

Chapter 6 Restoration: *Gaudete, Cave Birds*

After his return from Persia Hughes took up a film scenario he had written in 1964, and began to reshape it as *Gaudete*.¹ It is the story of Nicholas Lumb, an Anglican priest in a Devon village, who finds himself, inexplicably, in a Northern industrial town whose streets are thick with corpses, a Waste Land, cut off from the source, like Thebes after the slaughter of the Sphinx. From there he is abducted by spirits, and taken to the underworld, where he is shown a terribly scarred and apparently dying woman. She is the Lady of the Animals, described by Hughes in 1971 as ‘the goddess of natural law and of love, who was the goddess of all sensation and organic life’². She has been brought to the brink of death by the actions of humanity. Lumb has been chosen, like a grail knight, to heal her. But, like Wolfram von Aschenbach’s Parzival, he is clueless: ‘He is not a doctor. He can only pray’. Before Lumb can be of any use to her, he must undergo a scourging of his disconnected Protestant self (disbranched from his ‘material sap’) and a shamanic initiation or rebirth. To symbolize this, Hughes draws on the *taurobolion*, the chief rite of the Mithraic mysteries, which had survived as the ritual death and resurrection of Attis in ancient Rome, where ‘initiates in a pit were washed under the cascading blood of freshly slaughtered bulls, and emerged “sinless” and newborn to be clothed, and for some days fed, as new-born babies’³.

So that his disappearance will not be noticed, the spirits have created a duplicate of him, to carry on his work. But though the changeling looks like Lumb, he is as clueless as the real Lumb about what is required of him, since he is essentially a fertility spirit, whose primary instinct is to impregnate all the women of the parish. The changeling embodies what Hughes called in another context ‘the underground life that the upper-crustish, militant, colonial-suppressive cast of the English intelligence excludes’ [*Winter Pollen* 82]. The two Lumbs are clearly the two halves of a split psyche, the outer, over-civilized Lumb having lost all contact with his own animal self, which is repressed and, denied expression in a world of ‘sterile gentility’, turns lecherous.

The opening of the main narrative announces the main theme in style as well as content.

Binoculars

Powerful, age-thickened hands.

Neglected, the morning’s correspondence

¹ *Gaudete*, Faber and Faber, 1977. Hughes took the title (which means ‘rejoice’ in Latin) from Steeleye Span’s version of an early church chant celebrating the birth of Christ.

² *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. Scammell, Faber and Faber, 1994, 110.

³ *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Faber and Faber, 1992, 9.

Concerning the sperm of bulls.
The high-velocity rifles, in their glass-fronted cupboard,
Creatures in hibernation, an appetite
Not of this landscape.
Coffee on the desk, untasted, now cold.
Beside the tiger's skull — massive paperweight with a small man-made hole
between the dragonish eye-sockets.
Major Hagen, motionless at his window,
As in a machan,
Shoulders hunched, at a still focus.

We note here an absence of verbs, indicating that nothing is related to anything else. Letters and coffee are neglected. Rifles cannot be used, only displayed. Bulls are divorced from their sperm, the tiger from its skull. We later learn that Hagen cannot relate to his wife, his daughters, or his dog. He is a personification of everything Hughes hated about the rigid, militaristic Englishman, champion of science and efficiency.

Major Hagen, hunter and voyeur, scans the world through two layers of glass, his binoculars and the window. The world he scans is vital and vivid with motion and interrelatedness.

The parkland unrolls, lush with the full ripeness of the last week in May, under the wet midmorning light. The newly plumped grass shivers and flees. Giant wheels of light ride into the chestnuts, and the poplars lift and pour like the tails of horses. Distance blues beyond distance. [23]

What we might expect to be static, a landscape, 'unrolls', 'shivers', 'flees'. Its components 'ride', 'lift' and 'pour'. It is brimming over with uncontainable energy 'as if the brilliant real thing were happening to creatures of light in another world'. The characters, other than Lumb, Hughes wrote to Gifford and Roberts,

are the shadows of it, confusedly glimpsing and remembering, translating it all into puppet and monkey and routine reflex, and helpless to manage even that, broken or demonized by the flashes of it, enmired in bodily thickness and ego inertia, and overwhelmed anyway by the vegetable weight and confusion and dumb beauty of late May.⁴

⁴ Bentley, Paul, *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion & Beyond*, Longman, 1998, 63-4.

In his second Faas interview (1977) Hughes said that for a while he had thought of *Gaudete* as ‘just being the story of English Maytime’, in which ‘all the forms of natural life’, including ‘the actual bodies of the people’ [215], are emissaries from the underworld, the world of natural energies underneath the concrete and pebble-dash, which erupt at last, bringing chaos.

In 1972 I sent Hughes a copy of my own new Penguin selection of Lawrence’s poems. He replied that he had had ‘the intense pleasure of being overwhelmed afresh’. One poem which would have chimed particularly with his own concerns at that time was ‘The Triumph of the Machine’, where ‘mechanical man, in triumph seated upon the seat of his machine’, (the perverse will endlessly, mechanically, repeating the same mistakes), persecutes ‘the native creatures of the soul’ until they rebel and drive him mad. Then ‘the edifice of our life / will rock in the shock of the mad machine, and the house will come down’⁵.

The changeling Lumb is the personification of nature at its most rampant. The real Nicholas Lumb, a man of normal human failings, is dragged backwards and forwards between these incompatible worlds. Hughes wrote:

Idea in the style was to crush an elemental dimension into the dead end of tea-cups, spectacles, bits of stone etc. I wanted the feeling of a collision — a disastrous one — between something unlimited and insatiable and something trapped and itself a trap, between the sense of something supernatural or at least unnatural going on while the actual world yields nothing but the commonplace visible surface of inert objects and the skins of people’s faces.⁶

Gaudete is a heady mix of myth, folklore, horror film, and sensational journalism, prose and verse, sacred and profane, a desacralized human world of hard surfaces in collision with a soft spirit-filled world of flora and fauna, delicate spring shoots and vulnerable female bodies. It was, as Hughes had anticipated, too strong a brew for many of the reviewers.

Hughes’ original plan had been to write both the story of the changeling Lumb in our world and that of the real Lumb in the underworld, but finding the latter too difficult, he decided to tell that story partly through occasional leakages from that world into ours during the main narrative, but mainly, in an Epilogue, through the confused, half-forgotten flashes of Lumb’s memories after his return to our world (like the Ancient Mariner’s tale) and his prayers to the Goddess of that world. It is not clear whether Lumb has been able to help the Goddess in any way,

⁵ *D.H.Lawrence: Selected Poems*, ed. Sagar, Penguin, 1972, 219-20.

⁶ *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Reid, Faber and Faber, 2007, 384.

but on his return (in the West of Ireland) he is wholly dedicated to her, and, though now, apparently, like the Ancient Mariner, a slightly crazy outcast, he is able not only to write remarkable poems, but to call an otter out of the lough, and inspire three young girls with a sense of miracle. The girls rush to tell their priest, who had been seeking inspiration from the anchorite St. Ignatius, who had written ‘We must make ourselves indifferent to all created things’. The spark passes from them to him. He is granted a sudden glimpse of the ‘untouched joy’ which Lumb has let in again to a once ‘horrible world’ [194]. It is an instantaneous, vicarious, and wholly joyful (‘gaudete’ means ‘rejoice’) replay of what has slowly and painfully happened to Lumb himself during his sojourn in the underworld, whence he emerges as a shaman. The experience is parallel to that of the ancient mariner’s ‘revelation of the divine glory of the total creation’ which ‘renews his spiritual being’ [*Winter Pollen* 451]:

The pivotal event of ‘The Ancient Mariner’ is the Mariner’s transformation from the Protestant Christian who cannot pray in his world of loathsome death, to the (quasi-Catholic) Pagan spontaneously blessing the Creation in his world of radiant life. [456]

Some time in 1973-4, Hughes had come across A. K. Ramanujan’s book, *Speaking of Siva*, and the vacanas of the Siva-worshipping mystics of Southern India. Although they are part of the mystical process of becoming one with a god or with a divine Creative Source, the vacanas were written in a very naked, direct, personal and colloquial style, which Hughes immediately began to imitate, gradually making it his own.⁷ The *Gaudete* epilogue poems are virtually Hughes’ vacanas:

The poems I wrote in and around that time, as vacanas (an Indian form of prayer poem, specifically Tamil, I think). Again I wrote them as an attempt to reach a more direct, flexible, simpler expression of things that would be compromised by a more studied or ‘literary’ form. Each one jumps out of its own impulse, then shapes itself, extempore fashion, as it goes along – as you shape your remarks when you feel you have to get something over to somebody in a quarrel, or when you’re trying to explain why you did something incomprehensible, or when you’re pleading with somebody to do something. [*Letters* 634-5]

⁷ Ann Skea examines this process in detail on her website, <http://ann.skea.com/>

Where I let in again —
As if for the first time —
The untouched joy.

[‘The sea grieves all night’]

As Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello puts it: ‘One name for the experience of full being is joy’¹⁰.

Lawrence, dazzled by the glamour of the universe, failed to notice a great deal of the evidence, evidence meticulously noted by Crow. Hughes does not pay for these insights, as so many modern writers do, by losing his grip on the essential Lawrentian positives. In the epilogue to *Gaudete* he performs the incredible feat of holding together in a single all-embracing vision the bleak realities and black negatives of *Crow* and the joyful affirmations of *Season Songs*.

After the abandonment of *The Life and Songs of the Crow* in 1969, Hughes wrote to Daniel Weissbort:

In my saga Crow descends to Hell then climbs out to Paradise or a sort of quasi Crow Paradise. Unfortunately, when I got him right at the bottom of hell and being forced to eat his doppelganger and finding his bride in fragments and before he could get her together again (in process of which he was to become a skeleton scattered over the earth) at that happy moment everything went to hell and my sporadic efforts to get him out of it in convincing shape have been hopeless. [Letters 297]

In 1973 Leonard Baskin showed Hughes a set of nine drawings of mythic birds. Baskin’s titles suggested to Hughes that they could be arranged to tell a story (originally to be called *Cave Birds: The Death of Socrates and his Resurrection in Egypt*) of an alchemical judgement, death and rebirth. Hughes also saw how this story could be, in effect, ‘continued Crow’.

I do not know whether Baskin specified any particular order for the drawings, but Hughes began with ‘A Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird’. The twelfth and last labour of Hercules was to bring back alive Cerberus, the monstrous guardian of Hades. Pluto insisted that Hercules should use no weapon, but he overcame Cerberus with his bare hands, and subsequently returned him to Hades

¹⁰ Coetzee, J. M. *The Lives of Animals*, Profile Books, 2000, 45.

unharmd. Other Baskin titles were 'A Titled Vultress', 'A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl', 'A Raven of Ravens', 'A Tumbled Socratic Cock' and 'A Ghostly Falcon'. It is not difficult to see how all these suggestions must immediately have arranged themselves as an alchemical bird-drama in Hughes' imagination. In *The White Goddess* Graves had written:

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. ... It was the male intellect trying to make itself spiritually self-sufficient.¹¹

Socrates was condemned to death by drinking hemlock. Graves also notes that hemlock was sacred to the Goddess as Hecate.

My 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 (from one point of view) history holds him responsible, namely, the murder of the Mediterranean Goddess (as Mother and Bride). [Letters 492]

At one point I subtitled it *The Death of Socrates and his Resurrection in Egypt* — with some idea of suggesting that aspect of it which is a critique of sorts of the Socratic abstraction and its consequences through Christianity to us. His resurrection in Egypt, in that case, would imply his correction, his re-absorption into the magical-religious archaic source of intellectual life in the East Mediterranean, and his re-emergence as a Horus — beloved child and spouse of the Goddess. [Letters 395]

Hughes had come to believe that 'the whole abstraction of Socrates' discourse must inevitably, given enough time and enough applied intelligence, result in machine guns'.

Hughes described *Cave Birds* to me in slightly different terms:

The idea is to judge & condemn the guilty party — as a cockerel. He emerges in the underworld as a Crow of sorts. Through various initiatory ordeals, of a quasi-alchemical nature, supervised by varieties of owls & eagles, he is resurrected as a falcon, finally.¹²

¹¹ Graves, Robert, *The White Goddess*, Faber, 1961, 11-12.

¹² Letter 20 March 1975.

The cockerel was a traditional image for Pride of Life, or crowing ego. The falcon had already appeared in Hughes' work as a creature so specialized as killer as to be insanely incapable of awareness of anything not of advantage to it, a sealed monad; but it was also, in Egyptian mythology, Horus, the falcon-headed sun-god, son of Isis and Osiris, and also, as the resurrected form of Osiris, the husband of Isis.

Thus Hughes, not suspecting that there were to be more drawings, made a complete cycle of poems to go with the original nine, enacting the trial (as a crow), execution (as a cockerel), and rebirth (as a falcon) of the protagonist, who is a composite of many Hughes protagonists, Socrates, Egg-Head, St. George, Crow, Lumb, Firstman, Everyman, and, of course, hidden behind all these, Hughes himself.¹³

Closely related to the cockerel component is Hercules, who appears in several pages Hughes added to Euripides in his version of *Alcestis* as a buffoon, a 'guzzler and devourer', crowing about his labours, and 'deaf with his own din' to the glaring evidence of his host's distress, which 'any human being would have noticed'¹⁴. Admetos' wife Alcestis is about to be buried. It seems that one purpose of Hercules' din and drinking is to drown out the memory of his murder, in a bout of madness, of his own wife and children (as recorded by Crow in 'Crow's Account of St. George'). As his drunkenness becomes maudlin, Hercules cannot keep out that memory:

I remember going down into hell.
I hear the bleating of the dead
In the valley of death.
The dead flocking towards me.
The million, million, million ghosts
Swirling about me, with their tiny mouths.
Who am I looking for?

(Shouts, bewildered)

Who am I looking for?

I see my wife. I see my dead wife,

¹³ These drawings (and poems) were: *A Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird* ('The Summoner'); *A Desert Bittern* ('The Advocate'); *A Titled Vulture* ('The Interrogator'); *An Oven-Ready Pirhana Bird* ('The Judge'); *A Hermaphroditic Ephesian Owl* ('The Plaintiff'); *A Raven of Ravens* ('The Executioner'); *A Tumbled Socratic Cock* ('The Accused'); *A Ghostly Falcon* ('The Risen'); *Goblin* ('Finale').

¹⁴ *The Alcestis of Euripides*, Faber and Faber, 1999, 48.

Who killed her?¹⁵ [55-6]

But Hercules is sufficiently human to offer to pay for his guilt by challenging Death for Alcestis. He wrestles with Death, and succeeds in restoring Alcestis to her husband. It is a kind of rebirth for all three of them.

The birds who invade the protagonist's consciousness are all, of course, projection of parts of his own psyche. The first of them, the Hercules-in-the-Underworld Bird, is striking for its multiple, lethal, spurs and talons. It seems to be made of bronze. The protagonist (let's call him the hero from now on) assumes that this Herculean figure (his own physical strength and wellbeing) will protect him against the world, suffering, death. But he must become aware that this bird, the summoner, is not on his side. He is soon to feel its grip. Hughes' own note on the poem in the Exeter archive reads:

The hero's cockerel innocence, it turns out, somehow becomes his guilt — His own nature, finally, (the inescapable creature of his flesh and blood) brings him to court.¹⁶

The second drawing was 'A Desert Bittern'. The poem Hughes wrote for this was 'The Advocate', which did not make it into the published *Cave Birds*, and the revised version of it Hughes authorized subsequently for publication in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* seems to me inferior to the poem he originally wrote:

What is the legal position?
You are one Gargantuan debt.

Not only did you borrow everything

You corrupted the pure light
To put it to work. You stuck out like a gibbet.

And then lost the lot, with an ironic laugh.
How can you redeem it?

Not only did you borrow. You stole.
You plundered — with stretched mouth, sweating.

¹⁵ Euripides: *Alcestis*, in a version by Ted Hughes, Faber and Faber, 1999, 55-6.

¹⁶ The Exeter notes on all the *Cave Birds* poems are given in Ann Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, University of New England Press, Australia, 1994.

You amassed, you wallowed in engrossment.
With a bonfire unconcern for the screaming

In the cells.

I am their advocate. I am the balance.

I am hypodermic. My first word
Will start the truth leaking from your pores.

Here I sit on your brow, like a mosquito,
Totting the count.¹⁷

The third drawing, 'A Titled Vultress', produced 'The Interrogator', where the role of the vulture as agent of the sun-god is very similar to the vulture in *Prometheus on his Crag*. The Oven-Ready Piranha Bird is the drawing Hughes seems to have found most difficult to fit into his narrative. It provides an opportunity for some satire on the 'body of the law', but 'The Judge' seems to me to undermine the authority of the bird-court.

'The Plaintiff', in the very different version Hughes wrote at this time, is 'a holy creature of wounds / And it is yours'. It is a conglomeration of all his victims, his own daemon, his mother, and 'a horde of aggressive ghosts, not excluding the many-breasted goddess herself' [Hughes' notes: Skea 80]. The many-breasted goddess is the Mother-goddess Artemis, worshipped by the Ephesians, whose oracle bird is the owl. Each of her wounds is a mouth telling of atrocities the protagonist in his complacency has curtained off, but can no longer ignore:

And this festering, which your unconcern
Left to Mother Nature, is bulging

With voice, with the unheard-of voice
That can no longer be stanchèd.¹⁸

The voice is the voice of all the victims of man's violence, not nature's. In this draft specific atrocities are listed, death camps, Herod, Rome, Stalin ...

¹⁷ Photocopy of a typescript Hughes sent to me 20 March 1975.

¹⁸ Photocopy typescript Hughes sent to me 20 March 1975.

The protagonist's deafness to it is his complicity with tyrant and torturer. The same deafness has characterized most of Hughes' protagonists since Egg-Head:

Brain in deft opacities,
Walled in translucencies, shuts out the world's knocking
With a welcome, and to wide-eyed deafnesses
Of prudence lets it speak. [‘Egg-Head’]

This creature, a composite of all man's innocent victims, has come to supplant him. As Prospero is brought at the last to acknowledge Caliban as an essential part of himself, so the hero must take on board his guilt.

The raven, in ‘The Executioner’, suggested Crow, but more specifically the preliminary stage of the alchemical process of death, resurrection and transformation, the nigredo, which was also called the Raven or Raven's head. The executioner fills up the protagonist's world with hemlock.

‘The Accused’ contains the first hint of the refining processes of alchemy:

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

His mudded body, lord of middens, like an ore

To rainbowed clinker and a beatitude.

Hughes' own gloss on this poem is ‘The physical life of the cockerel is offered up to the Creator, the Sun-being’ [Skea 88]. ‘Clinker’, however rainbowed, is dross, useless, certainly lifeless. The beatitude then, the alchemical triumph, is in the release of the soul from the bloody, mudded, aberrant body.

In the next poem, ‘The Risen’, the clinker is the empty ‘shell of earth’ from which the reborn protagonist has just emerged as a ‘ghostly’ falcon, standing now in the doorway to another world, leaving behind ‘a mess of offal, mudded as an afterbirth’. He is like a released convict, which takes up the traditional Christian image of the body as the soul's prison. When he soars free, he heads for the sun, and his shape

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

As an abbot said to Pope Gregory VII a thousand years ago, ‘Like an eagle you soar above all lower things, and your eyes are fixed upon the brightness of the sun

itself'. In 'The Windhover' Hopkins had described his falcon as 'kingdom of daylight's dauphin', that is, son and favourite of the sun, and had dismissed the beauty of actual falcons as 'brute beauty', a mere token of the spiritual beauty of Christ, 'a million times told lovelier'. Hughes' title and the image of the cross suggest the risen Christ, risen not only from the tomb, but from this world, to be reunited with the Creator in heaven. The protagonist's annealed atoms have now become diamonds.

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

The culmination of the alchemical process is to transform, metaphorically, the base metal of mere matter into the gold of immortal spirit.

All this seems clear and traditional enough, and of a piece with a poem such as 'Song of Woe' (1970), where all creatures 'Clung with madman's grip/ To the great wheel of woe'.¹⁹ The wretched protagonist, whose heart pumps woe, tries to come clear of it, to detach himself from the wheel. St John of the Cross claimed that 'the soul cannot be possessed of the divine union [beatitude] until it has divested itself of the love of created beings'. So the man flings them all away.

He flung away the field and its grass,
The whole grievous funeral ...
He abandoned himself, his body, his blood.

And he succeeds. 'Something came clear'.

But Hughes had not long rested in this position of life-denial. In 1972 he wrote 'I Said Goodbye to Earth', in which the speaker also manages to detach himself from the earth and his body and arrive at light. But he does not find beatitude there:

I heard the atoms pray
To enter his kingdom,
To be broken like bread
On a dark sill, and to bleed.

¹⁹ In Buddhist terminology the great wheel is Karma. In 1960 Hughes had written an unperformed and unpublished libretto of the *Bardo Thodol* or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which describes in detail the many difficult stages the soul of the dead must pass through in order to become strong enough to resist the pull of the womb door and thereby avoid reincarnation and reattachment to the wheel. Detachment from the wheel is Nirvana.

Life is preferable to non-being at any price. It is better to be a man on a cross than a soul lost in outer space, deprived of its only home. This is surely what Blake meant by 'Eternity is in love with the products of Time'. This is the position Hughes recovers in the farming poems where an afterbirth is a sacred banner, and in the *Gaudete* epilogue poems, where the agony in the garden leads not to the transcendence of 'The Risen' but to 'annunciation / Of clay, water and the sunlight'. That annunciation is to be fulfilled in 'A riddle', where the hero's victim, the Goddess or her avatar, says:

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

And not only to cry. At the very time he was writing *Cave Birds*, Hughes was also writing *Season Songs*, perhaps the most wholehearted expressions of gratitude to the giver of that changed, unchangeable world of incarnate life ever written:

And the trees
Stagger, they stronger
Brace their boles and biceps under
The load of gift. And the hills float
Light as bubble glass
On the smoke-blue evening
And rabbits are bobbing everywhere, and a thrush
Sings coolly in a far corner. A shiver of green
Strokes the darkening slope as the land
Begins her labour.

['April Birthday']

Of the returning swifts he sings:

They've made it again,
Which means the globe's still working, the Creation's
Still waking refreshed, our summer's
Still all to come —

['Swifts']

And of the mackerel

I sing how he makes the rich summer seas
A million times richer
With the gift of his millions.

[‘Mackerel Song’]²⁰

‘The Risen’ ends with a caveat which calls in question all that has gone before:

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

This takes us full circle back to a poem, ‘The Dove Breeder’, where Hughes had celebrated the transformation of his life by love in 1956 with the image:

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

A falcon which cannot hear the falconer is no image of ‘Incomparable marriage’ (an early title for ‘A riddle’), of the union of opposites, of healing and atonement, however liberated and enlightened the falcon may be. The shaman always returns from the spirit world with healing power or news for his tribe. The Ancient Mariner must tell his revelatory tale to a succession of unwilling wedding guests. Lumb returns from the source to perform small miracles and write luminous poems. The job of the poet is to act as vocal emissary of the goddess among his people, however much everything may seem to be against it. So the falcon can only complete its journey by returning to the physical world to try to respiritualize it.

‘The Risen’ was not the end of the 1973 sequence:

At the end of the ritual
up comes a goblin.

The goblin is the Old Adam, the spark of unquenchable life in the flesh, what Joseph Campbell called ‘that pushing, self-protective, malodorous, carnivorous, lecherous fever which is the very nature of the organic cell’²¹. Nature will never

²⁰ Much more could be said about *Season Songs*, but I find I can neither improve on nor add to what I wrote in my chapter on *Season Songs* in *The Art of Ted Hughes*, (Cambridge University Press, 1978; reprinted 2009). *Season Songs*, though written to stay ‘within hearing’ of children, are no more children’s poems than are Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. They have the clarity and candour and vulnerability of unfallen vision.

²¹ *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Princeton University Press, 1972, 121.

allow itself to become wholly spirit. And all rituals designed to achieve that will fail.

Fired by these poems, Baskin then (1974) produced another ten drawings. To accommodate these Hughes had to invent ten further stages between execution and resurrection. These became, of necessity, more contrived and obscure, more reliant on a knowledge in the reader of alchemical processes. Gifford and Roberts describe 'A green mother' as one of 'the most straightforward of the *Cave Bird* poems'²². In the context of the bird drama it is, perhaps, relatively straightforward; but in the context of Hughes' development I find it problematic.

The *Collected Poems* contains a poem [351] called 'Green Mother', which was published in the *Boston University Journal* in 1976. This is presumably an early discarded version of 'A green mother'. Here the speaker claims to be 'the pillow where angels come for the sleeper'. These very different angels are then listed, an angel for every tree, flower, insect, bird, beast and fish, 'many heavens, none of them fallen'.

Do not think I am the stone of the grave.

I pillow the face of everliving.

Lie down — rejoice!

Among roots, among mouths.

Without any context, it is difficult to know how to read this poem. The speaker is presumably the goddess herself, offering the unfallen world of birds, beasts and flowers as a blessing. The angel-creatures are described in terms Hughes uses elsewhere for his highest praise. The angels of the insects are 'the trembling hosts of light / The chivalry of sun and moon / On the field of the leaf'. The fish are 'banners in the long flame / Of the beginning'. Yet there are details in the poem which might give us pause. Why must the listener lie down and sleep in order to rejoice? Is the offer of all these heavens only a dream? Why does the speaker need to repudiate death? And is the whole paradisaical set-up undermined by the final word 'mouths', with its inevitable suggestion of predation?

²² Gifford, Terry, and Roberts, Neil, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, Faber and Faber, 1981, 220.

Baskin's title for the drawing for which Hughes had to find a poem was 'Kindly father of lies and forgiveness'. An early draft of the poem was called 'Father of Lying Constructions'. Now the heavens of the flora and fauna are clearly temptations to wishful thinking, escapism and sentimentality. Like the holiday-hotel religions, which offer security and sweetness after death, they are balm for the 'bitumen of blood and the smoke of tears':

I am your doctor
I bring the prophylactics
Of undying joys
Among the theogonies of oblivion.

The poem is modelled on Blake's *Book of Thel*, where Thel, unable to accept mortality, a life 'like the dove's voice; like transient day; like music in the air', wishes only to lie down, rest her head,

And gentle sleep the sleep of death, and gentle hear the voice
Of him that walketh in the garden in the evening time.²³

A lilly of the valley, a cloud, a worm, and a clod of clay all try to persuade her to rejoice like the humble grass in selfless acceptance of the divine pattern:

Then if thou art the food of worms, O virgin of the skies,
How great thy use, how great thy blessing! Every thing that lives
Lives not alone nor for itself. [129]

But Thel, who cannot be reconciled to her own destruction, hearing rather the 'voice of sorrow breathed from the hollow pit', simply shrieks and flees. Blake's epigraph to the *Book of Thel* begins 'Does the Eagle know what is in the pit?' Baskin's drawing is of an eagle-owl.

There is a parallel situation in Blake's *Milton*, where the questing hero, Milton or Blake, is poised on the threshold of Eternity (fourfold vision). The last country or condition through which he must pass is Beulah:

It is a pleasant lovely Shadow
Where no dispute can come, because of those who Sleep ...
But Beulah to its Inhabitants appears within each district
As the beloved infant in his mother's bosom round incircled

²³ Blake: *Complete Writings*, ed. Keynes, Oxford University Press, 1974, 127.

With arms of love & pity & sweet compassion, But to
The Sons of Eden the moony habitations of Beulah
Are from Great Eternity a mild & pleasant Rest. [518]

Eternity, on the other hand, is a place of great Wars, 'in fury of Poetic Inspiration / To build the Universe stupendous'. The Emanations cannot face its brightness and challenge; they cry for 'a habitation & a place / In which we may be hidden under the shadow of wings'. Their prayer is granted:

Into this pleasant Shadow all the weak & weary,
Like Women & Children, were taken away as on wings
Of dovelike softness, & shadowy habitations prepared for them. [519]

But to rest in Beulah, in a state of threefold vision, would, for the questing poet/hero, be failure. His task, like the hero of *Cave Birds*, is to 'Redeem the Female Shade', his own Emanation, his mother and bride, Nature,

From Death Eternal, such your lot, to be continually Redeem'd
By death & misery of those you love & by Annihilation. [522]

Milton takes the final step into Glory, and his Shadow becomes a Dove.

There is also a parallel between 'A green mother' and Blake's favourite Wordsworth poem 'Intimations of Immortality':

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a Mother's mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely Nurse doth all she can
To make her Foster-child, her Inmate Man,
Forget the glories he hath known,
And that imperial palace whence he came.

Wordsworth thus relegates Nature to a side-show, a box of toys.

My problem with 'A green mother' in the larger context of Hughes' development is that in order to fit the poem to the Baskin drawing and the alchemical ritual, Hughes needs to regress to a Bardo view of nature as something to be shed in pursuit of a uniquely human (and male) individuation. The affirmations of *Season Songs*, *Moortown Diaries*, the *Gaudete* epilogue, *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, and, especially, *River*, seem to be closer to what is being rejected

here than to what, in the alchemical process, is achieved. What is being sought there, and occasionally, temporarily, found, is a shedding of individuality and separateness, and a merging with the timeless flow.

The birds in *A Primer of Birds* and even *Adam and the Sacred Nine* are real birds. The meanings drawn from them are intrinsic, heightened forms of the meanings we might attach to them as birdwatchers. The birds in *Cave Birds* are clearly not real birds. The meanings attached to them are symbolic, and largely, as the subtitle, ‘an alchemical cave drama’ warns us, drawn from alchemy.²⁴ For most readers the symbolism of alchemy is as cryptic as Egyptian cartouches. Moreover, even the orderly processes of alchemy had to be distorted to fit the poems to the Baskin drawings. Hughes seems to have worked, as often elsewhere, on the assumption that at least some of the power which had caused these symbols to be adopted in the first place, the power to engage directly with the human unconscious, could still be activated, without any esoteric knowledge.

This judgment follows a simple course: accusation, defense, conviction for the murder, execution after an expiatory sacrifice (the cockerel), passage to the underworld. In the underworld, a different order of judgment takes place — 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. So through this phase he does accept, with difficulty. Going through the ordeals of acceptance he is transformed. When he achieves total acceptance he is resurrected.²⁵

Perhaps, in the poems determined by the Baskin drawings, and ‘The Risen’ in particular, Hughes had allowed himself to be pulled by the magnificence of the Baskin drawings and the life-denial of the Bardo in a direction he was no longer comfortable with:

²⁴ For a commentary on the alchemical structure of *Cave Birds* see Skea, *Ted Hughes: The Poetic Quest*, University of New England Press, 1994..

²⁵ *Letters of Ted Hughes*, ed. Reid, Faber and Faber, 2007, 429.

But for Leonard's drawings as I say I'd delete the whole damned lot. There's a funny atmosphere about them that I really dislike. ... It's the last time I enter that sort of crabbing handcufflinked teamwork or three legged race.²⁶

Even while writing the poems, Hughes came to find most of the *Cave Birds* poems unsatisfactory, the alchemical imagery too contrived and remote, and decided (in 1975) to interpolate another, simpler, version of the story in purely human terms, more in the direct, personal style he had learned from the vacanas:

I ...now felt the style was, taken at such length, too cryptic and exclusive. Also, I wanted to incorporate the simultaneous drama of a man losing his soul (by a crime against it), falling (convicted, condemned because of the crime) into the underworld where, after judgements, he is reunited with his 'soul' and reborn.

I also wanted to set this in the suggested form of an alchemical disintegration and rebirth – which takes the form of a relationship between male and female, from whose union the transcendental new being is born.

Accordingly, I now wrote some pieces²⁷ to interleave with the others – in which the relationship between male and female in this world (this ordinary and daily, outer world, non-bird but human) appears brokenly through the goings-on in the cave – or in the crucible. These pieces I wanted to be in simpler, direct, more open style – shaped by the flow of their music rather than by the cryptoglyph patterning of their cartouche.

[*Letters* 633-4]

In 1984 Hughes wrote to Ann Skea:

The human scenario of the first half presents the disintegration of the female and the anaesthetised alienation of the male, and the second half the reconstitution of the female and the reunion of the female and male.

[*Letters* 491-2]

Of the 'human scenario' Hughes wrote to me at the time, 10 March 1975:

²⁶ Letter to KS 10 June 1977.

²⁷ These pieces were 'The Scream', 'After the first fright', 'Your mother's bones wanted to speak', 'In these fading moments', 'First, the doubtful charts of skin', 'Something was happening', 'As I came, I saw a wood', 'After there was nothing there was a woman', 'His legs ran about' and 'Bride and groom'.

Parallel & somewhat counterpoint goes a more human progress of correspondences, which are free & loose, contrast to the studied formality of the bird-pieces.

When Hughes proposed to drop several of these pieces from the final version of *Cave Birds*, I pleaded with him not to do so. He replied:

Thank you for your remarks about *Cave Birds*, because they made me dig out those pieces I'd deleted, and so it comes about that I rediscover their rough virtues, so much better than what I tried to replace them with, as you so rightly complain, and I think probably better than the main sequence, certainly better than many of them. In fact now I look at them I realise they were the beginning of an attempt to open myself in a different direction; a very necessary direction for me, the only real direction, and I'm aghast at the time and density of folly that has passed since I lost sight of it.²⁸

As in *Gaudete* the parallel stories take place in different worlds, 'this world', 'outer' and 'human', and 'the goings-on in the cave', the underworld, which are presumably inner and non-human. Given that Crow recapitulated human history and reenacted human (male) crimes, becoming at last (theoretically) a perfect man, and given that the Cockerel was a traditional image for 'Pride of Life', we are surely justified in taking the progression Crow—Cockerel—Falcon to symbolize the same process of human correction, humility, reconciliation and rebirth as the outer world story. Yet the phrase 'somewhat counterpoint' should perhaps give us pause. The two stories are, in fact, not easy to correlate, especially towards the end.

If we look at the new 'human scenario' apart from the bird drama, it reads very much like what Hughes called 'continued Crow'. The emphasis is on the relationship between the male protagonist and the female in all its forms, Nature, anima, mother, bride. It moves from the 'correction' of the male to the 'reconstitution of the female and reunion of the female and male'. That reunion is no longer a metaphor for a stage, the *coniunctio*, in the alchemical process within the male. It is an actual reconciliation and marriage in this world. The last three poems are all, surely, Crow's best answers to the ogress.

The title of 'The Risen', together with the reference to the cross, ensures that we compare the falcon, as Hopkins did, to Christ risen from this world of crucifixion to be reunited with the Creator. He passes through the doorway between heaven and earth. His flight is a 'convict's release' from the prison of the

²⁸ Gammage, ed. *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes*, Faber and Faber, 1999, 238-9.

flesh. He leaves behind 'the remains of something, / A mess of offal, muddled as an afterbirth'. The poem seems to repudiate what Beckett called 'the whole bloody business' of birth and death.

'After there was nothing there was a woman' could not be more different. Here the woman is also risen, from a living death, a state of mutilation such as that described in 'Crow's Song About England' (perhaps one of Crow's final answers to the question 'Who gave most, him or her?'):

Once upon a time there was a girl
Who tried to give her mouth
It was snatched from her and her face slapped
She tried to give her eyes
They were knocked to the floor the furniture crushed them
She tried to give her breasts
They were cut from her and canned
She tried to give her cunt
It was produced in open court she was sentenced

But rather than attempt to transcend her own physicality, she recovers, thanks to the last-minute correction of her persecutor, the parts of her body, face, breasts, bones and belly, and her pride and joy in them. Her recovery depends on her acceptance of the lowly, earthly origin of all bodies. Her face had come 'via the vulture's gullet / And the droppings of the wild dog'. Her breasts 'had come about / By long toil of earthworms'. And her belly was a product of the 'winding and unwinding sea'. The true source, as Whitman put it, is under our boot-soles. Ann Skea has noted the aptness here of Blake's proverb 'The nakedness of woman is the work of God'. The woman's wholeness and holiness does not depend on having a falcon on her wrist. It does, however, depend on her reunion with the errant male, and this is the subject of the next poem in the 'human' sequence, 'His legs ran about'.

Here, in finding each other, the couple, Adam and Eve, have found their way back to their long-lost Eden. In his cockerel hubris Adam had forfeited not only his partner but his 'soul', that is his connection to the source of life. Now, corrected, he is in no doubt what really matters. His parts come together

Like a bull pushing towards its cows, not to be stayed
Like a calf seeking its mama
Like a desert stagerer, among his hallucinations
Seeking the hoof-churned hole.

‘Greatness and truth’ descend on him. He has found wife, mother, water, his own natural home.

These two poems give us the reborn woman and man separately, but the final poem in this sequence makes clear that their rebirths are simultaneous, each completing and perfecting the other. Crow’s truest answer to the final question of the ogress is ‘Bride and Groom’, where both give all they have:

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.

This answer was to have transformed the ogress into her true and unscarred self, his intended bride.

The ‘alchemy’ of this process is not the alchemy which seeks to burn or refine away the grossness of the physical, leaving a diamond body or free spirit, it is the alchemy of the *conjunctio*, the chymical marriage which symbolizes not transcendence, but exactly the contrary, the atonement of the warring opposites of body and spirit, male and female, the healing of the psychic split in ‘spiritualised wholeness’, in this world, where the dirt is already god, and would cease to be of any use if it became gold.

What this process does burn away is the ‘cryptoglyph pattern’ and ‘studied formality’ of the bird drama, leaving a plainness, like the plainness Hughes so admired in Shakespeare:

Not the plainness of a white marble floor, but of deep, clear water, open and immediate. That same plainness, so alert internally, is the calm of what was both a perfect fearlessness and an unflinching, total vulnerability. The control and order of art are there, but none of the defences. None of the distancings and obliquities.²⁹

After writing the above, I was gratified to find, in an excellent essay by Janne Stigen Drangsholt,³⁰ a reading of *Cave Birds* very similar to my own. Drangsholt argues that the alchemical process of ego-death and psycho-spiritual rebirth is essentially designed to produce a finished, gem-like individual. It is

²⁹ *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, Faber and Faber, 1991, 202.

³⁰ ‘Ted Hughes & Romanticism: A Poetry of Desolation & Difference’, *Cercles* 12, 2005, 108-120.

therefore not compatible with love, since love is ‘an opening up towards the other that transcends and explodes the system of self’ [114]. The falcon in ‘The Risen’ is no more capable of love than the hawk in ‘Hawk Roosting’. It is ‘inhuman in its totality’. In the wholly human sequence, culminating in the love poems, rather than an ‘alchemical amalgamation’, we find a different process of transformation which is ‘a simultaneous dissolution of otherness and preservation of heterogeneity, so that the marriage is one between masculine and feminine elements that remain counterparts’ [115]. The distinction Drangsholt makes here is similar to that which divides Birkin and Ursula in Lawrence’s *Women in Love*, where Birkin, fearing complete possession by the moon goddess, invents what he calls ‘star-equilibrium’ as an image of the sort of balance he wants in marriage:

There was the Paradisal entry into pure, single being, the individual soul taking precedence over love and desire for union, stronger than any pangs of emotion, a lovely state of free proud singleness, which accepts the obligation of the permanent connection with others, and with the other, submits to the yoke and leash of love, even while it loves and yields.³¹

Drangsholt also quotes Lawrence, claiming that his goal was ultimately the same as Hughes’:

What man most passionately wants is his living wholeness and his living unison. ... I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me, ... the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surface of the water.³²

But, she claims, Hughes believed (as evidenced by the ending of *Cave Birds*) that this goal was very difficult to achieve, because of the limitations of human nature. No ritual can guarantee it. And when it is, momentarily, achieved, ‘the poetic subject cannot possibly assimilate or embrace what has happened. Nor can it enunciate it or comprehend it within its human rational framework’ [118]. It can be expressed only by song, dance, and metaphor, which ‘incorporates opposites without amalgamating them into a whole’. Drangsholt quotes Coleridge’s statement that art is thus ‘the union and reconciliation of that which is nature with that which is exclusively human’.

³¹ *Women in Love*, ed. Farmer, Vasey and Worthen, Cambridge University Press, 1987, 254.

³² *Apocalypse*, ed. Kalnins, Cambridge University Press, 1980, 149.

She concludes that ‘poetic language has always already allowed us to engage in a dialectic of generative contraries in which the process rather than the envisioned synthesis brings about understanding’ [119].

All Hughes’ works, like Shakespeare’s, are stages in this dialectic.

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Keith Sagar, *Ted Hughes and Nature: ‘Terror and Exultation’*, www.keithsagar.co.uk, 2009, page number.