20. FROM WORLD OF BLOOD TO WORLD OF LIGHT

Early in his career Hughes spoke of 'the terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus' of the English poetic tradition. But Hughes himself, despite his deep early involvement with the natural world, was never in much danger of being remade in the image of Wordsworth. The boy who was taken to a nearby pub to watch Billy Red catch and kill rats with his teeth, whose pet fox cubs were torn apart by dogs before his eyes, who dreamed of being a wolf, was not likely to see Nature as Lucy Gray, rather as the sow that eats her own farrow. Nor did poetry first make its impact as mediated by Palgrave and his successors among schoolbook anthologizers, but with the unmediated violence of an Indian war song chanted to him by his brother:

> I am the woodpecker,
> My head is red,
> To those that I kill,
> With my little red bill,
> Come wolf, come bear and eat your fill,
> Mine's not the only head that's red. [*Poet Speaks* 87]

The nine-year-old Hughes felt he could do something like that.

Wordsworth sealed his spirit to the inevitability of decay and death. The years would only lead his dear sister from joy to joy; her mind would be, in after years, 'a mansion for all lovely forms', her memory 'a dwelling place / For all sweet sounds and harmonies' ['Tintern Abbey']. In the event she became an imbecile. Hughes is determined from the beginning to take a full look at the worst and accept it as nature's norm:

> Drinking the sea and eating the rock
> A tree struggles to make leaves -
> An old woman fallen from space
> Unprepared for these conditions.
> She hangs on, because her mind's gone completely.
>
> Minute after minute, aeon after aeon,
> Nothing lets up or develops.
> And this is neither a bad variant nor a tryout.
> This is where the staring angels go through.
> This is where all the stars bow down. ['Pibroch']

The sound that haunted Hughes like a passion was

> That cry for milk
> From the breast
> Of the mother
> Of the God
> Of the world
> Made of Blood. ['Karma']

The first lines of the first poem in Hughes' first book *The Hawk in the Rain* plunge us into a world which is soon to become familiar:

> I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up
> Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,
> From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle
> With the habit of the dogged grave ... ['The Hawk in the Rain']

The last lines of the last poem in his 1982 *Selected Poems* are a world away:

> So we found the end of our journey.
>
> So we stood, alive in the river of light
> Among creatures of light, creatures of light.
> ['That Morning']

What I want to do in this chapter is to follow that journey, and look at some of the crucial stations in it.

*

The Hawk in the Rain is about man, imprisoned in single vision as in his own body, looking out through the windows of his eyes at the surrounding energies, the ‘wandering elementals’. He makes no effort to come to terms with them, as though that were unthinkable, but cowers, hides, peeps through his fingers, grips his own heart, runs for dear life. His only defence is poetry, where he can sit inside his own head and defend his ego with word-patterns.

'The Hawk in the Rain' pitches us into the thick of the battle between vitality and death which Hughes claimed was his only subject. It is, in this poem as in many, a one-sided battle. Three of the four elements seem to be

in alliance with death. Earth, even the earth of ploughland, is not fertile but a mass grave. Water drowns. Rain falls not to engender new life but to convert earth to down-dragging mud and to hack to the bone any head which presumes to raise itself. Air manifests itself only as wind which kills any stubborn attempts at life. The very language is a series of blows pounding life down. What hope amidst all this for the fire of vitality or spirit? It is located only in the eye of the hawk, which seems effortlessly, by an act of will, to master it all, to be the exact centre, the eye of the storm, the 'master-Fulcrum of violence'.

The hawk is as close to the inviolability of an angel as a living creature can be, yet the 'angelic eye' is doomed to be smashed, the hawk to 'mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land'. The extinguishing of the hawk's fire, this mingling of mud and blood, as in the trenches and bomb-craters of the First World War which his uncles by their stories and his father by his aching silence had made the landscape of the young Hughes' mind, is what death wants and invariably gets in Hughes' poetry of the fifties and sixties. It is what shoulders out 'One's own body from its instant and heat' ['Six Young Men']. It is 'the dead man behind the mirror' [Faas, p.171]. Yet the powerful ending of this poem comes to seem somewhat histrionic when we compare it with the death of the buzzard in *What Is the Truth?*:

> Finally, he just lets the sky
> Bend and hold him aloft by his wing-tips.
>
> There he hangs, dozing off in his hammock.
>
> Mother earth reaches up for him gently. [44]

Also the effect of 'The Hawk in the Rain' on the reader is far from depressing. If the man trying to cross a ploughed field in a cloudburst cannot be the 'master-Fulcrum of violence', the same man later sitting at his desk making a poem of the experience can.

> I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented - the poem is finished. [Faas 163]

This conception of art was very much in tune with the New Criticism fashionable in the fifties, and Hughes' early poems lent themselves to that kind of analysis. But it is an attitude to art he would soon have to modify radically. It is of a piece with the dualistic idea of creation by a sole male god. The goddess *was* heaven and earth, and cannot stand apart from nature. But the god who succeeded her makes nature out of inert materials, like an artist:

> In this way the essential identity between creator and creation was broken, and a fundamental dualism was born from their separation, the dualism that we know as spirit and nature. In the myth of the goddess these two terms have no meaning in separation from each other: nature is spiritual and spirit is natural, because the divine is immanent as creation. In the myth of the god, nature is no longer 'spiritual' and spirit is no longer 'natural', because the divine is transcendent to creation. Spirit is not inherent in nature, but outside it or beyond it; it even becomes the source of nature. So a new meaning enters the language: spirit becomes creative and nature becomes created. In this new kind of myth, creation is the result of a divine act that brings order out of chaos.
>
> [Baring 274]

And within that metaphysic, art is man's effort to bring further order out of chaos, to transform into music what would otherwise be uproar. Art becomes a contest against nature.

This is true of even the best poems in *the Hawk in the Rain* such as 'Wind'. Here Hughes brilliantly mimes the distorting and levelling power of a gale, seeking to find words, like those of the Border ballads, ‘that live in the same dimension as life at its most severe, words that cannot be outflanked by experience' [*Winter Pollen* 68]. His wind is real enough, and also carries much the same larger meaning as the wind Castaneda's Don Juan calls the 'nagual', a wind which threatens to obliterate the 'tonal' - 'everything we know and do as men' (or in Hughes' words 'book, thought, or each other'):

> Everyone’s obsession is to arrange the world according to the *tonal’s* rules; so every time we are confronted with the *nagual*, we go out of our way to make our eyes stiff and intransigent ... The point is to convince the *tonal* that there are other worlds that can pass in front of the same windows ... *The eyes* can be the windows to peer into boredom or peek into that infinity. ...

> As long as his *tonal* is unchallenged and his eyes are tuned only for the *tonal*'s world, the warrior is on the safe side of the fence. He's on familiar ground and knows all the rules. But when his *tonal* shrinks, he is on the windy side, and that opening must be shut tight immediately, or he would be swept away. And this is not just a way of talking. Beyond the gate of the *tonal*'s eyes the wind rages. I mean a real wind. No metaphor. A wind that can blow one's life away. In fact, that is the wind that blows all living things on this earth. [*Tales of Power*, 172-6]

Insofar as he has the courage to 'peek into that infinity', Hughes displays the courage of what Castaneda calls a sorcerer:

> A leaf's otherness,
> The whaled monstered sea-bottom, eagled peaks
> And stars that hang over hurtling endlessness,
> With manslaughtering shocks
>
> Are let in on his sense:
> So many one has dared to be struck dead
> Peeping though his fingers at the world's ends,
> Or at an ant's head. ['Egg-Head']

But the very skill Hughes exhibits in the control of language reinforces the *tonal* and keeps the wind out. The man who 'cannot entertain book, thought, / Or each other', can still write a splendid poem, with such finely crafted lines as: 'The wind flung a magpie away and a black- / Back gull bent like an iron bar slowly'.

The later Hughes will no longer erect such verbal barricades:

> And we go
>
> Into the wind. The flame-wind - a red wind
> And a black wind. The red wind comes
> To empty you. And the black wind, the longest wind
> The headwind
>
> To scour you. ['The guide']

Given the landscape of mud and blood, the vast no-man's land, which is the world of Hughes' early poems, it is not easy for him to say how men

should try to live in such a world. It is easier to say how they should not. What Hughes pours his most vehement scorn on is the egg-head's pride and 'braggart-browed complacency in most calm / Collusion with his own / Dewdrop frailty'; his spurning of the earth as 'muck under / His foot-clutch'; his willingness to oppose his own eye to 'the whelm of the sun' ['Egg-Head']. Pride and complacency are man's commonest defences against receiving the full impact of the otherness and endlessness of the natural world. What Hughes is trying to say in this poem is, I take it, that the egg-head, in defending his *tonal*, his single vision, at all costs, is resisting birth, which requires the breaking of the ego-shell, because the wisdom which would then flood in would be accounted madness in our world of single vision. In *Moby Dick*, when the Negro boy Pip fell overboard, thought he had been abandoned, and was then rescued, he went about an idiot:

> The sea had jeeringly kept his finite body up, but drowned the infinite of his soul. Not drowned entirely, though. Rather carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the miser-merman, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps; Pip saw the multitudinous, God-omnipresent, coral insects, that out of the firmament of waters heaved the colossal orbs. He saw God's foot upon the treadle of the loom, and spoke it; and therefore his shipmates called him mad. So man's insanity is heaven's sense; and wandering from all mortal reason, man comes at last to that celestial thought, which, to reason, is absurd and frantic; and weal or woe, feels then uncompromised, indifferent as his God. [Ch.93]

The tone of the poet's voice in 'Egg-head', however, is at the opposite pole from any divine indifference. The superiority of the poet manifests itself with just as much fervency and trumpeting as the egg-head is accused of. The style is confident and masculine and aggressive to the point of 'braggart-browed complacency'.

Such stylistic overkill is of a piece with the moral and sexual insensibility of some of the worst poems of the nineteen-fifties such as 'Secretary', 'Bawdry Embraced', 'Macaw and Little Miss' and 'The Ancient Heroes and the Bomber Pilot' (a poem glorifying the patriarchal savagery of the Bronze Age).

*

In *Lupercal* we are again in a world of 'oozing craters' and 'sodden moors', but this time with an awed acknowledgement that life is possible 'between the weather and the rock', that death and vitality are manifestations of the same forces, generating as well as extinguishing life:

> What humbles these hills has raised
> The arrogance of blood and bone,
> And thrown the hawk upon the wind,
> And lit the fox in the dripping ground. ['Crow Hill']

Nor are these forces now felt as exclusively a downward pull and pressure:

> Those barrellings of strength are heaving slowly and heave
> To your feet and surf upwards
> In a still, fiery air, hauling the imagination,
> Carrying the larks upward. ['Pennines in April']

(Though, as we are to see in 'Skylarks', to be flung upward is not necessarily an easier life than to be dragged down.)

Given such conditions, how to live? There is the example of the horses patiently outwaiting the darkness of a 'world cast in frost' and rewarded by a glorious sunrise. But that is a portion of eternity too great for the eye of the narrator, who stumbles away from it 'in the fever of a dream'.

Again, in 'November', he admires the 'strong trust' of a tramp asleep in a ditch in the drilling rain and the welding cold, but this patience is as hopeless as that of the corpses on the gibbet:

> Patient to outwait these worst days that beat
> Their crowns bare and dripped from their feet.

At the opposite extreme are the ancient heroes, the big-hearted, 'huge-chested braggarts' who spent their lives in war, rape and pillage, as if the answer were to try to beat ravenous Nature at her own bloody game. They are like the 'Warriors of the North', spilling blood

> To no end
> But this timely expenditure of themselves,
> A cash-down, beforehand revenge, with extra,
> For the gruelling relapse and prolongeur of their blood

Into the iron arteries of Calvin.

Some heroes and geniuses are able to live as single-mindedly as thrushes or sharks, but the normal human condition is to be forever distracted from day-to-day living by the opposite pulls of heaven and hell, hope and despair, the dream of an 'unearthly access of grace, / Of ease: freer firmer world found' and the rude awakening from that dream

> bearing
> Plunge of that high risk without
> That flight; with only a dread
> Crouching to get away from these
> On its hands and knees. ['Acrobats']

Here, in a few lines, Hughes takes in the fall of Hopkins from the spiritual acrobatics of 'Hurrahing in Harvest' to the terrible sonnets; the fall of modernist vision from Wordsworth's egotistical sublime to Beckett's spiritual void.

There is, however, again some discrepancy between style and content. The style has all the necessary weight and strength to mime the pressure of the huge forces of the natural world upon the living organism. But the energies are invoked (often in the form of predatory beasts) with a sometimes-overweening masculine confidence that they can be controlled by the imposed form of the poem itself. Were the poems really, as he thought at the time, containing the energies, or were they shutting out by their tightly closed forms energies which, had they come in, would have overwhelmed all pretence at art?

The style of *Lupercal* is confident of its ability both to evoke and control the energies, to plug in to the 'elemental power-circuit of the universe'. Hughes' imagination, purged of the poetic cult of beauty and the Wordsworthian sentimentalities, becomes a great intestine rejecting nothing:

> This mute eater, biting through the mind's
> Nursery floor, with eel and hyena and vulture,
> With creepy-crawly and the root,
> With the sea-worm, entering its birthright.
> ['Mayday on Holderness']

Thus the poet can clamp himself well onto the world like a wolf-mask, and speak with the voice of the glutted crow, the stoat, the expressionless

leopard, the sleeping anaconda, the frenzied shrew, the roosting hawk - which is 'Nature herself speaking'. Yet again there is some discrepancy. We are told that the stoat 'bit through grammar and corset', that its 'red unmanageable life ... licked the stylist out of [the] skulls' of Walpole and his set ('Strawberry Hill'). But the poem which tells us so is a triumph of intelligence and style, in a volume of great stylistic achievement, orthodox grammar, corseted stanzas and even rhyming verse.

This discrepancy is also apparent in 'To Paint a Water Lily' with its elegant rhyming couplets. The poem is a verse exemplum of Carlyle's observations on Nature in 'Characteristics':

> Boundless as is the domain of man, it is but a small fractional proportion of it that he rules with Consciousness and Forethought: what he can contrive, nay, what he can altogether know and comprehend, is essentially the mechanical, small; the great is ever, in one sense or other, the vital; it is essentially the mysterious, and only the surface of it can be understood. But Nature, it might seem, strives, like a kind mother, to hide from us even this, that she is a mystery. ... Under all Nature's works, chiefly under her noblest work, Life, lies a basis of Darkness, which she benignantly conceals; in Life, too, the roots and inward circulations which stretch down fearfully to the regions of Death and Night, shall not hint of their existence, and only the fair stem with its leaves and flowers, shone on by the sun, shall disclose itself and joyfully grow.

Hughes' example is the water lily, whose leaves are simultaneously the floor of the sunny, conscious world, accessible (visually) to any Sunday painter, and the roof of another, less colourful and 'aesthetic' world, the unconscious, inaccessible to all the senses, accessible only to the imagination. Hughes refuses merely to praise the rainbow colours of nature (for which the painterly style of the poem is well suited), but strives to escape the tyranny of the eye and listen rather to the inaudible 'battle-shouts / And death-cries everywhere hereabouts'. He refuses to paint only the dragonfly alighting on the water lily if his imagination can see into the life of the pond and the horror nudging her root. However, in this poem at least, it can only gesture in that direction - 'Prehistoric bedragonned times / Crawl that darkness with Latin names'. The underwater world, the unconscious mind, is a closed book to the poet. There is no hint of the wisdom of Pip, of the shamanic journey into the 'regions of Death and Night' which Hughes' poems are later to become. In 'Photostomias' for example, this primitive deep-sea fish, also

known as the dragon-fish, could well be described as having 'jaws for heads', but Hughes is there about deeper business than mere description of nature's horrors, about the business of revealing that those horrors are also miracles, are also God:

> Jehova - mucous and phosphorescence
> In the camera's glare -
>
> A decalogue
> A rainbow.

In his 1977 interview with Ekbert Faas Hughes described writing 'To Paint a Water Lily': 'I ... felt very constricted fiddling around with it. It was somehow like writing through a long winding tube, like squeezing language out at the end of this long, remote process'. He found in 'View of a Pig' 'a whole way of writing that was obviously much more natural for me than that water-lily-style'. Faas objected that 'To Paint a Water Lily' was 'one of the most beautiful poems in *Lupercal*'. Hughes replied:

> Maybe, but it isn't as interesting to me. And my follow-up to 'View of a Pig' was 'Pike'. But that poem immediately became much more charged with particular memories and a specific obsession. And my sense of 'Hawk Roosting' was that somehow or other it had picked up the prototype style behind 'View of a Pig' and 'Pike' without that overlay of a heavier, thicker, figurative language. ... All three were written in a mood of impatience, deliberately trying to destroy the ways in which I had written before, trying to write in a way that had nothing to do with the way in which I thought I ought to be writing. But then, that too became deliberate and a dead end. [Faas 208-9]

'Pike' is a much better poem than 'To Paint a Water Lily', moving from the descriptive and narrative modes of total authorial command in the first nine stanzas into a more open dramatic mode, where what is being dramatized is precisely the fear arising from the speaker's ignorance of what is rising towards him out of the 'Darkness beneath night's darkness'. As Gaston Bachelard writes (not in relation to this poem):

> Night alone would give a less physical fear. Water alone would give clearer obsessions. Water at night gives a penetrating fear ... If the fear that comes at night beside a pond is a special fear, it is because it is a

> fear that enjoys a certain range. It is very different from the fear experienced in a grotto or a forest. It is not so near, so concentrated, or so localized; it is more flowing. Shadows that fall on water are more mobile than shadows on earth. [Water and Dreams, 101-2]

It is also the fear that what is rising towards him might be too monstrous, too alien, too ego-destroying for the poetry he is yet able to write to deal with. Fishing in deep water at night is the perfect image for the kind of poetry Hughes really wants to write, poetry which projects the most naked and unconditional part of the self into the nightmare darkness, not with the intention of bringing back trophies into the daylight world, but of confronting, being, if necessary, supplanted by, whatever happens to be out there. The poems about fishing and water tend to be those in which this is to be most fully achieved, culminating in 'Go Fishing'.

Hughes knew that the horror with which we view Nature 'red in tooth and claw' was in part a product of our own preconceptions ('What you find in the outside world is what has escaped from your own inner world'), and our tendency to take 'portions of existence' (Blake) for the whole. He knew that not until we begin to understand Nature in its own terms will it show us any other face. Many of the poems in *Lupercal* are strategies for evoking, confronting and negotiating with the Powers. He forces himself and us to confront Nature at its most ugly, savage and apparently pointless, to look into 'the shark's mouth / That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own / Side and devouring of itself' ['Thrushes']. Perhaps Hughes was again remembering *Moby Dick*:

> They viciously snapped, not only at each other's disbowelments, but like flexible bows, bent round, and bit their own; till those entrails seemed swallowed over and over again by the same mouth, to be oppositely voided by the gaping wound. Nor was this all. It was unsafe to meddle with the corpses and ghosts of these creatures. A sort of generic or Pantheistic vitality seemed to lurk in their very joints and bones, after what might be called the individual life had departed. Killed and hoisted on deck for the sake of his skin, one of these sharks almost took poor Queequeg's hand off, when he tried to shut down the dead lid of his murderous jaw.
>
> 'Queequeg no care what god made him shark,' said the savage, agonisingly lifting his hand up and down; 'wedder Fejee god or Nantucket god; but de god wat made shark must be one dam Ingin'.
>
> [Chapter 66]

Blake felt much the same about the god who made the tiger.

One of the strategies Hughes adopted was his attempt to let Nature speak for herself through the mouth of a hawk in the most famous of his early poems, 'Hawk Roosting':

> Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more feminine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature ... and Nature became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. [Faas 199]

The strategy does not work because Hughes cannot yet get behind the fallen nature of our tradition, and therefore cannot render the hawk's vision other than in terms of deranged human vision - the vision of Canute or Richard of Gloucester or Hitler.

There are, of course, a great many animals in all Hughes' collections. It goes without saying that Hughes is a great animal poet. But we must distinguish between the use he makes of animals in the early poems and in the later. Most of the earlier animals are conscripted as cannon-fodder in the doomed battle of vitality against death. They are in the same trap as man, but Hughes prefers to write about them because they bellow the evidence which man, except in moments of extremity, tries to hide. Norman O. Brown takes Freud to task for what he calls his 'metaphysical vision of all life sick with the struggle between Life and Death':

> We need, in fine, a metaphysic which recognizes both the continuity between man and animals and also the discontinuity. We need, instead of an instinctual dualism, an instinctual dialectic. We shall have to say that whatever the basic polarity in human life may be ... this polarity exists in animals but does not exist in a condition of ambivalence. Man is distinguished from animals by having separated, ultimately into a state of mutual conflict, aspects of life (instincts) which in animals exist in some condition of undifferentiated unity or harmony. [83]

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

victims. Hughes' latest hawk is no murderous egomaniac; and the relaxed style takes off him the pressure to serve as a symbol of a savage god:

> And maybe you find him
>
> Materialized by twilight and dew
> Still as a listener -
>
> The warrior
>
> Blue shoulder-cloak wrapped about him
> Leaning, hunched,
> Among the oaks of the harp. ['A Sparrow Hawk']

As late as 1963, in a British Council interview, Hughes was still able to speak of his interest in poetry as 'really a musical interest' and of his desire to produce in his poems 'something final ... something that won't break down, like an animal'. Later he sought only to listen to and transcribe the music of that harp.

*

The early sixties was a period of intense experimentation in search of a poetry able to grope its way through that darkness without the map-grid of imposed form or the flash-light of rationality which would have scared away all its creatures. The most significant breakthrough at this time was 'Wodwo', first published in 1961. The success of the poem depends partly on the choice of persona, a 'little larval being' which might have just emerged from an egg or chrysalis, with human intelligence and curiosity, the human temptation to simply appropriate whatever it encounters, yet still naked and open, exposed and tentative; but mainly on finding the right voice for such a creature.

Rhymes, stanzas, 'poetic' effects of all kinds, rhetoric, have gone. And with them has gone the imposition of personality which those techniques had largely served. What we are left with is a very free verse, close to colloquial prose, flexible, responsive at every moment to the demands of the sense and to nothing else. It is a totally unforced utterance, a world away from the bludgeoning verse of 'The Hawk in the Rain'. The wodwo is no 'diamond point of will', no 'eye' or 'I' determined to keep things as they are: his 'I suppose I am the exact centre / but there's all this what is it ... very queer but

I'll go on looking' denies the desirability of being a 'master-Fulcrum of violence' and at the same time the desirability of using the formal elements of poetry, its melody and rhythm, as a means of resolving the uproar, thereby sealing off the poem from the real world. No possible pattern is final or definitive or at the 'exact centre'. How can it be when 'there's all this'?

The language is reduced to a functional minimum from which, like the wodwo itself, it is now free to move out into new, less manipulative forms of expression: 'The nearest we can come to rational thinking is to stand respectfully, hat in hand, before this Creation, exceedingly alert for a new word' [Faas, 172].

This freedom seems to be related to a more inclusive, more holistic vision. 'Still Life', for example, begins as uncompromisingly as 'Pibroch', but we gradually realize that the bleak vision is not this time that of the poet himself, but that of 'outcrop rock' taking itself to be the exact centre, the one permanent exclusive reality. The poet stands to one side, saying 'but there's all this'. The less insistent style allows for a play of humour undercutting the claims of outcrop stone to be all there is, 'being ignorant of this other, this harebell'

> That trembles, as under threats of death,
> In the summer turf's heat-rise,
> And in which - filling veins
> Any known name of blue would bruise
> Out of existence - sleeps, recovering,
> The maker of the sea.

And in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' we have balance instead of intolerable pressure, fullness instead of lack, unspilled milk instead of spilled blood, and a human being, albeit a child, in a reciprocal and rewarding relationship with a human world and a natural world at one with each other. The poetry here does not impose the momentary resolution, but mirrors it while remaining itself transparent, like water in a brimming pail.

The tragic events of February 1963 put an abrupt end to this atonement. Hughes was thrown back at a stroke into a much more deeply felt despair than ever before. It was as though he had seen the face of the goddess, who had blighted him and struck him dumb. It is the bloodiest of all the goddesses, Cybele, a Homeric hymn speaks of as she who 'loves the howling of wolves'. Before his three-year silence descended he wrote, however, 'The Howling of Wolves' and 'Song of a Rat'. The style here has

gone very cold, metallic, each line the sharp tooth of a steel trap. The diction is a succession of blank monosyllables forced between teeth:

> The eyes that never learn how it has come about
> That they must live like this,
>
> That they must live

or

> The rat is in the trap, it is in the trap.

To dress such testimony up as 'poetry',(with the association of that word with 'pleasure' relentlessly insisted on by the B.B.C.), would clearly be absurd, almost obscene. Great poetry is truth-telling, and the truth must be in the telling as much as in the authenticity of the vision. Pain, which otherwise is condemned to express itself in silence or inarticulate cries, has, in poetry, its only speech.

That speech will not be the speech of ordinary rational discourse. It searches for the buried world under the world, and for a speech beneath words. The poet opens himself to be 'pierced afresh by the tree's cry':

> And the incomprehensible cry
> From the boughs, in the wind
> Sets us listening for below words,
> Meanings that will not part from the rock.
>
> ['A Wind Flashes the Grass']

Meanings emerge from silence, from the blank unprinted page, sparely, one syllable for a line, in a voice which is not the commanding voice of the poet, but the faceless voice which issues the imperatives of living and dying to tree, gnat, skylark and man alike:

> A towered bird, shot through the crested head
> With the command, Not die
>
> But climb
>
> Climb

Sing

Obedient as to death a dead thing. ['Skylarks']

Hughes described *Wodwo* as 'a descent into destruction'. He placed the most up-beat poems at the end; but both 'Wodwo' and 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' predate the death of Sylvia Plath. If we look at the later poems in *Wodwo* and *Recklings* we are in a wasteland, a dark intestine, pointless cycles of recurrence, a dark night of the soul, a world very like that of Samuel Beckett:

Having taken her slowly by surprise
For eighty years
The hills have won, their ring is closed.

The field-walls float their pattern
Over her eye
Whether she looks outward or inward.

. . .

But with the stone agony growing in her joints
And eyes, dimming with losses, widening for losses. ['On the Slope']

Now the window has come in, the wind of the *nagual* sweeps away order and ordinary, and terrible energies are released. In *New Lines* John Holloway had warned his guest not to go down to the sea at night: 'It makes no place for those ... who, to sustain our pose, / Need wine and conversation, colour and light':

[I] know, from knowing myself, that you will be
Quick to people the shore, the fog, the sea,
With all the fabulous
Things of the moon's dark side. ['Warning to a Guest']

Hughes did go down to the sea, and what he found there were ghost crabs:

All night, around us or through us,
They stalk each other, they fasten on to each other,
They mount each other, they tear each other to pieces,
They utterly exhaust each other.
They are the powers of this world.
We are their bacteria
Dying their lives and living their deaths. ['Ghost Crabs']

The energies no longer need to be invoked. But when they come they are far too inhuman and overwhelming to handle. They supplant his normal consciousness, leaving him stripped of all defences and taken over by them. The 'elemental power-circuit of the universe' jams through him, blowing every fuse. Blake's symbol for the energies is the serpent or dragon. This is the face Hughes now sees on his god or not-god; the serpent as swallower of everything ('this is the dark intestine'), the dragon waiting with open mouth for the woman to deliver her child. Nature is 'all one smouldering annihilation', unmaking and remaking, remaking in order to unmake again. How could such a god be worshipped?

*

It is hard to say just when Hughes arrives at his spiritual nadir. Perhaps it comes, poetically, about 1967, when he (or his protagonist) at last refuses to make yet another doomed bid to live within or even rebel against a nightmarish creation, to cling 'with madman's grip / To the great wheel of woe':

Once upon a time
There was a person
Wretched in every vein -
His heart pumped woe.
...
So he abandoned himself, his body, his blood -
He left it all lying on the earth
And held himself resolute
As the earth rolled slowly away
Smaller and smaller away
Into non-being. ['Song of Woe']

But the attempt to say goodbye to earth, to become light and shadowless is also doomed, like Crow's attempt to destroy his mother, the tree of which he is the topmost twig ['Revenge Fable']. Being itself is cruciform, yet the atoms in deep space are praying for incarnation, for life at any cost, as though it were better to be a man on a cross than not to be a man at all ['I said goodbye to earth']. Hughes may have remembered the passage from Blake's *Vala* where the Human Odors arising from the blood of the terrible wine presses of Luvah are driven by 'desire of Being':

> They plunge into the Elements; the Elements cast them forth
> Or else consume their shadowy semblance. Yet they, obstinate
> Tho' pained to distraction, cry, 'O let us Exist! for
> This dreadful Non Existence is worse than pains of Eternal Birth.
> [Night the Ninth, 736-9]

This acceptance of suffering, powerfully expressed at the end of the essay on Popa in 1968, suggests the way out of total blackness which the post-war Eastern European poets had found, and which Crow was intended to find:

> The infinite terrible circumstances that seem to destroy man's importance, appear as the very terms of his importance. Man is the face, arms, legs, etc. grown over the infinite, terrible All'. [16]

The style or non-style of *Crow* is another new departure. At the end of his 1970 interview, Ekbert Faas asked Hughes why he had 'abandoned such formal devices as rhyme, metre and stanza'. Hughes conceded that

> formal patterning of the actual movement of verse somehow includes a mathematical and musically deeper world than free verse can easily hope to enter. ... But it only works ... if the writer has a perfectly pure grasp of his real feeling ... and the very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one's own tune against that choir. It is easier to speak a language that raises no ghosts.
> [Faas, p.208]

What he did not say, and may not yet have become conscious of in theory, though it is clear enough in his practice, as Nick Bishop has shown, is that the mathematical and musical accomplishments of formal verse might

actually prevent the poet's language becoming 'totally alive and pure', and deny him access to the deepest levels of his own psyche. He went on:

> The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of a style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the king's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. I throw out the eagles and choose the Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing.

But Hughes does not explain what, in the folktale, is the advantage of choosing 'the dirty, scabby little foal', the advantage of crows over eagles, or of super-ugly language over the beautiful musical language of our poetic tradition. In a letter to me, Hughes expanded a little:

> I tried to shed everything that the average Pavlovian critic knows how to respond to. It was quite an effort to get there - as much of an effort to stay there - every day I had to find it again. My idea was to reduce my style to the simplest clear cell - then regrow a wholeness and richness organically from that point. I didn't get that far.

But again Hughes does not explain the need for this stylistic asceticism. For that explanation we must turn to his writings on the Eastern European poets, who seemed to Hughes to have discovered a universal poetic language, independent of surface sound and texture and therefore translatable, an ABC of what counts. In his essay on Popa he wrote:

> No poetry could carry less luggage than his, or be freer of predisposition and preconception. No poetry is more difficult to outflank, yet it is in no sense defensive. His poems are trying to find out what does exist, and what the conditions really are. The movement of his verse is part of his method of investigating something fearfully apprehended, fearfully discovered. but he will not be frightened into awe. He never loses his deeply ingrained humour and irony: that is his way of hanging on to his human wholeness. And he never loses his intense absorption in what he is talking about, either. His words test

> their way forward, sensitive to their own errors, dramatically and intimately alive, like the antennae of some rock-shore creature feeling out the presence of the sea and the huge powers in it. This analogy is not so random. There is a primitive pre-creation atmosphere about his work, as if he were present where all the dynamisms and formulae were ready and charged, but nothing created - or only a few fragments. ... [There is an] air of trial and error exploration, of an improvised language, the attempt to get near something for which he is almost having to invent the words in a total disregard for poetry or the normal conventions of discourse. [4,7]

What first attracted Hughes to Pilinszky's poems was, he says, 'their air of simple, helpless accuracy'. Pilinszky described his own poetic language as 'a sort of linguistic poverty'. He takes 'the most naked and helpless of all confrontations' and asks 'what speech is adequate for this moment?' His vision is desolate; his language as close as he can get to silence. In his Introduction to Pilinszky's *The Desert of Love*, Hughes writes: 'We come to this Truth only on the simplest terms: through what has been suffered, what is being suffered, and the objects that participate in the suffering' [11]. The more affirmative, the more radiant with meaning, a work is going to be, the more essential that its starting point is Nothing, the silence of Cordelia, so that it cannot be said that the affirmative meanings have been smuggled in with the loaded language, that anything has been left unquestioned, that the negatives have not been fully acknowledged. Pilinszky has taken the route Hughes started out on in *Crow*. His images

> reveal a place where every cultural support has been torn away, where the ultimate brutality of total war has become natural law, and where man has been reduced to the mere mechanism of his mutilated body. All words seem obsolete or inadequate. Yet out of this apparently final reality rise the poems whose language seems to redeem it, a language in which the symbols of the horror become the sacred symbols of a kind of worship.
>
> These symbols are not redeemed in an unworldly sense. They are redeemed, precariously, in some all-too-human sense, somewhere in the pulsing mammalian nervous system, by a feat of homely consecration: a provisional, last-ditch 'miracle' achieved by means which seem to be never other than 'poetic'. [11-12]

Hughes did not get that far in *Crow*. The intention had been to use the figure of Crow as a means of recapitulating and correcting both his own errors and those of Western man. Crow tries out or witnesses all the techniques of single vision - words and numbers, scripture and physics - the result is war, murder, suicide, madness. He confronts the Energies always as something to be fought and killed - dragon, serpent, ogress - obstacles on his blind quest. Crow's mistaken quest, his flight from the female, his search for the Black Beast, was to have become, after many adventures in which he is completely dismembered and reconstituted, a painful reintegration and a shamanic initiation ordeal. But at the very moment when this upward process should have begun, Hughes was knocked back into the pit by another personal tragedy. He refused, in his work for adults, to posit a resolution he had not lived through. Crow was abandoned. The best poems from the first, the negative stage of the story, were salvaged to make *Crow*.

*

Hughes is, of all contemporary writers in English, the one most qualified by experience to feel and by intelligence to '*think* adequately about the behaviour that is at the annihilating edge' [R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*]. *Prometheus on his Crag* begins at the point of numbness which had characterized the later poems in *Wodwo* and much of *Crow*. Crow had already contemplated a Prometheus figure in 'The Contender':

> He lay crucified with all his strength
> On the earth
> Grinning towards the sun
> Through the tiny holes of his eyes
> And towards the moon
> And towards the whole paraphernalia of the heavens
> Through the seams of his face
> With the strings of his lips
> Grinning through his atoms and decay
> Grinning into the black
> Into the ringing nothing
> Through the bones of his teeth
>
> Sometimes with eyes closed

In his senseless trial of strength.

Hughes, at that point in his life, had come close to rejecting nature as a 'cortege of mourning and lament'. This left him in a limbo in which the only alternative to suicide or despair seemed to be absurdist revolt, as advocated by Camus:

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

But Hughes was not content to remain crucified on that rock. It was his study in 1971 of the fate of another Titan, in *Prometheus on his Crag*, which revealed to him the possibility that the agony and depletion might actually release the flow of *mana*.

Speaking of the etchings of Leonard Baskin, particularly his many versions of the hanged man, Hughes refers to the mythological motif 'that the wound, if it is to be healed, needs laid in it the blade that made it':

> As if the blade might cut to a depth where blood and cries no longer come - only *mana* comes. Baskin writes, somewhere, that his subject is the wound. One could as truly say that his subject is *mana*. His real subject is the healing of the wound.
> ['The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly' 18]

Such healing is, Hughes claims, 'redemption incarnate' which 'is purchased by suffering':

> Like those Indian gods who play deaf to the mortifications and ordeals and cries of the suppliant, till they can't stand it any longer - the stones of their heaven begin to sweat, their thrones begin to tremble - whereupon they descend and grant everything. And the suppliant becomes Holy, and a Healer. [16]

Like Lorca's *duende*, such *mana* is 'the goddess of the source of terrible life', perhaps of all blossoming and beauty:

Blossoms

Pushing from under blossoms -
From the one wound's
Depth of congealments and healing. ['Photostomias']

It is also 'the real substance of any art that has substance, in spite of what we might prefer' [17]. We may speak of this healing and rebirth as a divine gift, but we may equally speak of it in biological terms, as demonstrating 'the biological inevitability of art, as the psychological component of the body's own system of immunity and self-repair' [20].

Joseph Campbell discusses the power of mythology and all creative art in similarly 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'.

In the Prometheus sequence, the blade is the beak of the vulture, which gorges itself every day on Prometheus' liver. Prometheus knows that the vulture holds the key:

It knew what it was doing

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

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

And the cost of the gift
Without a tremor
As if both were nothing. [Poem 10]

Prometheus, the prototype of the human condition, also hangs weighing the cost, but for a long time can find nothing to set against it, the weight of the whole earth. The first clue comes when a lizard whispers to him 'Even as the vulture buried its head - / "Lucky, you are so lucky to be human!". The only advantage Prometheus has over the lizard is consciousness, which opens the possibility of understanding the situation, and thereby converting pain into payment. In poem 20 he permutates the possible meanings of the vulture, starting with all the mistaken meanings, such as Crow might have entertained; for example, that the vulture might be 'some lump of his mother'. But at last he begins to get warmer:

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

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

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

Or was it his anti-self -
The him-shaped vacuum
In unbeing, pulling to empty him?

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

In the final poem he correctly identifies the vulture as the midwife attending his own necessarily painful rebirth. That realization *is* his rebirth. And it lifts the weight of the world from him:

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

On the dusty peacock film where the world floats.

There is a beautiful line about the vulture in every draft of the final poem except the published version; (Hughes saved it for the vulture in *Cave Birds*):

That never harmed any living thing.

Eight thousand years ago the goddess was painted as vulture in the shrines of Catal Hüyük:

> For the vulture, feeding on carrion, does not so much 'bring' death as transform what is already dead back into life, beginning a new cycle by assimilating the end of the old one. In this way the goddess of death and the goddess of birth are inseparable. [Baring 87-8]

*

That Hughes, at this moment in his life (the moment also of that 'seismic event' [*Shakespeare* 330] the death of his mother), should have married a farmer's daughter and shortly afterwards become a farmer, may have been a lucky accident or an attempt, conscious or unconscious, to correct the psychic imbalance which had driven him (in the terms he himself uses of Shakespeare) to suppress the right side of the brain. This dominance of the left side produces the feeling of living in a state of Prometheus-like alienation from real things. Nowhere is it more necessary to adapt to the chaos of real things than on a farm. Hughes abandoned his aloofness from tangible reality, even from the mud. As he learned the feel of farming, the

hard disciplines of stewardship and husbandry, Moortown farm became for him, in Craig Robinson's words, 'a working laboratory of co-operation between man and nature' [*Achievement* 262].

In his marginalia on Wordsworth's poems Blake wrote: 'Natural Objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate imagination in Me'. He spurns the corporeal, vegetable world as having no more to do with him than 'the Dirt upon my feet' [*A Vision of the Last Judgement*, 95]. Coleridge agreed with him:

> The further I ascend from men and cattle, and the common birds of the woods and fields, the greater becomes in me the intensity of the feelings of life. Life seems to me there a universal spirit that neither has nor can have an opposite.

Hughes' experience was exactly the reverse. It was by descending again from the far limits of pain and consciousness (where only archetypal images serve) into woods and fields among men and cattle that he recovered his sense of the universal spirit of life. 'The field and its grass', which he had flung away in 'Song of Woe', Beckett's 'absurdity of pastures', is now recovered, with the practical responsibility, as a farmer, of tending the earth and its flora and fauna. His imagination flourished on this daily input of its proper food. As Robert Bly says:

> Imagination requires food, as a horse does, and contrary to many Jungian speculations, the food of the imagination is not archetypes, but the actual energy given off by old tree roots, mountains, rocks, glaciers, fields of barley, crows. [Interview in Housden]

What happened to Hughes is recapitulated in *Adam and the Sacred Nine*. Adam lies inert in Eden. Great things are expected of him, but he feels helpless and exposed. His dreams of technological achievements and immortality are so incongruous with his bruised body 'too little lifted from mud' that they merely bewilder him. He is visited by nine birds. Each offers him an image of how to live. The Falcon could not be more different from his weeping and shivering self, with its unfaltering gunmetal feathers, mountain-diving and world-hurling wing-knuckles, bullet-brow, grasping talons, tooled bill. Then the Skylark, living and dying in the service of its crest, cresting the earth, trying to crest the sun, with bird-joy. Then the Wild Duck getting up out of cold and dark and ooze, and spanking across water quacking Wake Wake to the world. Then comes the Swift wholeheartedly

hurling itself against and beyond the limits. Then the Wren who lives only to be more and more Wren - Wren of Wrens! Then the Owl, who floats, the moving centre of everything, holding the balance of life and death, heaven and earth. Then the Dove, the perpetual victim, but rainbow-breasted among thorns. Then the Crow comes to Adam and whispers in his ear a waking, reject-nothing truth. Finally comes the Phoenix, which offers itself up again and again and laughs in the blaze. Each bird has found what Adam lacks, its own distinctive mode of living fully within the given conditions. It is not for Adam to imitate any of them. He is defined precisely by his lack of wings. His business is with the earth. He stands, and it is the first meeting of the body of man with the body of the earth. The sole of Adam's foot is grateful to the rock, saying:

> I am no wing
> To tread emptiness.
> I was made
> For you.

These are the first and only words Adam speaks, and they embody the simplicity, humility and acceptance that Boehme had in mind when he said that men must attempt to recover 'the language of Adam'.

Thus it is fitting that the volume, *Moortown*, which begins with cattle knee-deep in mud in the poor fields, should end with Adam's affirmation of his total dependence on nature, a nature whose only god is a god of mud, but with miracles enough. As Whitman wrote: 'The press of my foot to the earth springs a hundred affections' ['Song of Myself' 14]. Instead of dreaming of technological dominion ('flying echelons of steel ... advancement of bulldozers and cranes' - the dreams of Prometheus) or of everlasting life ('the religion of the diamond body'), Adam must now set out on his quest for what is actually given, Eve, his mother and intended bride.

Lawrence wrote:

> You cannot dig the ground with the spirit. ... The very act of stooping and thrusting the heavy earth calls into play the dark sensual centres in a man, at last, that old Adam which is the eternal opposite of the spiritual or ideal being. Brute labour, the brute struggle with the beast and herd, must rouse into activity the primary centres, darken the mind, induce a state of animal mindlessness, and pivot a man in his own heavy-blooded isolation. [*Symbolic Meaning* 169]

Three months later Lawrence imagined his St Matthew as experiencing much the same dilemma as Hughes' Adam. The Saviour would have him live 'like a lark at heaven's gate singing', but he is suspicious of too much Uplift in this life, and insists that as a living man he must maintain his contact with the vitalizing earth:

> So I will be lifted up, Saviour,
> But put me down again in time, Master,
> Before my heart stops beating, and I become what I am not.
> Put me down again on the earth, Jesus, on the brown soil
> Where flowers sprout in the acrid humus, and fade into humus again.
> Where beasts drop their unlicked young, and pasture, and drop their droppings among the turf.
> Where the adder darts horizontal.
> Down on the damp, unceasing ground, where my feet belong
> And even my heart, Lord, forever, after all uplifting:
> The crumbling, damp, fresh land, life horizontal and ceaseless.
>
> ['St Matthew']

Lawrence and Hughes are both in the tradition of Meister Eckhart, who claimed that 'humility' derived from 'humus'. Jung wrote: 'Every renewal of life needs the muddy as well as the clear. This was evidently perceived by the great relativist Meister Eckhart' [*Psychological Types* 244].

This humility clearly must have implications for style. Again it seemed to be almost a matter of accident (Parzival letting the reins lie loose on his horse's neck) that Hughes had not the time or energy after a day's farming to write fully-fledged poems, only to make a few purely factual notes of the more interesting things which had happened:

> In making a note about anything, if I wish to look closely I find I can move closer and stay closer, if I phrase my observations about it in rough lines. So these improvised verses are nothing more than this: my own way of getting reasonably close to what is going on, and staying close, and of excluding everything else that might be pressing to interfere with the watching eye. In a sense, the method excludes the poetic process as well. [*Moortown Diary*, x]

It largely excludes the selective, interpreting, abstracting, ambitious ego, and all our preconceptions about what constitutes the poetic. When Hughes

later tried to process the notes into 'real poems', he found that he lost much more than he gained, lost the integrity of the original raw experience. (Lawrence admired Etruscan art because it was not 'cooked in the artistic consciousness'.) So he resisted the high temptation of the mind and the meddling intellect and left well alone.

The new humility requires also that Hughes should no longer 'relegate Nature to a function of human perception' [Scigaj 180]. On the contrary, it is now recognized as the only reality, into which we are granted an occasional privileged glimpse:

> … And so for some lasting seconds
> I could think the deer were waiting for me
> To remember the password and sign
>
> That the curtain had blown aside for a moment
> And there where the trees were no longer trees, nor the road a road
>
> The deer had come for me. ['Roe-deer']

On the farm miracles so clearly issued out of the dirt and the body's jellies. Farming is a far from romantic undertaking. Hughes' affirmations are fully paid for. He indulges in none of the distortions which make traditional nature worship so vulnerable to the attacks of any clear-eyed realist such as Samuel Beckett. There is no denying that farming is as much to do with deaths and misbirths (astride of a grave) as with happier miracles:

> The deepest fascination of stock rearing is this participation in the precarious birth of these tough and yet over-delicate beasts, and nursing them against what often seem to be the odds. [*Moortown Diary,* 65]

In 'Ravens' Hughes will not deny even to the three-year-old child that the lamb which died being born cried. But what the ravens have done to its body - 'its insides, the various jellies and crimsons and transparencies / And threads and tissues pulled out' - does not cancel the miracle that this mess and spillage so nearly added up to a new life, and that the same strange substances did so only a few yards away, where a ewe investigates her new lamb 'while the tattered banners of her triumph swing and drip from her rear-end'.

What had so disgusted Beckett, 'the pastures red with uneaten sheep's placentas', what he had reduced to 'the whole bloody business', 'a turd', 'a

cat's flux', what Eliot had reduced to 'dung and death', Hughes redeems. In the unfallen vision of *Moortown Diary*, *Season Songs* and *What is the Truth?* even death has its atonement, (the lamb's hacked-off head has 'all earth for a body'), and even the worm, even the dirt is god.

Hughes will not isolate the single death from its larger context:

> Though this one was lucky insofar
> As it made the attempt into a warm wind
> And its first day of death was blue and warm
> The magpies gone quiet with domestic happiness
> And skylarks not worrying about anything
> And the blackthorn budding confidently
> And the skyline of hills, after millions of hard years,
> Sitting soft. ['Ravens']

One might have thought that there was little new to say about the countryside and the seasons. Hughes writes of them as if he were the only one of us who is really awake:

> The trees still spindle bare.
>
> Beyond them, from the warmed blue hills
> An exhilaration swirls upward, like a huge fish.
>
> As under a waterfall, in the bustling pool.
>
> Over the whole land
> Spring thunders down in brilliant silence.

Every April is our real birthday, when the world bombards us with gifts:

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

Strokes the darkening slope as the land
Begins her labour.

Season Songs tells us, and what amazing news it is, what it is like to be alive in this world, with five senses and normal feelings. They embody what Lawrence called 'a man in his wholeness wholly attending'. Hughes' earlier books record the hard struggle towards this wholeness. When it is achieved, life's charge flows freely again, and can be communicated to others through poems. The agony of Prometheus is behind the apparently spontaneous and joyful balance of these poems and the humility of their thanksgiving.

*

The value of nature to Hughes is not aesthetic. He has now got well beyond the aversion to beauty as something irreversibly compromised. The larger beauty of his more recent work has nothing to do with the charming and the picturesque, or with the Wordsworthian pieties still trundled out by sentimental preservationists. Nature is of supreme value not in spite of, but, in a mysterious way because of the elements of ugliness, pain and death:

> For that's the paradox of the poetry, as if poetry were a biological healing process. It seizes on what is depressing and destructive, and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing. ... And to reach that final mood of release and elation is the whole driving force of writing at all. [Norwich Tape]

It is the absence of this final stage which distinguishes the work of Samuel Beckett from that of the Eastern European poets:

> At bottom, their vision, like Beckett's is of the struggle of animal cells and of the torments of spirit in a world reduced to that vision [of disaster], but theirs contains far more elements than his. It contains all the substance and feeling of ordinary life. And one can argue that it is a step or two beyond his in imaginative truth, in that whatever terrible things happen in their work happen within a containing passion - Job-like - for the elemental final beauty of the created world.
> [Introduction to Popa, 2]

Imaginative truthtellings demands that both the disaster and the beauty be fully presented. To select the benevolent, comforting aspects of

nature is to cast her in the role of the green mother. The green mother in *Cave Birds* is Nature in its Lucy Gray aspect, Blake's threefold vision, Beulah, 'a soft Moony Universe, feminine, lovely, / Pure, mild & Gentle' [*Vala* I,95-6], which appears to its inhabitants 'as the beloved infant in his mother's bosom round incircled' [*Milton* 30:11]. She seeks with 'songs and loving blandishments' to wipe Enion's tears. But her beauty is delusive. Beulah may be valued as a retreat for temporary solace and refreshment. As a permanent residence it becomes a Lotus Land where the soul dies:

> Where the impressions of Despair & Hope for ever vegetate
> In flowers, in fruits, in fishes, birds & beasts & clouds & waters,
> The land of doubts & shadows, sweet delusions, unform'd hopes.
> They saw no more the terrible confusion of the wracking universe.
> They heard not, saw not, felt not all the terrible confusion,
> For in their orbed senses, within clos'd up, they wander'd at will.
> And those upon the Couches view'd them, in the dreams of Beulah,
> As they repos'd from the terrible wide universal harvest.
>
> [*Vala* IX,377-84]

In *Cave Birds* the green mother offers the hero a return to the womb, not for rebirth but for perfect security, the everlasting holiday promised by all the religions, without contraries or suffering or consciousness:

> This earth is heaven's sweetness.
>
> It is heaven's mother.
> The grave is her breast
> And her milk is endless life.
> You shall see
> How tenderly she has wiped her child's face clean
>
> Of the bitumen of blood and the smoke of tears. ['A green mother']

In a wood the protagonist sees all the animals move 'in the glow of fur which is their absolution in sanctity'. But they have never fallen. Their 'state of steady bliss' [*Moortown Diary*, 65] is not available to or ultimately desirable for man: 'And time was not present they never stopped / Or left anything old or reached any new thing' ['As I came, I saw a wood']. The only religion the hero's deepest humanity sanctions for him is communion with a world

whose gods are perpetually crucified and eaten and resurrected, and men move not in perpetual sanctity, but in the bitumen of blood and smoke of tears. There and only there is the ground of his striving towards an earned atonement. His task, like Blake's Milton, is 'to redeem the Female Shade' which is his own Emanation, his anima, mother, bride and vision.

Hughes' intention, had the *Life and Songs of the Crow* been completed, was to bring Crow at last to a river he must cross. But his way is barred by a huge foul ogress who demands to be carried over on his shoulders. On the way her weight increases to the point where Crow cannot move. Then she asks him a riddle which he must answer before her weight will decrease to allow him to stagger a few more steps. This happens seven times. The first two questions are 'Who paid most, him or her?' and 'Was it an animal, a bird, or a fish?' Crow's answers, 'Lovesong' and 'The Lovepet', are about as wrong as they could be. But he comes to realize that these riddles are all about love, and are, in fact, recapitulations of his previous mistaken encounters with the female, onto whom he had projected the ugly and threatening contents of his own psyche, whom he had tried to kill or otherwise victimize. His answers gradually improve until, in his answer to the final question, 'Who gave most, him or her?', he gets it right. His answer is 'Bride and Groom', where the broken hero and his former victim begin 'with fearfulness and astonishment' tenderly to reassemble each other:

> So, gasping with joy, with cries of wonderment
> Like two gods of mud
> Sprawling in the dirt, but with infinite care
>
> They bring each other to perfection.

Crow reaches the far bank, and the ogress leaps lightly from his back transformed into a beautiful maiden, his intended bride.

The green mother offers a world without goblins. The overweening male ego is the criminal throughout the sequence. But the unselving process is not an end in itself. There can hardly be life without self. The process of individuation must begin again, hoping to avoid some of the mistakes. The alchemical marriage, or coniunctio, is not only a marriage of male and female but of all the polarized elements of the divided self. It is a marriage of heaven and hell. It must be the opposite of the submerging of one in the other, a perpetual creative struggle of contraries. The goblin is the offspring. The couple must not attempt to kill or tame or disown the goblin. They must

acknowledge this thing of darkness and attempt to accommodate its energies so that it does not turn ugly and destructive. Without the goblin there would be nothing for the married couple to do but lie in perpetual inertia, in a religious daze.

*

It is hard to decide which poems are the more wonderful, those written out of fourfold vision, or those which re-enact the painful process by which that vision is achieved and renewed. For the former we would go to *River*, for the latter to the Epilogue poems in *Gaudete*.

Here the Anglican clergyman Nicholas Lumb has undergone a terrifying ordeal in the underworld, which is the spirit world and the animal world, the world under the world, the depths of his own unconscious. The experience has destroyed his old split self and enabled him to be reborn of the goddess who is simultaneously reborn of him. Lumb is returned to the surface world by a loch in the west of Ireland. We can imagine him surviving only on the fringe of the modern world, for he returns as a holy idiot, stripped of everything but his new sacramental vision which enables him to perform small miracles such as whistling an otter from the loch and triggering a shattering vision of the creation in an Irish priest, and to write these little poems, some confused memories of his ordeal, some hymns to the goddess. Lumb corresponds exactly (as does the nameless hero of *Cave Birds*) to Hughes' description of the doubling and subsequent correction of the tragic hero in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*:

> 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. [393]

Here Hughes tries to imagine what it might be like to make the apparently impossible choice and accept, even worship, the Goddess in her totality,

including her role as Queen of Hell. To accept life, that is, unconditionally, with all its inevitable cargo of pain and death.

These Epilogue poems contain as much pain as poems can, pain which is felt to be essential to the ultimate exultation, the release of mana:

> The sea grieves all night long.
> The wall is past groaning.
> The field has given up -
> It can't care any more.
>
> Even the tree
> Waits like an old man
> Who has seen his whole family murdered.
>
> Horrible world.
>
> Where I let in again -
> As if for the first time -
> The untouched joy.

This is how Hughes now sees the 'drama of organic life', no longer simply as a battle between vitality and death:

> life itself is what terrifies living things and possesses them with their various forms of madness, and exhausts them with their struggles to control and contain it and to secure its subjective essence of joy.
> [*Shakespeare* 326]

These are poems about atonement, what it would be like to be, in Lawrence's terminology, reconnected with the cosmos, or in Hughes' to become once again 'participants in the business of living in this universe' [*Children as Writers* 2, p.5]:

> The grass-blade is not without
> The loyalty that never was beheld.
>
> And the blackbird
> Sleeking from common anything and worm-dirt
> Balances a precarious banner
> Gold on black, terror and exultation.

The grim badger with armorial mask
Biting spade-steel, teeth and jaw-strake shattered,
Draws that final shuddering battle cry
Out of its backbone.

Me too,
Let me be one of your warriors.

Let your home
Be my home. Your people
My people.

*

This total identification with the world of animal suffering is part of the atonement which follows his recognition of his own earlier criminality and his ruthless determination through *Crow, Cave Birds* and *Gaudete* to acknowledge his guilt unconditionally, to identify himself with the suffering of the victim, and to accept whatever punishment his own imagination finds fit. The victim appears in these poems as a female figure, bride, mother or goddess. But since the goddess is all Nature, the victim can equally well be presented as an animal; and such poems are equally grounded in autobiographical experience.

We have seen how Hughes' first relationship with the natural world was determined largely by his elder brother, Gerald, 'whose passion was shooting':

> He wanted to be a big game hunter or a game warden in Africa - that was his dream. His compromise in West Yorkshire was to shoot over the hillsides and on the moor edge with a rifle. He would take me along. So my early memories of being three and four are of going off with him, being his retriever. I became completely preoccupied by his world of hunting. He was also a very imaginative fellow; he mythologized his hunting world as North American Indian – paleolithic. And I lived in his dream. [*Paris Review* interview, 59]

Hughes in that innocence which, unlike Blake's state of innocence was also ignorance, had no compunction about shedding the blood of animals: 'He could not kill enough for me'. Man, he assumed, is a hunter. In 'Two' the

narrator, evoking the bliss of the two brothers returning from a successful hunting expedition, seems not to notice the negative implications of the imagery, that the snipe have been 'robbed of their jewels', the grouse ('glowing like embers') of their fire. The stream speaks 'oracles of abundance', and the purpose of that abundance is to provide limitless game for the god-like brothers.

The last such expedition the brothers made was the one to Crimsworth Dene recorded in 'The Deadfall'. To the seven-year-old Hughes it was 'the most magical place I had ever been in': 'All down the valley, over the great spilling mounds of foxgloves, grey columns of midges hung in the stillness'. A thrush's 'every note echoed through the whole valley'. In the tent at night 'listening to the stars, and the huge, silent breathing of the valley, I felt happier than I had ever been'. He is aware of no incongruity that in all this edenic abundance, the most precious and beautiful thing is 'my brother's gleaming American rifle'. He is woken in the night by the strange figure of what he takes to be a little old woman, who calls him (but not his brother) to help with an emergency. He is needed to release a fox-cub trapped by the deadfall. As soon as he has done so, the 'woman' vanishes. The deadfall has killed the parent fox: 'When I lifted its eyelid, the eye looked at me, very bright and alive. I closed it gently and stroked it quite shut'. He declines his brother's offer to cut off the tail for him. As they bury the fox, he finds in the loose earth a tiny ivory fox (which Hughes has to this day). It seems that Hughes is here being initiated into some special protective relationship with foxes, which involves distancing him from his brother, the hunter.

Nevertheless, when, after an estrangement of eighteen years the two brothers met again in Devon, and Gerald wanted 'a taste of English sport', they borrowed 'an old, rusty, single-barrelled' gun, and tried to recapture the joys of the hunt, with Hughes, as of old, in the subservient role: 'I am your dog'. 'Solstice' falls into three distinct parts. The opening is dream-like, magical, idyllic, as befits the attempt to recapture the time in childhood when the hunting expeditions of the two brothers seemed in memory to have taken place in such an edenic world. But the long middle part of the poem, the hunt itself, acquires a sinister tone as the gun seems to take over the two men for its own mechanical and bloody purposes, reducing them to 'two suits of cold armour', empty of human sensitivity and moral choice, hypnotized by the unstoppable logic of the hunt. The shot affects Hughes like 'a cracking blow on the head', an image of the rude awakening from the dream. Hughes is no longer the boy untroubled by conscience and consciousness. He is now a man aware of the sacred purity and nobility of a fox, of a responsibility towards foxes of all creatures as his particular

totemic beasts, of the fox as representing the most true, the innermost and most vulnerable part of himself, of an encounter with a wild fox as a particular epiphany, which the brothers have now profaned, not only killing the fox, but chopping off the tail and bundling the remains of this beautiful and 'phenomenal' creature into a hole 'like picnic rubbish'. He awakes from his trance too late, having been betrayed into the shameful and pointless destruction of a sacred life. The final section matches in tone the 'ultimate bitterness' in the smile of the dying fox. At the end it is no longer 'we' striding elated through a vividly coloured, sparkling, pristine landscape, but 'you' and 'I' walking through 'dank woodland', worlds apart.

Written at about the same time, 1978, 'The Head' is like a phantasmagoric nightmare version of the same story, with two brothers on a hunting trip. Again there is an abundance, a miraculous abundance of game. But this time it seems the brothers will not be satisfied until they have wiped out the whole animal creation. On the first night their camp-fire is surrounded by 'a close-up circle of magnificent foxes that lay with their noses on their paws watching him in deep concentration'. Next morning the massacre begins. It is made all the more obscene by the fact that the animals make no attempt to escape, but offer themselves like sacrifices, and by the fact that the corpses are skinned and then left in bleeding heaps. The narrator begins to be sickened, his sleep disturbed by even worse horrors than the enormities of the day. He tells his brother he never wants to 'see another animal drop':

> My whole being was saturated with animal wounds and animal pain and animal death. And the thought of killing one more animal wrenched me with agony like a hand grasping a raw burn.

The brother is disgusted with him, and insists on continuing the slaughter alone. That night the narrator dreams that his brother is 'tried and sentenced and executed' by wolves. Later, as in 'The Deadfall', he is visited by 'the shawled figure of a woman'. She bows low before the skinned victims 'as if before an altar'. She shrieks and laments over each body she finds. Then she takes his rifle from the tent and glides with it into the river. Next morning he finds the almost devoured remains of his brother.

The ending is problematical. But the drift of these three works from the same period, 'Two', 'A Solstice' and 'The Head', is clear enough. Hughes, drawing on some facets of his actual relationship with his brother, uses the traditional two brothers motif to dramatize the split within himself between the two extremes of his own nature, the aggressively masculine,

hubristic, insanely rational self, appropriating nature ruthlessly to its degrading purposes; and the more feminine self, open to feeling and spirit, to what Hughes calls in his essay on Henry Williamson 'the pathos of actuality in the natural world'. (It is no coincidence that one of Williamson's books is called *The Fox Under My Cloak*.) Hughes is again attempting to correct a psychic imbalance, to heal an unnatural split, in exactly the spirit of Wolfram's Parzival, which he quotes as an epigraph to *Gaudete*:

> And I mourn for this, for they were the two sons of one man. One could say that 'they' were fighting in this way, if one wished to speak of two. These two, however, were one, for 'my brother and I' is one body, like good man and good wife. Contending here from loyalty of heart, one flesh, one blood, was doing itself much harm.

The skinned and severed head of the brother is alive, and follows the narrator with vindictive shrieks. Later it turns into a sort of owl, finally into a slender girl, whom, though she never speaks, he takes home and marries. It may be that the pain of the brother eventually releases his animal self, what connects him with the whole animal creation he had formerly repudiated, as if he could exist like a severed head; then finally releases his repudiated and victimized feminine self, which is a perfect body but without the power of speech. Only after this transformation does it become possible for the estranged brothers to be reconciled. The half of the self which is externalized as the brother undergoes transformations well grounded in the mystical tradition, where

> beheading signifies 'removing carnal consciousness, replacing it with spiritual consciousness'. In general, beheading means to be reborn with a new, other consciousness. This meaning is constantly refreshed and re-enforced by recurring as a common, archetypal event in ordinary dream life.
>
> [*Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being,* 395-6]

The first phase of that rebirth, as in *Cave Birds* is as an owl-flower; the final phase as the Goddess herself restored to the naked maidenhood of the unfallen world (as the monstrous ogress would have turned into a slim naked girl, his intended bride, on the far side of the river, had Crow ever got there).

*

In *Remains of Elmet* Hughes turned to look at what had actually been done to his home and people in the Calder Valley. Hughes cannot regret that the moors, into which so many lives were ploughed like manure, are now breaking loose from the harness of men.

Chapels, chimneys, vanish in the brightening

And the hills walk out on the hills
The rain talks to its gods
The light, opening younger, fresher wings
Holds this land up again like an offering

Heavy with the dream of a people. ['The Trance of Light']

It is not only the chimneys, chapels and dry-stone walls of the Calder Valley which must collapse before there can be any new building. The image of stone returning to the earth is one of many images in Hughes for the restoration to Nature of her own, the healing and rededication of the holy elements before man can approach them again with clean hands, with respect and humility, and for purposes more natural, sane and worthily human than the enslavement of body and spirit which has characterized Protestantism and industrialism in England.

Most of the poems are bleak. The *duende* of the Calder Valley is a spirit of disaster and mourning. You can hear it in the 'dark sounds' of the moors - 'the peculiar sad desolate spirit that cries in telegraph wires on moor roads, in the dry and so similar voices of grouse and sheep, and the moist voices of curlews' ['The Rock']. But in spite of this, 'the mood of moorland is exultant'. Many of the finest poems in *Remains of Elmet* celebrate the exhilaration which is the recognition that out of these uncompromising and unpromising materials, this graveyard, this vacancy of scruffy hills and stagnant pools and bone-chilling winds, life is continually renewing itself and making miracles:

And now this whole scene, like a mother,
Lifts a cry
Right to the source of it all.

A solitary cry.

She has made a curlew. ['Long Screams']

The same wind which had so threatened the embattled ego in 'Wind', now blows great holes in the sky opening it to the huge light of spirit; it frees the hills from their harness of walls. The Methodists had built their foursquare chapels in an attempt to imprison spirit and keep out nature, even a single cricket. Nature is now reclaiming them. The happiest men are those at play, the roofless, wall-less, pitifully buffeted men trying to play football on the highest, most exposed ridge for miles. Though their only spectator is that wild god leaning through a fiery hole in heaven, they are not overawed:

Hair plastered, they all just trod water
To puddle glitter. And their shouts bobbed up
Coming fine and thin, washed happy

While the humped world sank floundering
And the valleys blued unthinkable
Under depth of Atlantic depression -

But the wingers leapt, they bicycled in air
And the goalie flew horizontal

And once again a golden holocaust
Lifted the cloud's edge, to watch them. ['Football at Slack']

The comedy is part of the feeling of release from that intolerable 'weight of Atlantic depression' which had characterized the earlier poems about the Yorkshire Pennines. The style, out from under that pressure, plays like the wind. So far has Hughes now travelled since 'The Hawk in the Rain' that Scigaj can speak of 'the ethereal lightness of his poetic line' in *Remains of Elmet*.

*

Scigaj has noted the accumulation of images of light in *River*:

> Most often Hughes portrays the spiritual component of the river's animistic energy through light imagery. Light imagery coalesces with river water regularly to imbue riverscapes with a numinous aura, a

> sense of the sacredness of the hydrological cycle. Cock minnows gathering in a pool at Easter work together solemnly in the 'lit water', an image Hughes expands at the poem's conclusion to convey brightness from the Source blessing their labour 'In the wheel of light - / Ghostly rinsings / A struggle of spirits' [23]. On the island of Skye an encounter with a salmon leaves the fisherman with a sense of being momentarily absorbed into the spirit world after miles of hiking towards the river's source while staring at the pool tail's 'superabundance of spirit' [31]. Under water, the mystical sea-trout 'Hang in a near emptiness of light' [40]; the West Dart River 'spills from the Milky Way, pronged with light' [39]; and the river's 'Unending' sustenance, a wine distilled from the harvest it helped to fertilize, is squeezed from hills packed 'Tight with golden light' [45]. An abundance of visual and auditory similes and metaphors revive in the reader a sense of participation in an ecosystem that fulfils much more than one's craving for facts and analysis. [*Ted Hughes*, 136-7]

Nature here is not clothed in celestial light, has no need of any borrowed glory. It is wholly constituted of earthly light. All life is matter radiant with spirit. 'In the marriage of these two is a bliss of making and unmaking, all matter spiritualized, all spirit materialized, in the divine harmony of Light' [Smith 93]. This is very close to the vision Nietzsche calls Dionysian:

> The word '*Dionysian'* expresses ... an ecstatic saying of yea to the collective character of existence, as that which remains the same, and equally mighty and blissful throughout all change; the great pantheistic sympathy with pleasure and pain, which declares even the most terrible and questionable qualities of existence good, and sanctifies them; the eternal will to procreation, to fruitfulness, and to recurrence; the feeling of unity in regard to the necessity of creating and annihilating.
>
> [*Will to Power* Sect. 1050]

In accordance with this spirit of acceptance, Hughes looks again at the previously unacceptable face of the goddess, the bloody face of the predator, and declares it good. Nature is indeed perfecting her killers; but if it were only that, the prey species would collapse and the perfect killers would soon have nothing left to kill. Nature must simultaneously perfect the survival skills of the prey. Neither species could have evolved without the other. They bring each other to perfection.

The 'religious daze, the state of steady bliss' which Hughes observed in new-born calves, can also be seen in the dying:

> The spider clamps the bluefly - whose death panic
> Becomes sudden soulful absorption.
>
> A stoat throbs at the nape of the lumped rabbit
> Who watches the skylines fixedly. [*Gaudete* 177]

Predation is a form of holy communion:

> And already the White Hare crouches at the sacrifice,
> Already the Fawn stumbles to offer itself up
> And the Wolf-Cub weeps to be chosen. ['Eagle']

'Tiger-psalm' was originally conceived as a dialogue between Socrates and Buddha. Gradually Buddha's side of the argument resolved itself into a tiger and Socrates' into the principle of machine-guns, 'as if the whole abstraction of Socrates' discourse must inevitably, given enough time and enough applied intelligence, result in machine guns'. It is an argument between single vision and fourfold vision. The tiger, unlike the machine-gunners, is carrying out a perfectly rational, restrained and sacred activity:

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

In his report on visions seen by thirty-five subjects after taking the hallucinogenic drug harmaline in Chile, Claudio Naranjo tells us that seven of them saw big cats, usually tigers, though there are no big cats in Chile and no tigers in the New World. One woman had a tiger guide throughout her journey. Another actually became a tiger:

> I walked, though, feeling the same freedom I had experienced as a bird and a fish, freedom of movement, flexibility, grace. I moved as a tiger in the jungle, joyously, feeling the ground under my feet, feeling my power; my chest grew larger. I then approached an animal, any animal. I only saw its neck, and then experienced what a tiger feels when looking at its prey. [Harner 185]

Naranjo comments: 'This may be enough to show how the tiger by no means stands for mere hostility, but for a fluid synthesis of aggression and grace and a full acceptance of the life-impulse beyond moral judgement'. A vision of such a synthesis occurs frequently in the oral poetry of 'primitive' peoples. Here is a Yoruba poem called 'Leopard':

> Gentle hunter
> His tail plays on the ground
> While he crushes the skull.
>
> Beautiful death
> Who puts on a spotted robe
> When he goes to his victim.
>
> Playful killer
> Whose loving embrace
> Splits the antelope's heart. [Finnegan 163]

Half Naranjo's subjects had ecstatic feelings of a religious nature: 'The sea was in myself. There was a continuity of the external with the internal. ... The sand and the plants were myself or something of mine. The idea of God was in everything' [188]. But this atonement must always be preceded by a descent into destruction:

> The complex of images discussed first as portraying the polarity of being and becoming, freedom and necessity, spirit and matter, only set up the stage for the human drama. This involves the battle of opposites

> and eventually their reconciliation or fusion, after giving way to death and destruction, be this by fire, tigers, drowning, or devouring snakes. The beauty of fluid fire, the graceful tiger, or the subtle and wise reptile, these seem most expressive for the synthetic experience of accepting life as a whole, or, better, accepting existence as a whole, life and death included; evil included too, though from a given spiritual perspective it is not experienced as evil any more. Needless to say, the process is essentially religious, and it could even be suspected that every myth presents us one particular aspect of the same experience.
>
> [189-90]

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

Hughes agrees with Eliot that the river is a god. But Eliot's river, 'with its cargo of dead negroes, cows and chicken coops' is purely destructive, sweeping everything as wastage into the sea. Hughes' river is source not sink, it 'will go on issuing from heaven / In dumbness issuing spirit brightness / Through its broken mouth'. It 'will wash itself of all deaths' ['River']. 'Peering into that superabundance of spirit', the human intruder is humbled, feels ghostly, loses all sense of his own centrality and omnipotence as a lord of language. The waters wash away his sense of identity:

> Let the world come back, like a white hospital
> Busy with emergency words
>
> Try to speak and nearly succeed
> Heal into time and other people

Here, as Nicholas Bishop points out 'the personal pronoun is absolutely eliminated from the poem as the protagonist becomes "translucent" to the processes of both the entire surrounding river-scape and those of the explored inner world' [248]. Here Hughes fulfils the hope for poetry expressed in 1952 by the French poet Francis Ponge:

> When man becomes proud to be not just the site where ideas and feelings are produced, but also the crossroad where they divide and mingle, he will be ready to be saved. Hope therefore lies in a poetry through which the world so invades the spirit of man that he becomes almost speechless, and later reinvents a language.

Pilinszky castigates that narcissistic art which 'places the stylistic certainty of appearances before the self-forgetful incarnating of the world' [Bishop 144].

***

To return to *River*, the language of all these poems is a rich weave of relationships. A poem may be ostensibly about a single creature, but that creature is defined by its relationships with other creatures, with weather and season and landscape. Since 'all things draw to the river' it is therefore the language of atonement.

In his note to 'Rain-Charm for the Duchy' Hughes describes in detail the astonishing breeding behaviour of salmon. He concludes:

> This is how salmon come to be such sensitive glands in the vast, dishevelled body of nature. Their moody behaviour, so unpredictable and mysterious, is attuned, with the urgency of survival, to every slightest hint of the weather - marvellous instruments, recording every moment-by-moment microchange as the moving air and shifting light manipulate the electronics of the water-molecules. [*Rain-Charm* 52]

The life of the salmon is also the life of the living waters, which is also the life of earth and sky. The salmon is part of a flow which 'will not let up for a minute'.

The bliss of unmaking is the theme of, for example, 'October Salmon'. The spent salmon is the defeated, torn and sacrificed hero whose acquiescence is a form of worship. The bliss of making is the theme of 'Salmon Eggs':

> Something else is going on in the river
>
> More vital than death -
>
> ...
>
> - these toilings of plasm -
> The melt of mouthing silence, the charge of light
> Dumb with immensity.
> The river goes on
> Sliding through its place, undergoing itself

In its wheel.

The wheel, karma, the 'cycles of recurrence', were formerly for Hughes, as for most religions, images of horror and absurdity. The pressure was to get off the intolerable wheel. Now it seems that that horror was a product of defective vision and of the hubristic attempt to redeem nature. Hughes now echoes Lawrence's risen Christ (in *The Escaped Cock*): 'From what, and to what, could this infinite whirl be saved?'

Like Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Hughes seeks to rescue the language of spirit and the sacred from transcendental religion. The early church arrogated to itself many of the most powerful symbols, festivals, rituals, of pagan religion. Now it is time for them to be restored. And if the only language now available to us to express sacredness is the language of Christian worship, then the church's monopoly of that language must be broken. In 'Salmon Eggs' Hughes appropriates the language of the church, its 'liturgy' and 'mass'; the river, the 'round of unending water', the wheel itself, is his 'crypt', 'altar' and 'font'. His eucharist gives thanks for 'earth's tidings' and the 'blessed issue' of salmon eggs. He translates the river's annunciation as '*Only birth matters'*. The Great Mother's only obligation is fecundity.

The influence on Hughes of Buddhism in the sixties was largely replaced in the seventies by the healthier influence of Alchemy, as he strove to find poetic equivalents (overtly in *Cave Birds: an alchemical cave drama*) for the Great Work of Alchemy:

> The 'Great Work' of Alchemy aimed to discover the nature of 'spirit' and to see face to face the 'body of light' that was the foundation of the human body as well as the 'matter' of the universe. The alchemical marriage between sun and moon, king and queen, spirit and soul (including body), expressed the essential identity of spirit and nature, so healing the split that had developed in human consciousness between these two aspects of life. Whoever this secret revealed itself to had penetrated to the mystery of creation and knew there was no death, for he or she understood how life continuously regenerated itself; how the manifest emanated from the unmanifest and 'dissolved' again into the unmanifest. [Baring 649-50]

This vision of the 'body of light' expressing the divine harmony of matter and spirit is evident in most of the poems in *River*, but most clearly in 'That Morning', the poem with which Hughes chose to end his 1982 *Selected*

Poems. Here two awe-struck human beings are allowed to re-enter Paradise, not as trespassers or intruders or voyeurs, but as long exiles being welcomed home. The place, a remote valley in Alaska, and its creatures demanded a sacramental response. The sheer profusion of salmon was a sign and a blessing:

> Then for a sign that we were where we were
> Two gold bears came down and swam like men
>
> Beside us. And dived like children.
> And stood in deep water as on a throne
> Eating pierced salmon off their talons.
>
> So we found the end of our journey.
>
> So we stood, alive in the river of light
> Among the creatures of light, creatures of light.

It is no derogation of the sacredness of the salmon that they should be also food, for both man and bear. Campbell writes:

> The affect of the successful adventure of the hero is the unlocking and release again of the flow of life into the body of the world. The miracle of this flow may be represented in physical terms as a circulation of food substance, dynamically as a streaming of energy, or spiritually as a manifestation of grace. Such varieties of image alternate easily, representing three degrees of condensation of the one life force. An abundant harvest is the sign of God's grace; God's grace is the food of the soul; the lightning bolt is the harbinger of fertilizing rain, and at the same time the manifestation of the released energy of God. Grace, food substance, energy: these pour into the living world, and wherever they fail, life decomposes into death. [*Hero* 40]

This moment out of time is of course precarious. The journey resumes next day, or that afternoon, to recapture it.

A more typical hero is the October salmon, worn-out with his two thousand mile journey, earth's 'insatiable quest', who, despite the 'covenant of Polar Light' ends as a 'shroud in a gutter' - 'this chamber of horrors is also home'. Only the salmon's superhuman 'epic poise ... holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so patient / In the machinery of heaven'.

Even if the covenant held, and man had the option of life 'among creatures of light', would he choose the Goddess for his bride and nature for his home?

> 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. ... 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. [*Shakespeare* 392-3]

Hughes is doubtful that any man could long sustain the salmon's 'epic poise'

> That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so
> Patient
> In the machinery of heaven. ['October Salmon']

Perhaps the best we can hope for is that our civilization will pass like the others, seeming no more than the nightmare of a stranded immortal who will eventually awake:

> The dream streamed from him. He blinked away
> The bloody matter of the Cross
> And the death's-head after-image of 'Poor'.
>
> Chapels, chimneys, roofs in the mist – scattered.
>
> Hills with raised wings were standing on hills.
> They rode the waves of light
> That rocked the conch of whispers
>
> And washed and washed at his eye.
>
> Washed from his ear
>
> All but the laughter of foxes.
>
> ['A Chinese History of Colden Water']

LITERATURE AND THE CRIME AGAINST NATURE

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