so close to the image of Prometheus on his crag as to suggest that Krag's name derives from it:

> He floated towards an immense perpendicular cliff of black rock, without top or bottom. Half-way up it Krag, suspended in mid-air, was dealing blows at a blood-red spot with a huge hammer. The rhythmical, clanging sounds were hideous . . .
> 'What are you doing, Krag ?' he asked. Krag suspended his work and turned round.
> 'Beating on your heart, Maskull,' was his grinning response.[23]

Krag's other name, Surtur, suggests both vulture and wounds. Surtur, in Teutonic myth was a fire-giant. Krag's name on earth is Pain. Maskull had thought Krag (the midwife at the birth of Nightspore) to be his enemy and persecutor until the eleventh hour. He comes ultimately to realize that it is only with Krag's aid, only through the most complete renunciation and self-exposure to redemptive pain that Muspel can be reached.

In the final poem the vulture is the midwife at his rebirth:

> And Prometheus eases free.
> He sways to his stature.
> And balances. And treads
>
> On the dusty peacock film where the world floats.

This poem went through many drafts, at the end of which only one line remained from the first draft, and that was dropped between proof and publication. He was still unsatisfied. He felt he had forced the issue. And in the last line the world loses its substance, as it never does in Baskin's work. In a sense *Cave Birds* was to be a renewed attempt to produce a poetic equivalent of Baskin's achievement.

Meanwhile, such stories as those of Prometheus and Orpheus were invaluable to Hughes, since they exemplified how tragic art can transform pain into illumination and balm, how pain is as necessary and valuable as the grit in the oyster.

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[23] Lindsay, David, *A Voyage to Arcturus,* Savoy Books, 2002, 239.

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Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exulatation'*, www.keithsagar.co.uk, 2009, page number.