

The Story of Crow

If poetry is an attempt to communicate at a deeper level than any other kind of language, it is bound to confront the reader with many problems, to demand many and subtle readjustments. The poet surely has a responsibility not to put any unnecessary obstacles in the path of the reader's understanding. Yet most poets do, not least Hughes, despite the concrete immediacy of his verse at one level. It is difficult for a poet to imagine what it is like not to know what he knows, not to have his general knowledge derived from his unique reading and experience, not to know the background and genesis of a specific poem, and its place in the context of all his other writings. Hughes has himself demonstrated, in his essay on Plath's 'Sheep in Fog', that it is impossible to understand that poem without access not only to a good deal of inside information, but also to all the manuscript drafts. Hughes has become increasingly aware of this problem of communication, of the need to make sure that readers have enough coordinates to orient themselves, and has actually provided notes to several of his most recent collections (in the case of *Rain Charm for the Duchy* fourteen pages of them). But the collection which most needed notes, or rather a complete narrative context, was *Crow*.

About 1967, Hughes' friend Leonard Baskin invited him to write a few little poems to accompany some engravings of crows. Hughes' mythic imagination immediately recognized the manifold mythic potentialities of the crow as trickster, quest hero and embodiment of almost all the themes that were most urgent to Hughes at that time. The crow figures prominently (usually as trickster) in many mythologies, including the Red Indian and the Eskimo. Hughes was very attracted by the trickster:

Beneath the Hero-Tale, like the satyr behind the Tragedy, is the Trickster Saga, a series of Tragicomedies. It is a series, and never properly tragic, because Trickster, demon of phallic energy, bearing the spirit of the sperm, is repetitive and indestructible. No matter what fatal mistakes he makes, and what tragic flaws he indulges, he refuses to let sufferings or death detain him. but always circumvents them, and never. despairs. Too full of opportunistic ideas for sexual samadhi, too unevolved for spiritual ecstasy, too deathless for tragic joy, he rattles along on biological glee. (Winter Pollen, 241)

Crow, once conceived, completely possessed Hughes, grew out of all proportion to his origins, and became the protagonist of *The Life and Songs of the Crow*, an 'epic folk-tale' in prose, studded with

hundreds of poems, most of them the 'super-ugly' songs of Crow or songs about him, some the songs of other birds and characters in the story. The tale drew not only on trickster mythology, but on the whole body of myth, folklore and literature with which Hughes had by the late sixties familiarized himself. Its basic shape was that of the traditional quest narrative, ending, like all quests, with the hero's emergence from the blackness of his crimes and sufferings into a raw wisdom, the healing of the split within him, the release of his own deepest humanity, all expressed in images of ego-death, rebirth and marriage.

Like all Hughes' protagonists - Prometheus, Adam, the nameless hero of *Cave Birds* and Nicholas Lumb in *Gaudete*, Crow was to function to some extent as an alter ego for Hughes, recapitulating aspects of his own experience. In a work for children such as *The Iron Man*, an up-beat ending could be manufactured, but in a fully adult work such an ending had to be validated in life, and events in Hughes' life in 1969 plunged him back into the pit. He felt he could not continue the story beyond the point he had reached, where Crow was just beginning the upward movement of the final third. He abandoned the larger project entirely (though years of work and boxes of manuscripts had gone into it) and merely salvaged in *Crow* (1970) some of the poems from the first two thirds, with no attempt to provide them with a context. In a 1970 radio interview Hughes said:

The main story takes the Crow through a series of experiences which alter him in one way and another, take him to the bottom and then take him to the top, and eventually the whole purpose of the thing is to try to turn him into a man, which, as it stands, the story nearly succeeds in doing, but I haven't completed it, and whether one could complete it I don't know.

Or maybe, he added, he might 'use all the material in some other way'.

Crow in fact refused to be killed off in 1969, and Hughes wrote many more Crow poems, some of which are incorporated in *Cave Birds*, but most of which are scattered in limited editions or obscure magazines or unpublished.

Hughes later regretted having published the poems in this manner:

A more graphic idea of the context - of the traditional convention I set out to exploit, as far as I could, and of the essential line and level of the narrative, which might make some misreadings less likely - ought to have been part of those published fragments.

(‘A Reply to My Critics’, 1981)

He attempted to provide this belatedly by publishing several articles and interviews on aspects of *Crow*, and by summarizing large segments of the narrative whenever he introduced the poems in recordings and at readings. But all this reached very few readers, and misreadings are still common, not least by professional critics, some of whom have given the poems precisely the opposite interpretation required by the missing context.

In what follows I have attempted to reconstruct the whole story, keeping close to Hughes' own words, by amalgamating segments of the story from recordings, broadcasts, readings, essays and letters.

The story begins in Heaven. God is trying to sleep after the hard labour of creation, but He finds it impossible to sleep. As soon as He begins to doze, He has a terrible nightmare - always the same nightmare. A giant hand grabs Him by the throat and throttles Him. This hand lifts Him out of Heaven, shakes him beyond the last stars, ploughs the earth with his face, making new valleys and new mountain ranges, and throws him back into heaven in a cold sweat. At the same time, the hand seems to be laughing. Every time he falls asleep, this Hand arrives, and he knows in his dream that this hand is also a voice. And he can't understand how there can be anything in his creation (since he considers, being God, that he created everything) that can be so unknown to him, and so hostile. Who created this thing that has such power over His sleep?

So there are long episodes where he tries to get this nightmare to divulge its secret. When at last the voice speaks, it abuses God, and is full of mockery of His creation, especially the crown of His creation - mankind. How could God take pride in such a paltry, ugly, miserable, futile being? God becomes very angry and defends man as god-like and noble. But the voice becomes only more and more derisive.

While the debate is going on, Man, on earth, has sent up a representative to the Gate of Heaven, and this Representative has been knocking on the mighty marble gates, and God has been so preoccupied with the nightmare that he hasn't heard him. And so this little figure is sitting at the Gate of Heaven waiting for God to hear him. At that point in the argument, where God is saying 'You're quite wrong', that Man is really a superb success on the earth, the voice, as the last, absolute, triumphant point in his argument, says 'Listen to

what he's saying.' And the figure says to God 'take life back'. Man has sent this little figure up to ask God to take life back, because men are fed up with it. God is enraged that Man has let him down, and in a voice of tremendous fury, He challenges the voice to do better. He gives the voice the freedom of the earth to go and produce something better than Man, given the materials and the whole set-up, to produce something better than Man. And this is what the voice has been contriving to bring about. So with a howl of delight he plunges down into matter, and God turns Man round and pushes him back down into the world. God is very curious to see what this production by the voice will be.

The voice begins to ferment and gestate in matter, and the little thing begins to develop. A little nucleus of something-or-other, a little embryo begins. But before it can get born it has to go through all manner of adventures, and find its way to a womb, and then through the womb, and finally out of the womb and into the world.

First of all he's nothing at all. He's just a black lump. Eventually, as things go along and experience defines him and exercises him and enlightens him, he becomes something like a crow. Nobody knows quite how Crow was created, or how he appeared. There are several contradictory, apocryphal stories. 'Two Legends', 'Lineage' and 'A Kill' are some of them. Right at the womb-door he meets an examiner and has to pass an oral examination. Because of all the adventures he's been through, he's a very canny embryo now so his answers are circumspect. The first question is 'Who owns these scrawny little feet?' He thinks he's going to be outflanked in some way. He thinks long thoughts, short thoughts, and he answers 'Death'.

Having been created, he's put through various adventures and disasters and trials and ordeals, a pin-table of casual experiences, and the effect of all these is to alter him not at all, then alter him a great deal, completely transform him, tear him to bits, put him together again, and produce him a little bit changed. He's a man to correct man, but of course he's not a man, he's a crow. And maybe his ambition is to become a man, which he never quite manages.

The world he appears into is a world where everything is happening simultaneously, so the beginning and the end are present, and all the episodes of history are present, as in all the different rooms of a gigantic hotel, and every single thing goes on happening for the first time forever.

God, having come down into the world to see how this creature is going to size up, first sees what a wretched, black, horrible little nothing it is. He befriends the strange, helpless little creature. He's rather

indulgent towards it and tends to let it look on while he shows the marvels of the beginning. So God lets Crow watch the creation of man and woman. Eden is all going on, and God has the old Talmudic problem with Adam and Eve. The Talmudic legend is that when God created Adam and Eve, he took clays from the four corners of the earth, waters from the great rivers, so that Man shouldn't feel lost wherever he wandered on the earth, and he modelled these two beautiful people. But then he couldn't get the souls into them. The souls stay away out in the gulf for five hundred years howling and wailing because, being perfectly clairvoyant, they don't want the lives that they are going to have to live. And eventually he gets them in by music.

God lets Crow into these early experiments as a sort of mascot. Then (in 'A Childish Prank') Crow sees a short cut, a very obvious short cut it seems now, which has great consequences in the story later on. God forgives him for that. In 'Crow's First Lesson' he gives Crow another chance, again with serious consequences. God, who was initially indulgent, becomes worried, because he sees that this is an alert little beast, so he begins to try to frustrate him.

Crow is simply a pupil of God's in the early world, just a little childish hanger-on to the events of the creation. Crow interferes at every point, of course, because God, having created the world, has created it slightly wrong, and Crow's efforts over-correct it. This particular God, of course, is the man-created, broken down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion, who bears about the same relationship to the Creator as, say, ordinary English does to reality. He accompanies Crow through the world, in many guises, mis-teaching, deluding, tempting, opposing and at every point trying to discourage or destroy him. To begin with Crow is full of flawless courage, but then he becomes, through what happens to him, more complicated. All God does to him simply toughens him up, wises him up.

Most of the story is prose. The poems are here and there along the narrative. The original idea was simply to get the Crow's songs, not so much the stories about him - the things he sang and the songs that various things sang back at him. As he goes along he holds dialogues with everything he meets: rocks and trees and rivers and so on. Every plant, stone, creature, has its own version of any event. Everything sings its own song about itself,

Crow wanders over the earth staring at creation. He begins to learn strange lessons about the creation and about himself. The hopeful sign is that he recognizes pain - or rather 'travail'. He does not recognize it so much as become conscious of it by projecting it, because he too

is in pain, though he doesn't know it. Everything in himself that he refuses to acknowledge is in pain. And pain calls to pain. Mystified, he detects this. He experiences the whole exchange, yet observes it as a non-participant. In other words, he is still infantile - he evades the reality in himself. Or, for some reason or other, he cannot yet recognize it, so does not take responsibility for it, and so remains infantile.

As he learns more, he thinks more. He begins to wonder where he came from, who created him. Crow sees wonders, horrors, follies. He learns a thing or two about them. Occasionally, fury gets the better of him, and he decides to solve the mystery by force.

In these ways, little by little, he learns who he is. But the more He learns about himself, the clearer and closer the real problems come. As he goes along he finds himself involved repeatedly with various Female figures, and this coincides with a growing curiosity about his Own make-up. A certain question begins to trouble him more and more, fundamental and simple: "Who made me?" This curiosity turns into a search, and becomes a serious quest for whoever made him, a quest to locate and release his own creator, God's nameless prisoner, whom he encounters repeatedly, but always in some unrecognizable form.

He journeys on, always looking for his creator, following every clue. He begins to question everything he meets for clues to his creator, and he follows these clues and they inevitably and repeatedly lead him to some sort of female being. His misfortune is that he always bungles the encounter. Again and again, this search brings him to some being that he hopes will be his creator, but it always turns out to be something else. At least it seems to Crow every time that this being is not his creator. He never understands that this is what he is actually looking for. He's expecting a male being. It's female, but not beautiful or obviously female. It's seemingly monstrous and enigmatic. He misinterprets it. He tries to destroy it ('A Horrible Religious Error'). He mismanages his opportunity to find whatever it might be that this thing holds for him. So it's a disaster, and he has to go right back and start again. So his whole life is one succession of adventures with female beings.

Often wearied by his search and his travails, he feels low. Ordinary human reflexes puzzle him, like laughter. Sometimes he just wonders about himself and his quest. The power of thoughts, he realizes, is very strange, very real. The power of words, too, is very great, he finds, but not quite great enough.

So he goes along, always looking for his creator, getting help wherever he can, trying to make use of everything, but not always with

very much success. He sees many strange things, and tries to understand them. The world he sees is definitely a very strange place, a painful place, sometimes a very dark place. He sees that if he is going to survive, he needs supernatural strength. And yet he has to survive. The world is suddenly dangerous, but Crow struggles to cope. He sees that God's creation is a commendable effort, but it's constantly falling apart. God himself seems weary of it. Crow sees the creation needs help. On every side, things go wrong, great and small. He makes songs about it all.

He becomes more learned too, and involved in all the cultures, intrigued by all the possibilities and the interesting tales. He encounters all sorts of cultural monuments, and begins to realize that the whole business of religion and so on is very much a game for everybody, and that really it's a matter of rearranging the elements in the plot. One religion arranges it this way, another religion arranges it that way, similar elements, or even the same elements. He sees that in fact anybody can do it, and that most arrangements are greatly mistaken. He can see that there is after all a very simple explanation for the obvious elements in the religion of this particular God that he's encountered. So he simply rearranges them ('Apple Tragedy').

In his travels, he has heard many stories, many variants of stories, and he watches the dramas Man puts on the stage. He sees that some have more truth than others. As he gets older, more aware, more able to deal with what happens, he begins to invent his own variants and his own drama but it's very crude. He never gets much beyond the bare outline. He produces plays and stories, but can never get more than two characters into them, and always the same two, a man and a woman. Early on he encounters the literature of Oedipus. He reads Sophocles and Seneca and Freud, and decides they all got it wrong, so he makes his version ('Song for a Phallus'). 'Notes for a Little play' is one of his efforts, a simple outline just like a stage direction. Sometimes he makes observations about the characters in his plays ('Fragment of an Ancient Tablet'); occasionally, he simply recounts a note for a dramatic scene ('Crow Paints Himself into a Chinese Mural'). Perhaps it came to him in a dream.

One problem Crow can see is the universal business of Death. He decides to tackle Death ('Crow Sickened'). He makes a head-on attempt to grasp the truth of things. 'Maybe', he thinks, 'maybe it was Truth who created me.' At last, in 'Truth Kills Everybody', he's located what he thinks is the truth, in the shape of Proteus, a sea-god who can change into any shape. The hero who wants to speak to Proteus has to grab him and hang on to him, and not be frightened by whatever he

turns himself into, until he finally turns back into himself. Crow knows that he has to come to terms with reality somehow. He understands at last that he has to accept the way things are, the nothingness in which everything began, the fire of the sun in which everything will end. The 'violence' of this poem, therefore, is limited to a purely psychological and even barely conscious event. Either Crow gives up or he breaks through to what he wants and is exploded by it - his culpable ego-machinery is exploded. That he explodes is positive. It is not an image of 'violence' but an image of breakthrough. If he had withdrawn, he would have remained fixed in his error. That he pushes to the point where he is annihilated means that now nothing remains for him but what has exploded him - his inner link with his creator, a thing of spirit-fire ('he that loses his life shall find it' etc.). This is Crow's greatest step forward. But he regresses, and has to make it again and again, before his gain is finally consolidated in his union with his bride.

Eventually Crow meets the ghost of an Eskimo hunter, who adopts him and becomes his mentor. As a medium might have a Red Indian guide, he has an Eskimo guide. Because he's failing on the way, the Eskimo supports him, and shows him how to muster his energies and spirits. He does this by teaching him little stories and songs. The Eskimo convention is that your good spirits live in various songs and when you learn one of these songs you get that particular spirit. When you give the song away you lose it. So the Eskimo's giving him these spirits. The more of these songs Crow possesses, the better armed he is against all the trials that beset him. Each song contains a helpful spirit, a power. One of these magical songs is called 'Littleblood'. One's a little fable in the shape of a song: 'How Water Began to Play'. This guide promises to lead him finally to his creator.

Crow comes to a river which he must cross to get to the Happy Land where he believes his bride awaits him. Sitting beside the river is a hag, an ogress, a great monstrous assemblage of all the horrific parts of all the female beings that he's encountered on the way. She demands that he carry her across the river. She's huge, so he has no choice. So he gets her up on his shoulders, piggy-back, and wades into the river. Suddenly she begins to get heavier and heavier, until her weight drives him down into the gravel. When the water is level with his chin, she stops growing heavier and asks him a question. It is a question about all the female figures he's encountered on his journey, about the relationship between male and female, about love. But it is also a dilemma question, that is a question without any final answer, or with several contradictory answers. Nevertheless, the great hag demands not only that he answer the question,

but that he sing the answer. But he is only a crow so he sings a primitive one-note croak. He tries to answer, but most of his answer is sadly wrong. So he has to keep starting again, correcting his tack. Wherever his answer approaches the truth, the ogress becomes lighter, and when he goes wrong she becomes heavier. So he just has to home in on the fragment of rightness in his answers, like a negative feedback machine. So every line that he sings is a new start, a new answer. At last he gets her back to her original weight, then he steps out of the hole and sets off again across the river. But soon her weight increases again and he cannot move until he has answered another question. This happens seven times. With each question Crow learns from his earlier mistakes, and makes fewer.¹

The questions change. They begin at the negative extreme and end at the positive. The first question expects the darkest answer: 'Who paid most, him or her?' Crow's answer is 'Lovesong'. The third question is 'Was it animal, or was it a bird?' Crow's answer is 'The Lovepet'. The last, and seventh, question, when they are close to the far side of the river, expects a joyful answer. The question is 'Who gave most, him or her?'. Crow's answer is 'Bride and groom lie hidden for three days'. At this point the hag leaps from his back. She has become a beautiful, lithe, naked maiden, who runs towards an oak-wood with Crow in pursuit.

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¹ For further information about the Ogress' questions see my *Ted Hughes and Nature: 'Terror and Exultation'*, Fastprint Publishing, 2009, pp.103-9.