

## The Mythic Imagination

In his address at the Memorial Service for Ted Hughes at Westminster Abbey, Seamus Heaney claimed that as DNA is the genetic code for the human body, so myth is the poetic code for the human spirit. By myth he meant not only the great body of named myths we have inherited from the ancient world, but any imaginative work that consciously or unconsciously takes on an identifiably mythic shape.

The choice of mythic subject matter or imagery is, of course, no guarantee of the release of 'mythic imagination'. Myth can be used as a short-cut to prefabricated 'profundity' (Star Wars); it can degenerate into fantasy (Tolkien); it can seduce a genuine poet to inflate his themes into cosmic incomprehensibility (Blake). Hughes writes:

Obviously many poems take myths as their subject matter, or make an image of a subjective event, without earning the description 'visionary', let alone 'mythic'. It is only when the image opens inwardly towards what we recognize as a first-hand as-if-religious experience, or mystical revelation, that we call it 'visionary', and when 'personalities' or creatures are involved, we call it 'mythic'.

*(Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being, rev. edn 35)*

The ancient myths have stayed alive, and new or recycled myths will forever be created precisely because of myth's continuing power to 'open inwardly' in this way. giving access to subjective experience in a way that makes it not only easier to understand and handle, but also, by giving it a context of accumulated human experience and a grounding in the permanent features of the human psyche, easier to communicate. It does not allow the reader, as some 'confessional' poetry does, to stand aside from the recorded experience, regarding it as unique to the unbalanced, even in some cases psychotic, subjectivity of the poet. For Hughes the greatest exemplars of such mythic imagination in English are Shakespeare, Coleridge and Eliot.

## The disease

The history of Western civilization has been the history of man's increasingly devastating crimes against Nature, Nature defined not only as the earth and its life forms, powers and processes, but also as the female in all its manifestations, and as the 'natural man' within the individual psyche.

It is the story of man's mutilation of Nature in his attempt to make it conform to the Procrustean bed of his own patriarchal, anthropocentric and rectilinear thinking. In his review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution* Hughes firmly linked the ecological crisis to the role of the poet and to the myth which subsumes all other myths, the myth of the quest.

The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost. The basic myth for the ideal Westerner's life is the Quest. The quest for a marriage in the soul or a physical re-conquest. The lost life must be captured somehow. It is the story of spiritual romanticism and heroic technological progress. It is a story of decline. When something abandons Nature, or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end. [Winter Pollen, 129.]

Man will always live by myths, true or false. But the twin myths of Reformed Christianity and technological progress (supporting each other in their fanatical rejection of nature) have proved to be false because they involve hubristic lies about the supremacy of man to nature. In the first of his two 'Myth and Education' essays, Hughes analyses, for example, the false myth of St. George and the Dragon, a recipe for disaster (first kill the dragon; ask questions later, if at all), since the dragon is Nature.

The most important role for the poet is to challenge the false myths we all live by and offer true myths which involve the inward journey and the painful acquisition of self-knowledge, which illuminate and purge the dark interior, and which help us to discover 'a proper knowledge of the sacred wholeness of Nature, and a proper alignment of our behaviour within her laws', (or, as Hughes put it elsewhere, 'to realign our extreme, exclusive attitude with our natural environment and our natural biological supply of life'):

When the modern mediumistic artist looks into his crystal, he sees always the same thing. He sees the last nightmare of mental disintegration and spiritual emptiness ... This is the soul-state of our civilization. But he may see something else. He may see a vision of the real Eden, 'excellent as at the first day', the draughty radiant Paradise of the animals, which is the actual earth, in the actual Universe: he may see Pan, the vital, somewhat terrible spirit of natural life, which is new in every second. Even when it is poisoned to the point of death, its efforts to be itself are new in every second. This is what will survive, if anything can. And this is the soul-state of the new world. But while the mice in the field are listening to the Universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stands the whole army of madmen's ideas, and shareholders, impatient to cash in the world. [Winter Pollen, 130]

All the quest myths, however far the quest hero may travel, end where he started, under his own coat. They are internal voyages of self-discovery. The quest myth which most deeply influenced Hughes was *The Conference of the Birds*, in which the questing hero, the hoopoe, together with the ragged remnant of his band of birds, arrive finally at the mountain-top where the fabulous Simmurch is to reveal the secret of it all. But the Simmurch can tell them nothing they do not know already, and reveals himself to be but a mirror or conflation of themselves. Yet their journey and sufferings have not been in vain, since they return sadder and wiser birds, bearing healing truths for those who had stayed behind or fallen by the wayside.

It could be argued that a 'living myth' is not a new myth but a rediscovery and release of the power of the oldest myths. In *The Myth of the Goddess* Baring and Cashford write:

Nature is no longer experienced as source but as adversary, and darkness is no longer a mode of divine being, as it was in the lunar cycles, but a mode of being devoid of divinity and actively hostile, devouring of light, clarity and order. The only place where the voice of the old order breaks through, though so disguised as to be barely recognizable, is where the inspiration of poetry re-animates the old mythic images. (298)

The old order breaks through, either by consciously reanimating the old mythic images or by allowing them to well up from the depths of the psyche, in a surprisingly high proportion of the greatest imaginative writers of our tradition. It is 'barely recognizable' today only because we have been conditioned not to recognize what is staring us in the face. So Auden looked at the great body of mythic imagery within and behind Yeats and called it mere silliness.

Do you remember that article about Yeats in the *Kenyon Review*, where Auden dismissed the whole of Eastern mystical and religious philosophy, the whole tradition of Hermetic Magic (which is a good part of Jewish Mystical philosophy, not to speak of the mystical philosophy of the Renaissance), the whole historical exploration into spirit life at every level of consciousness, the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision, traditional wisdom and story in folk belief, on which Yeats based all his work, everything he did or attempted to bring about, as 'embarrassing nonsense'?

(TH to KS, 30 August 1979)

And Philip Larkin gazed blankly at the 'common myth-kitty' and

dismissed it as irrelevant to his own or any other poet's concerns, thus castrating his own poetry and criticism. His best poems are about his desperate need for the spiritual healing he allowed his lesser self to spurn.

What has kept the old consciousness alive through the thousands of years of its gradual rejection and persecution, in spite of the obliteration of the beliefs and rituals of nature religions and the total desacralization of modern life in the West, has been art, myth and, especially, poetic literature. That ancient vision of atonement is preserved in myth, and both preserved and perennially recreated in art. The purpose of art is to preserve it, and imaginative art cannot do otherwise, since the very nature of the creative imagination is holistic; its primary function is to make connections, discover relationships, patterns, systems and wholes.

There is now widespread agreement that we must try to develop a new holistic, biocentric vision incorporating the latest insights of imaginative (and computerized) science. This can be attempted in two ways' through deep ecology and through imaginative art. In the work of Ted Hughes they are essentially the same.

## **Imagination**

Imagination seeks to respiritualize Nature, to heal the split in the human psyche, replacing anthropocentric with biocentric consciousness, to provide the only viable religion for the new millennium.

A work of imagination shares with a living creature or the ecosystem itself the characteristic of not being reducible to its parts, or explicable in terms of the technique of its manufacture. It cannot be exhausted by analysis. It is a system of interrelationships which, since it extends far beyond the words on the page, engages with everything else in the reader's conscious and unconscious experience, and is therefore virtually infinite. It is a microcosm, a model of the universe . The living poem is the opposite of a well-wrought urn (or billiard-ball in Lawrence's comic terminology) complete in itself; it sends out countless roots and tendrils, ripples, shock-waves, shrapnel, grapnels, to touch, engage, disturb, grapple with the world, and with a different matrix of experiences, beliefs, values, psycho-biological make-up, in each reader. In relation to *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* Hughes wrote: 'I want my readers to approach it with the Cooperative, imaginative attitude of a co-author'. This seems to me the only valid approach to any imaginative work.

Imagination is not a separate faculty which some are born with. It is what happens when the faculties we all have are freed from their usual bonds and divisions, resist the process of training and indoctrination, and speak out with the voice of nature - the voice of human nature of course, but not a human nature which defines itself in contradistinction to the rest of life, the voice of a man or woman, but not one who represses the anima or animus which is their continuity in consciousness. The language of the imagination is necessarily holistic and biocentric. It is grounded simultaneously in the depths of the artist's being and in the external universe. It breaks down the walls of egotism, sexism, nationalism, racism, anthropocentrism. It expresses relationships and wholes. Its language is metaphor and symbol. The literary imagination connects all the severed halves - inner and outer, self and other, male and female, life and death, man and Nature. Every metaphor is a stitch in the suture.

Imaginative speech is essentially metaphorical. For the process of making metaphors Wordsworth made the astonishing claim:

This principle is the great spring of the activity of our minds and their chief feeder. From this principle the direction of the sexual appetite and all the passions connected with it, take their origin: it is the life of our ordinary conversation; and upon the accuracy with which similitude in dissimilitude and dissimilitude in similitude are perceived, depend our taste and moral feelings.

*(Preface to the Lyrical Ballads)*

Metaphor is the linguistic equivalent of touch. It is the link, the bridge, the meeting, the marriage, the atonement, bit by bit reconstructing the world as a unity, blissfully skipping over the supposed chasms of dualism. Hughes speaks of it as 'a sudden flinging open of the door into the world of the right side, the world where the animal is not separated from either the spirit of the real world or itself' [*Shakespeare* 159]. Lawrence speaks of poetry as a 'magical linking up':

The religious way of knowledge means that we accept our sense-impressions, our perceptions, in the full sense of the word, complete, and we tend instinctively to link them up with other impressions, working towards a whole. The process is a process of association, linking up, binding back (religio) or referring back towards a centre and a wholeness. This is the way of poetic and religious consciousness, the instinctive act of synthesis.

*[Apocalypse, 190]*

Imagery is the body of our imaginative life, and our imaginative life is a great joy and fulfilment to us, for the imagination is a more powerful and more comprehensive flow of consciousness than our ordinary flow. In the flow of true imagination we know in full, mentally and physically at once, in a greater, enkindled awareness. At the maximum of our imagination we are religious. And if

we deny our imagination, and have no imaginative life, we are poor worms who have never lived. [*Phoenix*, 559]

The images which most consistently achieve this magic are symbols. Jung valued the symbol highly as providing the necessary third ground on which the otherwise polarized halves of the psyche could meet:

What the separation of the two psychic halves means, the psychiatrist knows only too well. He knows it as the dissociation of personality, the root of all neuroses; the conscious goes to the right and the unconscious to the left. As opposites never unite at their own level, a supraordinate 'third' is always required, in which the two parts can come together. And since the symbol derives as much from the conscious as the unconscious, it is able to unite them both, reconciling their conceptual polarity through its form and their emotional polarity through its numinosity.

[*Aion*, 180]

The imagination is by no means the enemy of intelligence or civilization. Its function is to correct any imbalance which has come about in the psyche, to reconcile and harmonize the warring, artificially polarized elements. What we call intelligence is often merely the analytical and manipulative aspects of intelligence developed to the exclusion of, at the cost of, all other aspects - intelligence cut off from its sustaining and validating connections with the rest of the psyche, with emotion and spirit, with the body, and with everything outside itself. Yeats said 'God save me from thoughts men think in the mind alone'. If thought were a matter of mind only, man would be a windowless monad, an ego-bound obscenity. Such thinking is what Blake called 'single vision and Newton's sleep'. It is the insanity of the clever imbeciles of science, business and government who have brought the world to its present condition.

At a reading Hughes explained how it had come about that a poem ('Tiger-psalm') which had begun life (in the sixties) as a dialogue between Socrates and Buddha had ended up as a dialogue between machine-guns and a tiger:

The whole abstraction of Socrates' discourse must inevitably, given enough time and enough applied intelligence, result in machine-guns ... machine-guns descending directly from a mechanical, mechanistic development of logicity which grows from the abstraction of dialectical debate.

The ultimate in 'applied intelligence' and 'mechanistic development of logicity' was perhaps the computer-based systems-analysis of the Rand Corporation which largely directed American foreign policy in the nineteen-sixties - perhaps the apogee of disembodied reason in our history, when the computerized dialectical debate focused on what figure of American losses

in a nuclear war, between fifteen and a hundred million, would be 'acceptable' or 'sustainable'. Dean Acheson said of American policies and actions at that time: 'The criteria should be hard-headed in the extreme. Decisions are not helped by considering them in terms of sharing, brotherly love, the Golden Rule, or inducing our citizens into the Kingdom of Heaven' [quoted in Stein, *Peace on Earth*, 281]. Of the brinkmanship of the Cuban missile crisis Acheson said: 'Moral talk did not bear on the problem'. Nor did it bear on American action in Vietnam. In 1964 the analysts assured the U.S. government that a war in Vietnam could be quickly won. When in 1967 the Rand Corporation's computer was asked when the war would end, it replied that America had in fact won it in 1964. Perhaps the most realistic literature of the sixties was the so-called 'absurd' fiction of Heller and Vonnegut.

And 'applied intelligence' has in store for the early years of the next millennium all the incalculable perils of global warming, of genetic engineering, of water wars. American and Russian scientists are spending billions of dollars a year on a project to abolish night by stringing across the sky vast artificial moons, each a hundred times brighter than the real moon. This will destroy all the ecosystems which depend on the age-old rhythm of night and day. And it is not just moonshine, since the first such moon, Znamya 2.5, will be launched before the end of the millennium. It is lunacy. We are also promised soon the first human clone, and the creation of life in the laboratory from purely synthetic components.

What is normally thought of as thinking, all those methods of 'thinking' which have been developed over the centuries in Western civilization, whose dualistic assumptions have been built into the very structure of our language, which has specialized in separating things from each other, then separating the parts, analyzing, vivisection, compartmentalizing, until it has drastically weakened our capacity for thinking in a way that puts things together, makes connections, perceives patterns and wholes. For most of the history of the human race the language of myth and folk-tale was to some extent generally understood, and understood to have a relevance not only to metaphysical truths, but to the health of the race and to the practical business of living. This has largely gone, except as it is perennially recreated by great imaginative art.

Imagination's goal is atonement, the healing of the split between the mind and the rest of our faculties. Starting from the narrow world we all inhabit, with its hubristic human perspectives and habitual complacencies, the imagination reaches inward towards the roots of our being and outward towards the powers of the non-human world. We know that all mirrors held up to nature, even by scientists, are distorting mirrors. All descriptions of nature are coloured by attitudes, are partly descriptions of the contents of the observer's own psyche projected onto the receptive face of nature. For the

scientist this might be a problem, but for the artist it is the whole point of his art. Hughes develops the case:

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, laws that only the greatest artists are able to restate. 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. ... So it comes about that once we recognize their terms, these works seem to heal us. More important, it is in these works that humanity is truly formed. And it has to be done again and again, as circumstances change, and the balance of power between outer and inner world shifts, showing everybody the gulf. The inner world, separated from the outer world, is a place of demons. The outer world, separated from the inner world, is a place of meaningless objects and machines. The faculty that makes the human being out of these two worlds is called divine. That is only a way of saying that it is the faculty without which humanity cannot really exist. It can be called religious or visionary. More essentially, it is imagination which embraces both outer and inner worlds in a creative spirit.

[*Winter Pollen*, 150-1]

But before imagination can operate in this way upon the outer world, it must make the necessary inner and outer connections to allow creative energy to flow through the body and all its faculties. The artist as physician must first heal himself.

## Myth

Metaphors and symbols, the natural language of the imagination, have a natural tendency to form dynamic combinations. As though they wanted to communicate something urgent, they strive to acquire the capacity to change and develop in time which is characteristic of narrative or drama. When a set of powerful symbols have fully developed their potential for dramatic narrative, we can call them a myth. A myth, in other words, is a story in which not only the figurative language which might be used in the telling, but the very characters, actions, settings, properties, are, whatever else they may also be, symbolic.

Moreover, these stories tend to gravitate towards a very few closely related shapes which seem to operate as paradigms of crucial, archetypal human psychological or spiritual processes. We can speak, for example, in relation to mythic literature, of the death and dismemberment which leads to resurrection, of the quest motif, of the shamanic flight, of the pranks and follies of fools and tricksters, of the healing of the disabling wound and



regeneration of the waste land, of the trial, punishment and redemption of the criminal, of the slaughter of the goddess by her son/consort, of Graves' white goddess and Lorca's *duende*, of the alchemical marriage, of the pursuit of what Blake called fourfold vision, of the Jungian process of individuation, and many more apparently wide-ranging paradigms. We will find that there is a great deal of overlap, that we are often using a different terminology for describing much the same thing.

It hardly matters where we begin, or in what order we look at these paradigms. Each throws up countless links to all the others. Together they weave a dense network of meanings which is the inherited wisdom of our culture, the accumulation of thousands of years of human effort to achieve some sense of the proper relationship between men and men, men and women, human beings and nature, created beings and the gods.

No great writer simply dips into the myth kitty for easy resonances. The imagination of the great writer is drawn, with or without his knowledge, towards these paradigms of human experience we all inherit. It will automatically, as an auto-therapeutic reflex, seize upon, adapt for its purposes, whatever myth or mythic paradigm seems at that moment to offer the greatest possibility of healing. As Hughes said in a discussion:

I don't think it's possible to invent a story that your whole being doesn't need in this way of a myth that is trying to heal you. ... You think of one myth rather than another because that myth is the one that belongs to you at that moment. You cannot create imaginatively anything that isn't made in healing yourself, otherwise it just isn't imaginative. [ 'Myth and Education I' ]

And in the first Faas interview he said that developing inwardly means 'organizing the inner world or at least searching out the patterns there and that is a mythology' [Faas 204].

The healing power of myths is partly a matter of connecting the experience of the individual human being to the larger human and non-human context. It was this quality, Lawrence wrote, that Hardy shared with the great writers, Shakespeare or Sophocles or Tostoi:

this setting behind the small action of his protagonists the terrific action of unfathomed nature; setting a smaller system of morality, the one grasped and formulated by human consciousness within the vast, uncomprehended and incomprehensible morality of nature or of life itself, surpassing human consciousness. [Study of Thomas Hardy]

It is not that such writers write impersonally, striving for universality. Far from it. It is an inward journey. The paradigms are located in the depths of personal experience. But the paradigms can transform the most apparently

eccentric or unique experience into something universally recognizable, so that, for example, Kafka's fictional alter-ego K or Joseph K simultaneously both expresses Kafka's unique personality and experience and enters the consciousness of the reader as the prototypical alienated European of the modern era. So that Eliot's 'wholly personal grouse against life', as he called *The Waste Land*, is received as distilling the cultural, psychological and spiritual experience of an age. Similarly, Hughes' personae - Crow, Prometheus, Adam, Nicholas Lumb, the nameless protagonist of *Cave Birds* - are all simultaneously unique expressions of Hughes' own nature and experience and mythic prototypes easily recognized by any reader willing to make connections with whatever body of myth, folklore and imaginative literature he or she knows, and, more crucially, with his or her own inner depths to which the myths give access.

Different readers will give priority to different paradigms. I shall briefly describe, in relation to Hughes, some of the more common and central. But I shall deal only in passing with those which have been thoroughly described elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

## The Goddess

In the poems he wrote prior to the death of Sylvia Plath, Hughes is concerned primarily to try to cleanse the doors of his perceptions of Nature. In the last two thousand years Nature has become in Western consciousness a prowling mass of dangerous energies to insulate ourselves against, and a bottomless heap of resources to exploit. It could be increasingly marginalized, as our self-confidence increased; marginalized and at the same time polarized into an unacceptable face which civilized man had long risen above and could now safely ignore or control, and an acceptable face, which could be domesticated and sentimentalized and incorporated into Christianity as the Wordsworthian pieties. All this Hughes tried to shed to reveal the true face of Nature. And that face, as it emerged from behind the veils, was monstrous.

The goddess first appears in Hughes' work as Isis, Mother of the Gods, speaking through the mouth of her hawk. This savage goddess ('The one path of my flight is direct / Though the bones of the living') is a far cry from the Isis who heals and resurrects the torn Osiris, then becomes his

---

<sup>1</sup> See in particular Hirschberg, Scigaj, Bishop and Skea, and the following essays in critical anthologies: Sweeting 'Hughes and Shamanism', Scigaj 'Oriental mythology in *Wodwo*', Ramsay 'Crow, or the trickster transformed', Bradshaw 'Creative mythology in *Cave Birds*', Sagar 'Fourfold vision in Hughes' in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*; Porter 'Beasts/Shamans/Baskin: The Contemporary Aesthetics of Ted Hughes', Scigaj 'Genetic Memory and the Three Traditions of *Crow*' in *Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*; Skea 'Regeneration in *Remains of Elmet*', Scigaj 'Ted Hughes and Ecology: A Biocentric Vision' in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*.

bride. Hughes' journey from one vision of the goddess to the other is the theme of Part 2.

If Nature were indeed monstrous, then man, even if doomed never to triumph over Nature, would be morally justified in attempting to do so. But Hughes, unlike Tennyson, did not turn away from monstrous Nature in the belief that we have better alternatives in morality, civilization, art, and a religion of universal love. He persisted, with the conviction of all true poets that Nature cannot be subdivided, that if you reject the violence and ugliness, you must also reject the creative energies and the beauty. The question he asks in many of the *Wodwo* poems is whether it is possible to accept Nature as a whole, to worship it, perhaps even to love it.

In this effort he was much helped by Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, which taught him to see the goddess as indivisibly triple: as witch, crone, ogress, the sow that eats her own farrow; as erotic sexually irresistible woman and procreant mother; and as beautiful vulnerable maiden. Her appearance at any given moment is largely determined by the vision of the protagonist, who projects onto the receptive face of nature his own distorted preconceptions. If he is afraid of the female, the goddess will appear fearsome to him. A black American high-school girl once showed me a poem she had written:

I am as nature is - ugly,  
When you see me ugly,  
Beautiful,  
When you see me beautiful.

We shall never see the goddess as beautiful if we bring expectations which cannot encompass the beauty of blackness, of the snake, of the predator at the moment of the kill. She is the mud-splattered 'black Venus' of Peter Redgrove's poem 'The Idea of Entropy at Maenporth Beach'. She is Lorca's *duende*:

A few years ago, in a dancing contest at Jerez de la Frontera, an old woman of eighty carried off 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.

(*'The Theory and Function of the Duende'*)

## **The hero as criminal**

It is unfortunate that the word 'hero' with its inevitable associations with bravery, nobility and greatness of soul, should have come to be used to describe the chief male character in any story, for many of the so-called heroes of myth, epic and drama are in fact criminals against Nature who should be viewed with horror as exemplars not of heroism but of hubris, or rather of hubris in their very heroism. Vaclav Havel writes:

The natural world, in virtue of its very being, bears within it the presupposition of the absolute which grounds, delimits, animates and directs it, without which it would be unthinkable, absurd and superfluous, and which we can only quietly respect. Any attempt to spurn it, master it or replace it with something else, appears, within the framework of the natural world, as an expression of *hubris* for which humans must pay a heavy price, as did Don Juan and Faust.

[*Living in Truth*]

Perhaps the most damaging perversity in our response to great literature has been our insistence on treating as heroes the anti-heroes, the criminals. Prometheus has been celebrated as winning man his freedom from the tyranny of the gods. What Prometheus did was to teach man to regard himself as autonomous, to regard nothing as sacred, to 'strike wounds in the divine environment' (Kerenyi), to relegate nature to a heap of raw materials, to regard technology as the highest achievement, to probe nature's deepest secrets and not hesitate to play with fire. In other words, Prometheus set the feet of the race on the road to where we now have to live.

We meet hubris in many of the protagonists of Greek tragedy - Agamemnon, Creon, Oedipus and Pentheus for example; in Sir Gawain; in several of Shakespeare's most fascinating characters - Adonis, Theseus, Angelo, Hamlet, Macbeth, Prospero; in Gulliver, and the Man Who Loved Islands, and Pincher Martin; in the poets themselves as well as in their alter egos from the Ancient Mariner to Crow.

The crucial factor that makes the healing process potentially mythic is that the wound is self-inflicted, so that the healing process is simultaneously the trial and correction of a criminal. Hughes once said at a reading that he was always astonished by 'the extraordinary assumption by critics that they are the judges of literature, rather than criminals merely reporting on the judgments passed upon them by literature'. The great writers are far from being exempt from the criminality of their species and culture. The difference is that the writer recognizes his own guilt, puts himself in the dock, submits to correction by his own deepest self, the voice of nature within him, his imagination.

The creative writer is not a privileged being, a born judge or infallible seer. Writers who are concerned simply to castigate others for failing to live by their own superior values are lesser writers than those whose imaginative

depth and honesty leads them to reveal, even when they are about quite other business, their own complicity in the crime against nature and their own natures. Such writers earn an authenticity and universality lacking in propagandists for however good a cause.

The crime against Nature is there in Hughes from the beginning. But in the early poems it is a crime committed by others, the egg-heads and egotists, who can harm only themselves, since they are to Nature but a few fleas on a lion, a few diseased leaves on a huge tree. Few people in the fifties believed that man could seriously harm Nature, except in very small and localized ways. It needed ecology to demonstrate that you could not harm any part of Nature without harming the whole. Rachel Carson demonstrated the horrific effect of a single chemical, DDT, on the whole food chain. Man may not be able to draw up Leviathan with an hook, but he can draw up a great many Leviathans with exploding harpoons on factory ships. We know now that the sum of all the localized crimes can indeed poison the earth, the atmosphere, the multitudinous seas. And this knowledge is only the confirmation by science and our own direct experience of what has been evident to the poetic imagination for millennia, and is embodied in countless myths, folktales, poems. The commonest of all heroes is the one Joseph Campbell called 'The Hero with a Thousand Faces', the hero who hubristically sets himself above Nature and the gods, commits the archetypal crime against Nature and his own nature, is punished, virtually destroyed, but also corrected after a long quest in search of his bleeding victim which is also his true self. Prometheus was one of the earliest such heroes, who encouraged man by example to set himself above Nature.

The great imaginative writer may be one who has achieved a measure of fourfold vision - early Wordsworth, early Coleridge, Whitman, early Hopkins, later Yeats, later Lawrence, later Hughes. But that achievement is made at great cost. He is also likely to be the opposite, for much of his life, or in his more normal state - a cursed sufferer from single vision, from egotism, materialism, dualism, who differs from the rest of us in lacking our complacency, in knowing that he is sick and striving in his art to diagnose that sickness, to punish and to heal himself. The artist is a criminal like the rest, but differs from us in that his loyalty to his imagination forces him to acknowledge his guilt and seek correction. Rarely, he manages to get himself, to a degree, corrected.

We are all criminals in the sense that we have all persecuted, exploited or denied essential parts of ourselves, particularly that part which Jung called, in men, the anima. And that innermost self is representative of all that we persecute, exploit or deny in the outer world - women, 'undeveloped' peoples, animals, Nature herself. Hughes us careful not to accuse his protagonists of specific crimes. Their guilt lies rather in a state of being, a

set of unconscious attitudes we all inherit, complacent and hubristic and inimical to nature's laws. This state of being harms the goddess in three ways. It harms the actual women, her incarnations, with whom the protagonist comes in contact; it harms, directly or indirectly, the earth, its sacred creatures, its delicate web of interdependencies; and it harms the man's own anima, his daemon, the more creative, feminine part of his own nature.

By the time we reach *Crow*, Hughes' first major work after the death of Plath, the crime against Nature looms much larger than ever before, and is no longer a crime committed by 'them', certain identifiable types, but by all of us, to an extent that makes it seem to be a defect in the genetic code of the species, or at least the male of the species. But even if going on committing the crime is what it is to be human, humans also have the capacity to recognize their own criminality and do something about it. The writer hauls himself, as Everyman, into the dock of his own imagination, as Hughes quite literally does in *Cave Birds*, the continuation of the aborted *Crow*.

Imagination is the faculty which enables us to locate and release the violated prisoner, or at least to give her a voice. Those who are most successful in this we call poets. Initially, that voice may well be embittered, revengeful, destructive. It passes a harsh judgment on the poet, our representative. The punishment may be bloody, as in *The Bacchae* or *Gaudete*, terrifying, as in *King Lear* or 'The Ancient Mariner' or *Cave Birds*. But the pain and the fear, which may be real enough in some cases, are also symbolic of a process which is simultaneously destructive and creative, the breaking of the complacent, self-sufficient ego, which is the locus of guilt. Subsequently the voice becomes gentler, and the healing process can begin.

Beyond all this the artist must, of course, have the ability to communicate the whole experience through language in a way which produces an authentic miracle - that some sounds, or marks on a page, should transmit a healing and fertilizing power.

Hughes' fullest description of the myth of the goddess is to be found in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Here Hughes makes many attempts to summarize his approach. The best of these I can find is tucked away on pages 392-3:

Confronting the Goddess of Divine Love, the Goddess of Complete Being, the ego's extreme alternatives are either to reject her and attempt to live an independent, rational, secular life or to abnegate the ego and embrace her love with 'total, unconditional love', which means to become a saint, a holy idiot, possessed by the Divine Love. The inevitability of the tragic idea which Shakespeare projects with such 'divine' completeness is that there is no escape from one choice or the other. Man will always choose the former, simply because once he is free of a natural, creaturely awareness of the divine indulgence which

permits him to exist at all, he wants to live his own life, and he has never invented a society of saints that was tolerable. In other worlds, always, one way or another, he rejects the Goddess. This is the first phase of the tragedy. Then follows his correction: his 'madness' against the Goddess, the Puritan crime ... which leads directly to his own tragic self-destruction, from which he can escape only after the destruction of his ego - being reborn through the Flower rebirth, becoming a holy idiot, renouncing his secular independence, and surrendering once again to the Goddess. From the human point of view, obviously the whole business is monstrous: tragic on a cosmic scale, where the only easements are in the possibilities of a temporary blessing from the Goddess (an erotic fracture in the carapace of the tragic hero) or of becoming a saint. There is a third possibility, in some degree of self-anaesthesia, some kind of living death. But man has no more choice in the basic arrangement than the blue-green algae.

Hughes calls this his 'tragic equation', though it is far from being some mechanical formula he has invented; it is no less than a complex, all-embracing myth, which Shakespeare forged out of his inheritance of classical mythology and Gnostic and Alchemical wisdom, all transformed in the crucible of his life and times, as his supreme attempt to convert apparently random and painful experience into a process of self-transformation:

The secret of Shakespeare's unique development lies in this ability (in most departments of life it would be regarded as a debility) to embrace the inchoate, as-if-supernatural actuality, and be overwhelmed by it, be dismantled and even shattered by it, without closing his eyes, and then to glue himself back together, with a new, greater understanding of the abyss, all within the confines of a drama, and to do this once every seven months, year after year for twenty-four years. (479)

And it is not only a matter of self-transformation. Shakespeare simultaneously expresses what Hughes calls 'the fundamental human challenge'. The equation is equally applicable, that is, not only to Shakespeare, but to the template of many of the classics of Western literature (including *The Oresteia*, the Theban plays of Sophocles, *The Bacchae*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, 'The Ancient Mariner', *Moby Dick*, *The Scarlet Letter*, Hopkins, Eliot, Golding and Hughes himself, especially *Crow*, *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete* ...), and to the present world predicament, the ecological crisis.

### **Going naked**

The very act of transforming experience into art through the 'poetic' mastery of language itself exposes the artist to a new dimension of temptation, a new disguised form of criminality. The temptation is to process

experience, in Lawrence's terms to cook it in the artistic consciousness, until it loses its savour, its very life and truth, and becomes another form of egotism. There is the temptation to succumb to the embrace of what Hughes called the 'maternal octopus' of the English poetic tradition, to produce your own version of what has been done so beautifully, so expressively, so powerfully, in the past; the temptation to write the sort of poetry that is currently valued, that critics and publishers seem to want; the temptation to put on display one's talents, as the young Yeats put all his circus animals on show in the full confidence that words obeyed his call; the temptation, having achieved some success, a readership, to repeat the same effects and write what Hopkins called Parnassian. Both Yeats and Lawrence at the time of the First World War were arguing that at such a time the poet could earn the right to be noticed only by going naked: 'Everything can go, but this stark, bare, rocky directness of statement, this alone makes poetry, today' Lawrence wrote in 1916. When Eliot read that fifteen years later he responded with rare fervour:

This speaks to me of that at which I have long aimed, in writing poetry; to write poetry which should be essentially poetry, with nothing poetic about it, poetry standing naked in its bare bones, or poetry so transparent that we should not see the poetry, but that which we are meant to see through the poetry, poetry so transparent that in reading it we are intent on what the poem *points at*, and not on the poetry, this seems to me the thing to try for. To get *beyond poetry*, as Beethoven, in his later works, strove to get *beyond music*. We never succeed, perhaps, but Lawrence's words mean this to me, that they express to me what I think that the forty or fifty original lines that I have written strive towards.

[Mattheissen, *The Achievement of T.S. Eliot*, Oxford U.P., 1959, p.90]

A few years later, at the beginning of another World War, Eliot wrote the line: 'The poetry does not matter' ['East Coker'].

Ted Hughes had the same lesson to learn, the need for the self-abnegation by a famous poet of the pyrotechnics, the 'old heroic bang' on which his fame depended. He admired a generation of Eastern European poets such as Popa and Pilinszky whose work was purged of rhetoric, deliberately impoverished, 'a strategy of making audible meanings without disturbing the silence' [*Winter Pollen* 223]. He sought a simplicity not of retreat or exclusion but on the far side of experience and complexity:

This other rare type has the simplicity of an inclusion of everything in a clear solution. We recognize the difference, because we recognize in this latter kind that the observer has paid in full for what he records, and that has earned him a superior stake in reality, which is not common. Good folk rhymes have this kind of simplicity - experience itself seems to have produced them. ... To succeed in any degree in producing it, a writer needs ... a touch of that martial/ascetic brand of



temperament - usually alien and even hostile to aesthetic sensibility - to provide the reckless drive towards essentials, and the readiness to abandon the verbal charms of conventional poetry.

[*Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar*, British Library, 2012, p.301]

The achievement of such nakedness is a shedding of what Lawrence called 'the full armour of their own idea of themselves', a form of ego-death. It is also a shedding of the husk which must split before the seed can germinate. From such humble beginnings whole new myths might grow.

### Healing the Wound

Hughes' deepest discussion of the healing powers of the imagination is in his essay on Leonard Baskin, 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly'. Here he describes the process by which Baskin's greatest works miraculously transform the greatest imaginable horror, the hanged man, into something rich and strange, the dragonfly.

The process must begin with a kind of death, with full awareness, that is, of the nearness of actual death, 'the dead man behind the mirror', and the experience of the ego-death which would necessarily follow a full recognition and acceptance of that. Hughes was deeply influenced by Lorca, who wrote of the *duende*:

The *duende* does not appear if it sees no possibility of death. ... 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. The magical quality of a poem consists in its being always possessed by the *duende*, so that whoever beholds it is baptized with dark water. Because with *duende* it is easier to love and to understand, and also one is *certain* to be loved and understood; and this struggle for expression and for the communication of expression reaches at times, in poetry, the character of a fight to the death. [136]

Baskin's hanged man is not a picture of death, but of an individual living a perpetual 'extreme moment'

not of heightened powers of life, but of dead man nakedness, dead man last ditch helplessness, dead man exposure to the crowding infinities, getting to his feet only as a Lazarus, having had life stripped off him, and the ego and personal life plucked out of him, through the strange wound in the chest. [Winter Pollen 92]

This figure appears frequently in Hughes, most notably as Prometheus on his crag and as the protagonist of *Cave Birds*, in, for example, 'The Knight'. Nor is it a picture of atrocity, designed merely to horrify. Because it is art it is also music, whose dark sounds are simultaneously horrible and beautiful. This music, Hughes claims, or what wells up out of this music 'is also the sap of mathematical law, a secretion of the gulf itself - the organizing and creative energy itself':

And so the very thing that makes it art, that gives it the ring of cosmic law and grips us to itself and lifts us out of our egoistic prison and connects, as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself - is what makes it unpleasant. ... It is, as it were, some ambiguous substance, simultaneously holy and anathema, some sort of psychological drug flourishing in the bloodstream.

Lorca called it *duende*; Hughes calls it *mana*: '*mana* as the goddess of the source of terrible life, the real substance of any art that has substance, in spite of what we might prefer'. *Mana* comes to the sufferer as the body's natural response to deep hurt, a healing medicine, a redemption. It must be paid for by that suffering. Hence all great art is tragic. Baskin's hanged man depicts the moment of unbearable pain, which is also the moment at which *mana* begins to flow. *The Hanged Man* is life-size - the largest woodcut ever made. As an engraver, Baskin literally wounds his subjects. 'It is the portrait of a total wound - head to foot one wound':

And it is here in this woodcut, in the actual work of the blade, that we can find the meaning of Baskin's line. With deep labour, he is delivering his form from the matrix. He is liberating a body from the death that encloses it. Inevitably, one imagines a surgeon's tranced sort of alertness, as he cuts.... And as the scalpel cuts, *mana* flows. That is, seen from our point of vantage, beauty flows. As if the blade, in prayer, were less a honed edge, more a laying on of hands - a blessing - a caress - and a glorification. The steel, under Baskin's care, is a balm flowing into the wound....

But in Baskin's imagination the Hanged Man is evolving further, and becoming something else too. That moment of redemption, where healing suddenly wells out of a wound that had seemed fatal, is not enough. The beauty of it has to blossom. The dead man has to flower into life. And so this skinned carcass, so wrapped and unwrapped in its pain, is becoming a strange thing - a chrysalis, a giant larva.

[92-7]

And out of the chrysalis emerges the fragile beauty of the dragonfly:

The Hanged Man is a symbol of the first phase: *mana* nursed from agony. And the Dragonfly is a symbol of the last phase: the agony wholly redeemed, healed - and transformed into its opposite, by *mana*.

This process is, of course, by no means unique to Baskin. Hughes claims that it is the spontaneous response to private pain or tribal calamity. He connects it to the mysteries of Eleusis - 'a stunning end-of-all-things cry at the death of the god - which is also the cry of incredulity, the ecstatic outcry at his simultaneous resurrection' - and to the myths of Osiris, Prometheus, Job, and the Holy Grail, to the shaman's dream-journey 'from his difficult take-off and flight, through obstacles and ordeals, to the source of renewal', to the morphology of epic, 'its recurrent pattern of recognizable episodes ... wherever the saga tells, in one metaphor or another, of the search for and the finding of *mana*'. A decade later he was to find the classic literary expression of the paradigm in the ending of *Antony and Cleopatra*:

What now remains, for this Osirian Antony, is for him to free himself, wholly and finally, from that obsolete Herculean Roman Antony, and emerge as his true self, the universal love god, consort of the Goddess of Complete Being, in so far as that can be incarnated in the body of the middle-aged Roman warrior, lover of a middle-aged, reckless, fearful queen.... While the drama portrays the self-destruction of the great Roman Antony on the tragic plane, it becomes, on the transcendental plane, a theophany, the liberation of Antony's Osirian Divine Love nature, under the 'magical' influence of the completeness of Cleopatra's. The play ... begins with the love god fully formed but unacknowledged, trapped within the self-ignorant, military Herculean *bon viveur*, who is still confidently wrestling for political control of the Roman world. It ends with the crushed, empty armour of the former Herculean warrior, like an empty chrysalis, while the liberated love god, like an iridescent new winged being, lies in the lap of the Goddess, his love 'total and unconditional', reunited beyond life and death (in the high tomb) with the adoring Goddess. [Shakespeare 316-7]

Hughes' own *Prometheus on his Crag* undergoes a similar process, emerging finally from the shell (with the help of the vulture/midwife/goddess) of his crucified body as weightless as a dragonfly:

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

On the dusty peacock film where the world floats.

Many of the *Cave Birds* poems and the *Gaudete* epilogue poems are the verbal equivalent of Baskin woodcuts.

Lumb's agonies finally earn him the right to redeem a 'horrible world'

Where I let in again -  
As if for the first time -

The untouched joy.

### **‘The value and force of living myth’**

The usual form of myth is the folktale, the narrative or epic poem, or the poetic drama (often, for the Greeks, a trilogy of such dramas). We can hardly conceive of all the painful transformations of a fully worked out myth being contained in anything shorter than ‘The Ancient Mariner’. Yet Hughes’ imagination seemed most at home with the fairly short poem. Occasionally Hughes managed to get almost the whole myth into a single poem, but most of his poems, though they plug directly into one or more of the mythic paradigms I have been discussing, do not attempt to contain the whole process. Each poem is a station on the journey, a bulletin from the struggle. Consequently Hughes was attracted from the beginning to the poetic sequence. Some of the poems in *Lupercal*, most obviously ‘Mayday on Holderness’, were salvaged from an abandoned sequence about England, in which the unifying image was to have been a river - insofar as it was a specific river, the Humber. Hughes prefaced *Wodwo* with this note:

The stories and the play in this book may be read as notes, appendix and unversified episodes of the events behind the poems, or as chapters of a single adventure to which the poems are commentary and amplification. Either way, the verse and the prose are intended to be read together, as parts of a single work.

He later described this adventure as ‘a descent into destruction of some sort’ (Faas 205), yet the last two poems at least clearly indicate an upward movement.

Hughes’ most ambitious sequence, by far, was to have been *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, an epic folk-tale studded with hundreds of poems, in which Crow would recapitulate almost all the crimes and errors of humanity, undergo the descent into destruction, but finally, with the help of an Eskimo shaman, reconstitute himself and his female victim, and marry her. Hughes had taken Crow through about the first two-thirds of his adventures, had again just reached the point where Crow was beginning to make some progress, when Hughes was stunned by the second tragedy in his life in March 1969. The wound was reopened. His own experience could no longer validate the healing process. Whereas, in his works for children he was prepared to fabricate an up-beat ending - determined on principle to do so - he would never write a poem for adults which was not authenticated by his own experience. The published *Crow* was merely a selection of poems salvaged from the almost entirely negative phases of Crow’s quest for humanity.

Crow, however, refused to die, and managed to complete his quest in slightly different terms as the nameless protagonist (cockerel/crow/man) of *Cave Birds*. Though *Cave Birds* is Hughes' most complete sequence, and has been acclaimed by several critics as his most successful, it seems to me that its dependence on rather contrived and esoteric imagery drawn from alchemy puts it, as a sequence (there are several wonderful individual poems), to one side of the mainstream of Hughes' achievement, incompletely recycled through his own experience. Hughes himself came to feel this too: 'there's a funny atmosphere about them that I really dislike ... crabbed, dead, abstract'. When he proposed to drop from the sequence the several poems which stand outside the alchemical bird drama, I pleaded with him to retain them. He replied:

I'd like to 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 probably better than the main sequence, certainly better than many of them. In fact now I look at them I realize 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.

[*Poet and Critic*, p. 61]

*Gaudete* was another attempt to get the whole myth, but it is lopsided, the melodrama of the changeling Lumb overshadowing the story of the real Lumb so wonderfully, if obliquely, rendered in the Epilogue poems.

*Moortown* is a sequence of short sequences, the farming poems, *Prometheus on his Crag*, *Earth-numb* and *Adam and the Sacred Nine*. In *Prometheus* the agony overwhelms the rather contrived ending. *Adam* is pleasing, but a little too formalized, formulaic. Hughes tried to overcome the limitations of the separate sequences by combining them with great care into a regenerative myth, which he described in a letter to me:

The first part is a life embedded in mud, body of death etc., & seeds. *Prometheus* is what tries to wake up inside this. *Earth -numb* is his failing effort to come to terms with it. *Adam* is his succeeding means of coming to terms with it. That's the general plan. The whole drift is an alchemising of a phoenix out of a serpent. An awakened life out of an unawakened.

Anything that was not satisfyingly inter-related, I kept out, or rather, it kept out. Prometheus is related to the main protagonist of *Earth-numb* - in his various phases. The Vulture not unrelated to the 9 birds. The death in the natural labouring external world of *Moortown*, which is mainly dung & death acting as a crucible for repeated efforts at birth, is a counterpoint to the 'birth', in a supernatural, spirit, inner world, of Prometheus. That's its symbolic role.

It was a case of me finding the dominant pattern in all the stuff I had from 3 or 4 years, & making positive sense out of it, rather than negative. And as it

turned out, I didn't have to wrench & remake anything, it was all there simply. What it lacks, as a single pattern, is a sense of purposive or dramatic motive. Maybe it's better that way. But it means its growing into other people will be a slow business - as it was with *Wodwo*. [ibid 90]

Unfortunately, Ann Skea, one of the few readers with the imagination to divine such patterns, did not deal with *Moortown* in *The Poetic Quest* (a splendid book which, being published in Australia, has been largely ignored in England). Ann Skea has attempted, persuasively, to read *Remains of Elmet* as a complete regeneration myth, but to do so has had to rely on an ordering of the poems which is Fay Godwin's, not Hughes'. It is, however, an ordering Hughes was willing to accept, and later recognized as better than his own two subsequent attempts (in *Three Books* and *Elmet*) to reorder the poems.

As *Wodwo* and *Crow* got only the earlier stages of the myth, so *River* gets mainly the later, regenerative stages, completing the gradual transformation over Hughes' entire oeuvre from blood to mud to water to light.

We can say of Hughes what Hughes said of Eliot that every poem must be read, chronologically, as part of 'the series which make up the poet's opus':

The poet's each successive creation can be read as the poetic self's effort to make itself known, to further its takeover. This effort embodies itself in a complete visionary symbol of the poetic self and its separated predicament. The distinguished features of this kind of image are just these - that it is visionary, that it is irreducibly symbolic, and that it is dramatically complete. The successive visions evolve in time according to the way the poetic self evolves in its hidden life. [Winter Pollen, 277]

When we look at the whole span of Hughes' work from *The Hawk in the Rain* to *River* (as I try to do in Part 2) we shall see how closely it fits most of the mythic paradigms I have been discussing. It also corresponds remarkably to the four-stage process leading to what Blake called four-fold vision.

Single vision is fallen vision, fallen, that is, from an assumed original, primal, unified vision, symbolized by Eden. At the Fall, which is both a curse we inherit and a process we reenact in every life, man is assumed to lose his ability to perceive anything in the spiritual dimension, anything as holy or miraculous. Hence it is a fall into sterile materialism and rationalism. He is assumed to lose his innocence, which is not simply his ignorance and inexperience but his flexibility, openness to experience, good faith, capacity for spontaneous authentic living; to lose his access to the Energies, either within himself or without. Fallen man lives a second-hand life, a living

death, in a self-made world of false rigidities and mechanisms of thinking and feeling and seeing. Single vision cannot see wholes, only fragments. It is analytic, compartmentalizing. It cannot see relationships and patterns and wholes, and is therefore solipsistic, reductive and dehumanizing, at the mercy of time and chance and death. Single vision is alienated, hubristic selfhood, and the achievement of twofold, threefold and fourfold vision are therefore stages in the annihilation of the self. The purpose is to regain Paradise - but it will not be the same Paradise. The new Paradise will be 'organized innocence' and atonement on the far side of experience and suffering and many inner deaths.

Single vision has been Western man's common condition throughout historical time. Artists and prophets have always cried out against it. Only the symptoms change from age to age, and the artist must diagnose them afresh, for the new symptoms are usually hailed as signs of 'progress'. Blake saw the symptoms in the late eighteenth century as the deification of reason and the five senses (Locke), mechanistic science (Newton), the increasingly repressive Puritanism of the churches, and the first mills of the Industrial Revolution. It is not assumed that every artist is born with fourfold vision and never loses it. What he can never lose is the sense of something lost, and the obligation to struggle to recover it.

Blake's use of the suffix 'fold' implies that each stage depends upon and then subsumes the former. That is, the recovery of true vision, whereby we shall see things as they really are, can only be achieved by passing through all four stages, and in this order. Stage one is the recognition of the all-pervading symptoms of single vision as such, of the need to undertake the psychic or spiritual journey out of its dark prison, and to engage it in a lifelong battle. Stage two is the release of the energies which will be needed for this battle and this journey, energies which, denied and repressed, have become 'reptiles of the mind'. Stage three is the recovery of innocence. Stage four, the recovery of unified vision, will be a vision of the holiness of everything that lives.

What I am suggesting here is that Hughes' career has taken him this very route - not in a straight line, not without temporary diversions and retreats - there are endless recapitulations. The vision once achieved is not subsequently 'on tap': it has to be won again every time. If it is taken for granted, if short cuts are taken, it loses its validity. Every insight must be paid for. Nevertheless, looking at the whole of Hughes' oeuvre from *The Hawk in the Rain* to *River*, the paradigm fits.

And at the end of the quest there is always the return, when the hierophany must be turned into words as a healing gift for others' In 1987 Bo Gustavsson prophesied, on the basis of the clearly mythic shape of Hughes' career thus far, where his poetry would go next:

Hughes' future development as a poet, if it is at all possible to speculate about such matters, will probably be in the direction of a poetry returning to everyday life. He will still be a mythic poet but a mythic poet who returns, like Campbell's questing hero, with the elixir of life or regenerative knowledge to share the life of ordinary people. Hughes will then write a Poetry of mythic return to everyday life and by so doing he will complete his career as the foremost mythic poet of our age. The aim of this new phase of his career, following the two earlier phases of m1'thic descent and m1'thico-mystic initiation, will be to anchor his hierophanic awareness in everyday reality and so further broaden and clarify his awareness of the sacred.

(*Critical Essays on Ted Hughes*, ed. Scigaj, G.K. Hall, 1992, p. 239)

And this is exactly what happened. After *River*, Hughes returned from Paradise, his spiritual home, to his ordinary home and familiar, indeed earliest themes. In *Wolfwatching* he writes again of the hawk and the wolf, but with a newly won poise, an unforced gentle strength. He returns to his own family history and particularly to the theme of the First World War in such poems as 'For the Duration', but with a new humility and deeper humanity. These qualities, this compassionate wisdom, informs many of his last poems: 'The Last of the 1st/5th Lancashire Fusiliers', 'Lines about Elias', 'Platform One'. These are no doubt the kind of poems Hughes would have continued to write had death not intervened.

\*\*\*

Like Hughes, Joseph Campbell discusses the power of mythology and all creative art in biological terms:

Mythological symbols touch and exhilarate centers of life beyond the reach of vocabularies of reason and coercion. The light-world modes of experience and thought were late, very late, developments on the biological prehistory of our species. Even in the life-course of the individual, the opening of the eyes to light occurs only after all the main miracles have been accomplished of the building of a living body of already functioning organs, each with its inherent aim, none of these aims either educed from, or as yet even known to, reason; while in the larger course and context of the evolution of life itself from the silence of primordial seas, of which the taste still runs in our blood, the opening of the eyes occurred only after the first principle of all organic being ('Now I'll eat you; now you eat me!') had been operative for so many hundreds of millions of centuries that it could not then, and cannot now, be undone - though our eyes and what they witness may persuade us to regret the monstrous game.



The first function of a mythology is to reconcile waking consciousness to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* of this universe *as it is*: the second being to render an interpretive total image of the same, as known to contemporary consciousness. [Creative Mythology, 4]

The function of all art is 'the revelation to waking consciousness of the powers of its own sustaining source'. Campbell claims that with any writer whose realization of his own experience has been 'of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth' [Creative Mythology,4]. Jung had said the same in *The Spirit of Man*:

The unsatisfied yearning of the artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present. [82] Whenever the collective unconscious becomes a living experience and is brought to bear upon the conscious outlook of an age, this event is a creative act which is of importance for a whole epoch. [98] He [the artist] has plunged into the healing and redeeming depths of the collective psyche. [105]

Jung believed, according to Baring and Cashford, that

if the conscious psyche of individuals or of groups (such as nations or even the human race as a species) has become distorted, then the unconscious psyche will, apparently intentionally, compensate for this distortion by insisting on an opposite point of view in order to restore the balance. [Baring 554]

Thus imagination is subversive, and the imaginative writer of sufficient courage says, in Melville's phrase, 'No, in thunder!' to the prevailing orthodoxies, unquestioned assumptions and shibboleths of his time. The dramatic festivals of ancient Greece virtually came into being in order to testify to the crime against Nature and warn of its inevitable consequences - consequences for the individual, for the state, and for the race. Those protests and warnings have not hitherto been heeded. The truth is too uncomfortable, the implications too radically revolutionary.

We no longer need visionary artists to give us warnings; we are bombarded with warnings from every side. The role of the artist now is, more than ever before, to heal, to discover and embody possibilities of regeneration. In 1970 Hughes said that if our civilization was about to disappear, 'one had better have one's spirit invested in something that will not vanish. And this is a shifting of your foundation to completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse' [Faas 207].

Aristophanes' *The Frogs* was performed at the Great Dionysia in 405, (possibly the same festival at which *the Bacchae* was performed), when it was obvious to the imaginative writers that Athenian civilization was about

to vanish. *The Frogs*, for all its knock-about comedy, is almost as tragic in its implications for Athens as *The Bacchae*. The idea of the play is that since the three great poets, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, were all now dead, the only hope for Athens was to send Dionysos down to Hades to bring back the greatest of them. When Dionysos gets there, the ghost of Euripides asks him what he wants a poet for. 'To save the city of course', he replies. The comedy lies entirely in the idea that a dead poet might be brought back, not at all in the idea that a poet might save the city. The absolute seriousness of that proposition marks the difference in the status of the poet in Athenian society from our own. The idea that a poet could save us if listened to would provoke almost universal laughter, not least among academics.

On the 12 January 1999, the day on which it was announced that Hughes had won the T.S.Eliot prize, an article in *The Independent* asked Euripides' question: 'What are poets for?', described Shelley's phrase 'unacknowledged legislators' as 'brash cockiness', and gave no hint that there could be any connection between poetry and the ecological crisis, the fate of our civilization, or the life of the spirit.

Imaginative art would be in a privileged position to lead the way in our time if there were a large enough readership capable of responding appropriately to it. But the capacity for such a response had already in Lawrence's day become rare:

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. The people who, having lost their religious connection, turn to literature and art, find there a great deal of pleasure, aesthetic, intellectual, many kinds of pleasure, even curiously sensual. But it is the pleasure of entertainment, not of experience. ... They cannot give to literature the one thing it really requires - if it be important at all - and that is the religious response; and they cannot take from it the one thing it gives, the religious experience of linking up or making a new connection. [Apocalypse, 155-6]

The greatest challenge to literature, education and literary criticism is to try to help readers to recover this faculty. As Lawrence writes:

The great range of responses that have fallen dead in us have to come to life again. It has taken two thousand years to kill them. Who knows how long it will take to bring them to life. [ibid 78]

In the Faas interview Hughes wrote of the call to the shaman to go to the spirit world:

He goes to get something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs. ... Poets usually refuse the call. How are they to accept it? How can a poet become a medicine man and fly to the source and come back and heal or pronounce oracles? Everything among us is against it.

[Faas, 206]

Hughes' assumption that the shamanic call and the poetic call are the same, that all great poems 'qualify their authors for the magic drum', seems less outlandish (as Paul Bentley has pointed out) in the light of Levi-Strauss's claim that an essential part of the undeniable effectiveness of shamanic procedures as cures lies in the shaman's ability to give the sufferer a language in which the sickness can be understood:

The shaman provides the sick woman with a language, by means of which unexpressed, and otherwise inexpressible, psychic states can be immediately expressed. And it is the transition to this verbal expression - at the same time making it possible to undergo in an ordered and intelligible form a real experience that would otherwise be chaotic and inexpressible - which induces the release of the physiological process, that is, the reorganization, in a favourable direction, of the process to which the sick woman is subjected.

(*Structural Anthropology*, 198)

Perhaps since 1970 the claims made for myth by Hughes and Heaney have become a little less unthinkable, not because there is any wider appreciation of imaginative art, but because the poet is no longer alone. Art, science, philosophy, religion, are converging towards a common centre which we are now in a position to recognize as holistic, sacramental, a rapidly growing awareness that, in Coleridge's words, 'we are all one life'. No longer are poetic visionaries voices in the wilderness. Their vision, formerly seen as romantic or eccentric, is coming to be seen as the essential vision of the nascent world-age.

© Keith Sagar, 2000 and 2012. This essay may be quoted within the limits of fair use, and with due acknowledgement to this website.