THE POETRY OF TED HUGHES*

by P. STRAUSS

Our main responsibility as readers is in the end to modern literature, simply because it needs to be made use of before the particular value of its contemporaneity is lost, before the moment is past when it can become a part of our ideas and feelings in the most natural and effective way. If the poet's genuinely in touch, that moment is really the moment when he writes the poem. So there's no need to apologize for talking about a modern poet — one can't do that too soon; in fact it's always too late already.

However, I'm not easy about it — with a new poet there's always too much one doesn't understand, too much that hasn't been tested. One can't know just how heavily one's going to put one's foot in it. So I *am* asking you for tolerance for blanks and incompletenesses and doubts and uncertainties. Not to mention the probable blunders.

One of the noticeable things about modern critics is that they make no move to measure the importance of contemporary writers against that of the great writers of the past. Today, critics tend to read writers as talents, and not as men with authority — who are saying something. It would certainly be a brave man who would be prepared to make an evaluation of Ted Hughes in comparison with Donne or Blake or Wordsworth. What one can do is show that some such evaluation will have to be made eventually — the poems ask for it. They ask for it because they're so clearly written in a tradition: they're a kind of sequel. Moreover Hughes is no longer a talent, he's a poet who has completed himself, who can now say things with complete purity and individuality. And he has the effect on previous poetry that Eliot saw as a characteristic of all *truly* new poetry: he makes it look different, he changes the direction of its resonance, so that new aspects of it suddenly seem important.

The specific tradition to which Ted Hughes belongs is a tradition of metaphysical verse — or say philosophical poetry — that had its origins in the self-questionings of thinkers in the seventeenth century, when confronted with new scientific discoveries and theories. Dr. Johnson called these poets 'metaphysical' with pejorative intention, largely because he saw philosophy as a

* A lecture given at the University of Natal, Pietermaritzburg in June, 1971.

serious business in its own right, which poetry could not deal with except in a spirit of frivolous bravado. And of course it's quite true that the use of philosophical ideas in seventeenth century verse was more often than not a pretty light-hearted affair, little more than impertinent foolery. But this is not the whole story. The seventeenth century really did develop ways by which poetry could discuss the fundamental problems of man's nature and existence: his relation to God, to the creation he is part of, to death, to time; the split in his being; his dissatisfaction with his own nature; the question of free will; the relation of soul to body, of man's finiteness to the infinite. Moreover, these problems were dealt with by poetry in a non-discursive form, ultimately by enactment, not by argument. An example of this is Marvell's *Dialogue between the Soul and Body*, a fliting-match in which each participant feels the other as a prison and a torture. The poem is theoretical enough in some of its implications, but ultimately the agonized split in man's nature is *felt* not analysed, felt in the conflict of divergent impulses and in the wry humour of the whole.

It is difficult to evaluate the importance to us moderns of this poetic form which enables a poet to enact his philosophical explorations in a symbolic way: a mode of thinking that frees his intuitions and keeps his thought sane, but which doesn't allow of any easy translation back into conceptual thought. One can at least say that the value of such a form of thinking is not limitless. We tend anyway to talk about the significance of poetry in too grand terms.

On the other hand, what can be said with assurance is that, in our time, philosophy — and moreover philosophy dealing with basic assumptions and questionings about the nature of our existence — is perhaps the discipline that is most vitally significant for our lives and for our future. We live in an age where we are, in a quite new way, affected and perhaps imprisoned by things that are man-made, ultimately by man's ideas about himself. This applies to the raw experience of our senses, the structure of the society we live in, our education, the basic assumptions that are communicated by our amazingly efficient network of communications. No other civilization has ever transformed its ideas so swiftly into actions that directly affect its members. The seeming sterility of so much academic philosophy may make it seem strange to claim that it is in philosophy that the basic battle is fought. But in fact the philosophies that our civiliza-

tion lives by have not been sterile: they have been extraordinarily successful and productive, and for this reason are practically unassailable, perhaps rightly so. I am thinking of course primarily of the philosophies underlying the natural sciences, and the philosophical adaptations made of these to enable them to be used as a basis for sciences of man such as sociology, economics, and especially psychology.

The scientific benefits of these philosophies have been immeasurable; the psychological side-effects of them might yet prove disastrous. To quote Yvor Winters: '. . . the study of history seems to show that if any doctrine is widely accepted for a long period of time, it tends more and more strongly to exact conformity from human nature, to alter human nature.' This sentence takes on particular significance if compared with what Winters says elsewhere while speaking about determinism, one of our most ineradicable inheritances from the nineteenth century, the machine age — a doctrine that we are always coming up against, in its crudest forms, in our own minds, and have never succeeded in digesting — Winters writes: '. . . a belief in any form of determinism should, if the belief is pushed to its local ends, eliminate the belief in, and consequently the functioning of, whatever it is that we call the will. . .' And indeed our problem is of this kind. It is as though science's necessary refusal to accept subjective experience as primary, whole and indivisible, its creation of objectivity by an analysis of subjective experience, involving a destruction of its entity and primality, acts indirectly against man's confidence in himself as an originator of action — corrodes his primitive conviction as a creature. Man comes to see himself more and more as a passive adaptor rather than a maker of creative decisions. If the trend goes too far — if men should ever really abdicate — we can expect the most terrifying forms of authoritarianism.

In this situation 'the traditional values of literature' are no adequate protection of our humanity; what is required is a radically unevasive, as it were 'non-fictional', criticism in depth of existing philosophic ideas, a criticism which isn't intimidated by the terrific realities of modern science. With regard to philosophy we really are justified in thinking in the most apocalyptic terms — with regard to poetry surely we're not.

Which is not to say that poetry doesn't have its place in this struggle. For one thing, poetry is essentially the assertion of experience, of the primal knot where man and world meet to make consciousness. It has this power because its medium is

language — language as opposed to the communication of objective information. It can for a moment restore one to that centre in one in which one's human power and responsibility lies. And so it can act as refreshment — or as a warning, when it tells one that this centre is missing from one's calculations.

But although the poet can draw on the existential vitality of the language he deals in, often, in order to liberate these creative forces in the language he will need to be using his intelligence strenuously to overcome what is divisive or falsifying in the terms he is using or in his own concepts. Hence the value of the Metaphysicals' method. Marvell's problem in the *Dialogue* is clearly the conflict between opposing yearnings, which he ascribes to the Soul and to the Body respectively; this split in him is what prevents him from having a sense of wholeness and purpose. He must struggle to resolve the conflict, which I believe he does in the last two lines of the poem, when the two are as close together as an artist and his material, each gaining its greatest degree of significance only through the other.

> So Architects do square and hew,
> Green Trees that in the Forest grew.

But it is not so much the seventeenth-century poets that haunt our contemporary poetry — the distinctions that we find in poets of our time seem to owe more to William Blake. The problem he defines is not that of the division between mind and body, or soul and body, but of the division between the analytic mind and the imagination. This distinction between the mental and the imaginative, and Blake's sense of how the mental can form a world of its own, hostile to man, lies at the bottom of much of Ted Hughes's verse. But Blake's sense of the transcendent power of the imagination, ultimately in control of all the facts, his sense of a world that is fundamentally in harmony with the best part of the human consciousness, is no longer available to our time. The objective world has got too big for us: it has moved too far away on the one hand, has invaded our own territory on the other. In one of Hughes's poems, *Ballad from a Fairy Tale,* he seems to be writing specifically about the impossibility for him of Blake's interpretation.

We can take Blake's poem about the tiger as an example. The poem shows the agonizing tortures of the tiger's energies when forced to take on a finite shape, and it gets beyond these tortures by showing how the tiger's energy is able to assimilate its physical

form completely to itself. But one of the assumptions necessary to the poem is that the tiger as a creature is complete and self-justifying; it isn't a failed experiment, a half-success, a fluke — that is for Blake unthinkable. But since the theory of evolution this view of a creature — as something incomplete —becomes perfectly thinkable, as Hughes's poems on caged jaguars show us most forcefully.

The first of these poems appears in Hughes's first book, *Hawk in the Rain*. Its thesis is that the jaguar, though caged, is really free. Having envolved into a harmony with his environment, he has no need of his native wilderness, the wilderness is in the instincts of his body and that is enough. He is blind to all else, and the awed audience watch the horizons move across the cage floor, spellbound by the jaguar's hallucination.

If there is something undeniably romantic about this view of the jaguar, it is otherwise in a later poem, which comes from Hughes's third book of serious poetry, *Wodwo*. The poem is called *Second Glance at a Jaguar*, and in fact it revokes the earlier poem.

Skinfull of bowls, he bowls them,
The hip going in and out of joint, dropping the spine
With the urgency of his hurry
Like a cat going along under thrown stones, under cover,
Glancing sideways, running
Under his spine. A terrible, stump-legged waddle
Like a thick Aztec disemboweller,
Club-swinging, trying to grind some square
Socket between his hind legs round,
Carrying his head like a brazier of spilling embers,
And the black bit of his mouth, he takes it
Between his back teeth, he has to wear his skin out,
He swipes a lap at the water-trough as he turns,
Swivelling the ball of his heel on the polished spot,
Showing his belly like a butterfly,
At every stride he has to turn a corner
In himself and correct it. His head
Is like the worn down stump of another whole jaguar,
His body is just the engine shoving it forward,
Lifting the air up and shoving on under,
The weight of his fangs hanging the mouth open,
Bottom jaw combing the ground. A gorged look,
Gangster, club-tail lumped along behind gracelessly,
He's wearing himself to heavy ovals,

Muttering some mantrah, some drum-song of murder
To keep his rage brightening, making his skin
Intolerable, spurred by the rosettes, the cain-brands,
Wearing the spots off from the inside,
Rounding some revenge. Going like a prayer-wheel,
The head dragging forward, the body keeping up,
The hind legs lagging. He coils, he flourishes
The blackjack tail as if looking for a target,
Hurrying through the underworld, soundless.

One of the concerns of the volume called *Wodwo* is to find out whether there is a region of man's personality which enables him to call himself free, undetermined, originating his own actions. The poems discuss the problem for other creatures besides man. The jaguar of this poem is a real jaguar, not a romantic one — and it's a disturbing sight. For one thing this jaguar is not free — and the poem makes one see that a jaguar never could be free. He is caged, but this is not his real imprisonment. The reminders of the cage simply serve to turn our eyes further inwards to the true imprisonment of the jaguar, which is an imprisonment in his own anatomy. He takes the black bit of his mouth between his teeth and strains at it. His body is at odds with itself. He's 'trying to grind some square/Socket between his hind legs round'. His hip goes in and out of joint. It's as though he is continually losing himself and having to find himself again. 'At every stride he has to turn a corner/In himself and correct it.' Life has made him self-contradictory, continually having to mend himself, make a cohesion out of his body which doesn't cohere. Life has left him incomplete. 'His head/Is like the worn down stump of another whole jaguar.' There are parts of his body that don't belong and serve no purpose, his club-tail is lumped along behind gracelessly — it's a kind of appendix. His hind legs lag.

He's tied to the earth. The weight of his teeth makes his jaw hang to comb the ground. Teeth are a recurrent symbol in *Wodwo*. Teeth and intestines, standing for the same imprisonment and burden.

In a strange way this picture of the jaguar makes one think about man along the same lines. There is no *comparison* drawn. It's just that phrases are used that are so arresting that they take on a human meaning for us, like that 'At every stride he has to turn a corner/In himself and correct it'. But we're never allowed to escape from the jaguar's individual movement, the dislocated rhythm that still manages to gather a kind of mesmeric fluidity.

It is in fact precisely because the jaguar is just a jaguar and no more that we are made to think of man as just the creature man and no more: not the crown of creation; not planned; not complete in himself, carrying his own significance in himself; not necessarily in tune with his own purposes.

What is the jaguar's purpose, that makes him so intent on life? His teeth may be a great weight, they may take up a large part of his mind, but not all. 'He swipes a lap at the water-trough as he turns'—essentially he holds the process of drinking in contempt, it's simply to keep him going. What is this engine of his body carrying, then? Hughes speaks of the jaguar as 'carrying his head like a brazier of spilling embers'. As description this is extraordinarily intense, rendering the life in the jaguar's skull that is so full that it seems to be overflowing through his glowing eyes. This carrying of his head seems ambiguous, too, as though the intensity of the brazier is a torture, while it is also precious. For the suggestivity of the language is such that one is aware, in the image, of the primitive significance of fire for man. The brazier in his head is the jaguar's treasure. But it is also the jaguar's rage, which, as we come to see, *is* his life.

The markings on the jaguar's skin are called cain-brands. The jaguar is a murderer, he needs to kill in order to live, and so he is born into the tortures of murderous hatred. And his movements seem an attempt to escape these tortures, to wear the spots off from the inside, perhaps also to revenge himself on his incompleteness, his prison. The poem allows us to make that transition: from the jaguar's rage at his literal captivity, our normal interpretation of the scene, to his more fundamental rage against the captivity of his nature. And his bid to escape is a movement into an ecstasy of rage; he has to 'keep his rage brightening'.

It is this escape or revenge, this ecstasy, that the last part of the poem deals with, and that Hughes links with religious imagery, Hindu or Buddhist in this case. And religious ecstasy, being an attempt to escape from the wheel of life, is seen by Hughes largely in these terms. God is man's shout of despair or of vengefulness on finding himself a captive. As with the jaguar this shout is his life, the dissatisfaction with his situation that gives his existence its dynamism. But the attainment of ecstasy is not freedom. The jaguar in his ecstasy of rage is simply being driven the more efficiently and blindly by the instincts that have been built into him.

This is quite an important theme in Hughes, explaining some of his more puzzling poems. Certainly one of the most significant

aspects of our time has been the debunking of ecstasy as an absolute, or as anything like an absolute. Whether this debunking of ecstasy was effected by Freud, the neurophysiologists, or (most unintentionally) by the drug culture, it's anyway a fact. And for Hughes, though he is interested in the states, ecstasy or inspiration are in a particular sense a diminution, a loss of freedom, because they are a complete surrender to instinctual control, a becoming 'passive like a dead thing'. He frequently links them with death or suicide. He does the same with music, which for him is often an adventure into a purely determined and instinctively logical world.

Second Glance at a Jaguar is about a creature living uneasily in the anatomy that evolution has determined for him. But there is another way of regarding one's situation as it's determined for one by evolution, and Hughes explores the possibilities of this way in a well-known early poem, *Hawk Roosting.* If one has evolved so as to be suited to one's environment, if one is made for it, isn't it equally true that the world is made for oneself? Historically, it may be true that the world was made first, but as far as oneself is concerned it is oneself that comes first — that is one's initial experience, far more persuasive than reflection: the world is an extension of oneself.

Hawk Roosting

I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat.

The convenience of the high trees!
The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray
Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

My feet are locked upon the rough bark.
It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly—
I kill where I please because it is all mine.
There is no sophistry in my body:
My manners are tearing off heads—

The allotment of death.
For the one path of my flight is direct
Through the bones of the living.
No arguments assert my right:

The sun is behind me.
Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.
I am going to keep things like this.

Ted Hughes once said that this poem is about a bird who 'believes that he's nature'. This explains lines like those in the fifth verse: 'For the one path of my flight is direct/Through the bones of the living.' There is no split in the hawk. He translates his will straight into action. The source, the sun, shines straight through from behind him. He's omnipotent because his impulses are in complete harmony with the world that feeds them for him. The universe is an extension of his eye and his claws.

This poem suggests a human parallel much more explicitly than *Second Glance at a Jaguar* does. It is shot through with suggestions that make it a caricature of a dictator. We must see this dictator as comparatively harmless, of course, seeing he is so engagingly insane. But simply by the fact that we can see the hawk in human terms we must see him as quite absurdly limited, lobotomized. In human terms the hawk is mad. He has a certain power and vitality of his own; he is even enviable: but fundamentally we can't be anything but ironical in our feelings about him. And the last line justifies our scepticism: 'I am going to keep things like this'. The hawk's world is static, and so fighting a losing battle with life. Just wait till that bird grows old.

In the poem *Wodwo,* the final and title poem of Hughes's third volume, he creates a creature who is much nearer to man. 'Wodwo' is a medieval word, meaning a wild man of the woods. Hughes's Wodwo is half animal, half man, lives alone (no other member of his species is hinted at); he is almost as much at home in the water as out of it (though this surprises him); and his sense of smell is as strong as his sense of sight. Beyond that we don't know much about him, except the things that he finds himself doing. This is of course the whole point—he himself is trying to find out what he is and how he fits in. The conviction that grows on us as we read the poem is that, in spite of the carefully recorded superficial differences between him and man, in essence he simply *is* man: his situation is the essential human situation.

Wodwo

What am I? Nosing here, turning leaves over
Following a faint stain on the air to the river's edge
I enter water. What am I to split
The glassy grain of water looking upward I see the bed
Of the river above me upside down very clear
What am I doing here in mid-air? Why do I find
this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret
interior and make it my own? Do these weeds
know me and name me to each other have they
seen me before, do I fit in their world? I seem
separate from the ground and not rooted but dropped
out of nothing casually I've no threads
fastening me to anything I can go anywhere
I seem to have been given the freedom
of this place what am I then? And picking
bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me
no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it
me and doing that have coincided very queerly
But what shall I be called am I the first
have I an owner what shape am I what
shape am I am I huge if I go
to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees
till I get tired that's touching one wall of me
for the moment if I sit still how everything
stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre
but there's all this what is it roots
roots roots roots and here's the water
again very queer but I'll go on looking.

The Wodwo—we get more and more certain about it— is man throughout, man seen with particular clarity. Unlike other animals, which can be defined by the needs that attach them to a particular environment, he is not tied down to any place, and this freedom makes him unsure about his identity. 'I've no threads/fastening me to anything I can go anywhere/I seem to have been given the freedom/of this place what am I then?' He doesn't know how far his identity extends. Where does his body end? It's not unlimited. He defines it in terms of the work it can do. 'If I go/to the end on this way past these trees and past these trees/till I get tired that's touching one wall of me'. Obviously this definition, like any other, is going to be a merely provisional one. He tries (unsuccessfully) to put together an objective sense of space and gravity out

of his experiences with reflection and buoyancy in the water. He tries metaphor to order his experience, comparing the surface of the stream to the grain of wood. He even makes scientific experiments, dissecting a frog like a biology class learning about human anatomy vicariously. 'Why do I find/this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret/interior and make it my own?' Already he's seeing himself as an object as well as a subject. And already he's aware of breaking a taboo, though so far he believes it's only the frog's sacred secrecy he's invading. The Wodwo even plays. 'And picking/bits of bark off this rotten stump gives me/no pleasure and it's no use so why do I do it/me and doing that have coincided very queerly'. He realizes that his will, even, is a problematic thing. And where does he come in the order of creation? 'If I sit still how everything/stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre'. This is more compelling, I think, than any of the lines in *Hawk Roosting* that make us see the hawk as the centre of his perceptions. It is a hallucination we've all had in childhood but had forgotten. For one moment the Wodwo sees himself as the hawk sees *him*self, with short-lived smugness: 'I suppose I am the exact centre'. But then: 'but what's all this what is it roots . . .' The Wodwo knows that the weeds and the roots have a life of their own, utterly alien to his and unimaginable.

The conclusion of the poem is a proof of its quality: 'very queer but I'll go on looking'. The tone of that is perfect. It's by no means casual, and yet there are no heroics either—there is no time for heroics in what is simply the (possibly tragic) business of living. And this balance in the tone is not merely local: it issues out of the kind of balance between despair and humour that appears in different forms in all Hughes's poems—in a gentle form here, more savagely on both sides in the poems of Hughes's latest book, *Crow*.

The book *Wodwo* seems chiefly concerned with the Wodwo's main problem, the consciousness of a world which is not human. Though this has always been a problem, there are reasons why it should be a special problem of our time. Through our knowledge the universe has got much larger in both directions, outwards and inwards—and more impersonal. We have had wars that have created whole landscapes of anonymous death and depersonalized cruelty in our minds. We find that we must link these with science and impersonal social techniques. Above all we are aware of how much in our personality is a matter of automatism, and we're afraid we might turn out to be automatons all through. Some people believe we are that, and this gives them frightening powers

which they can use to manipulate us, though we hope that some part of us must escape them.

As well as poems, the book *Wodwo* contains stories and a radio play. All these deal with a man being attacked, sometimes destroyed, by contact with something non-human that is more powerful than he is and that makes him lose his grip. In one story it's a mad horse, in another the sun, in a third it's emptiness. In this story a man's plane crashes on an apparently infinite plane of ice. Snow is falling all round him and he has no way of knowing where he is or in what direction he is setting out. I'll read a passage from this:

> Useless to think about it. Where my energy ends I end, and all circumspection and all lucidity end with me. As long as I have energy I can correct my mistakes, outlast them, outwalk them—for instance the unimaginable error that as far as I know I am making at this very moment. This step, this, the next five hundred, or five thousand—all mistaken, all absolute waste, back to where I was ten hours ago. But we recognize that thought. My mind is not my friend. My support, my defence, but my enemy too—not perfectly intent on getting me out of this. If I were mindless perhaps there would be no difficulty whatsoever. I would simply go on aware of nothing but my step by step success in getting over the ground. The thing to do is to keep alert, keep my mind fixed in alertness, recognize these treacherous paralysing, yes, lethal thoughts the second they enter, catch them before they can make that burrowing plunge down the spinal cord.
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> Then gently and without any other acknowledgement push them back—out into the snow where they belong. And that is where they belong. They are infiltrations of the snow, encroachments of this immensity of lifelessness. But they enter so slyly! We are true, they say, or at least very probably true, and on that account you must entertain us and even give us the run of your life, since above all things you are dedicated to the truth. That is the air they have, that's how they come in. What do I know about the truth? As if simple-minded dedication to truth were the final law of existence! I only know more and more clearly what is good for me. It's my mind that has this contemptible awe for the probably true, and my mind, I know, I prove it every minute, is not me and is by no means sworn to help me. Am I to lie? I must survive—that's a truth as sacred as any, and as the hungry

> truths devour the sleepy truths I shall digest every other possible truth to the substance and health and energy of my own, and the ones I can't digest I shall spit out, since in this situation my intention to survive is the one mouth, the one digestive tract, so to speak, by which I live. But those others!

This, I think, explains very well the kind of language Hughes is trying to speak in *Wodwo*. He is trying to see the mind as merely one of man's tools, which must be discarded or curtailed when it threatens his capacity for survival. He is really trying to make a tremendous shift in thought and expression, the shift from the mental truth, which says: the facts are these, or very probably these (a kind of truth on which almost the whole logical structure of the language is based) to the truth of the will to survive. Perhaps it's an attempt which can't, finally, succeed.

The method was perhaps one that couldn't succeed, but we must see the attempt as an honourable one and not an evasion. The modern critic tends to be ghoulish in his tastes, seeing the origin of any real modern poetry in the experience of 'truths that kill'. That way poetry becomes a suicidal enterprise. Hughes's determination is to survive in spite of those truths.

I want to discuss *The Bear* now, which is one of Hughes's most obscure poems. Despite the obscurity, it is so powerful that it has convinced me, at any rate, that it is the most important of all Hughes's poems to date.

The Bear

In the huge, wide-open, sleeping eye of the mountain
The bear is the gleam in the pupil
Ready to awake
And instantly focus.

The bear is glueing
Beginning to end
With glue from people's bones
In his sleep.

The bear is digging
In his sleep
Through the wall of the Universe
With a man's femur.

The bear is a well
Too deep to glitter
Where your shout
Is being digested.

The bear is a river
Where people bending to drink
See their dead selves.

The bear sleeps
In a kingdom of walls
In a web of rivers.

He is the ferryman
To dead land.

His price is everything.

I can't pretend to understand this poem, so I can only speak it impressionistically.

First stanza: The bear is hostile to man, he's a man-eater. He's watching you, and when he's got your measure he'll wake up. When he does, it'll be curtains for you.

The bear is a process which can't be stopped, being involuntary like somnabulism. The bear is a vast computer gathering information which it will one day present. It is rather like the way in which the Special Branch likes to think of itself. Or to be thought of.

Stanza two: The bear is preparing an apocalyptic fund of knowledge, which will one day be complete. He is sapping your vitality, taking the glue from your bones to make a new arrangement with it, leaving you glueless.

Stanza three: The bear is destroying the screens on which creation depends. He will bring about the end of the world.

Stanza four: The bear is impressive. He will take your suffering and revolt into account, however, and analyse it, or use it as statistics.

Stanza five: The bear destroys the possibility of refreshment as a true recreation of yourself. Instead of a new self, he offers you your dead self over again. He deadens the sources of inspiration.

Stanza six: The bear is a suspicious tyrant, subtle and complex. Hiding behind his walls and rivers, he is a tyrant who can't be got at. He's a city, perhaps a city you must live in. Come to that he might be your own body, with its bones and its veins, working against you. Preparing your objectness, your death.

As you can see, all these ideas don't add up to anything very unified, though the unity of the poem seems indubitable, if only because of its very particular, undermining rhythm. I find it most profitable to think of the bear as a gathering complexity of knowledge that is becoming so complete in its way that it is driving back the spot of darkness, the unknown in man that enables him to be creative, or feel himself at all alive.

Of course, in invoking the dark unknown in man, I've got Lawrence at the back of my mind, as Hughes must have had in many of his poems. Lawrence says: 'This is the innermost symbol of man: alone in the darkness of the cavern of himself, listening to the soundlessness of inflowing fate'. The concept is not the same as the Freudian concept of the unconscious. It's a different kind of unknown in himself that Lawrence recognizes and Hughes hopes to believe in. Lawrence approaches the problem of rendering the creative centre in the human personality quite directly. The end part of his *Song of a Man who has Come Through* seeks to lead the reader till he stands in this part himself. But the poem doesn't quite succeed, in spite of the power of the imagery, and the sensitivity of the rhythm: the poem's development is too brittle.

Yet it's the special power of poetry that it *can* create the reality of this human centrality in positive terms. Blake's *Songs of Innocence* are the obvious example. I know only one poem of Hughes's, however, which attempts this kind of positive statement, where he attempts to step straight into that indestructible (because unknown and unselfconscious) centre in himself—and carry the reader with him, returning him 'into his own kingdom'. This is the poem *Fern*.

Here is the fern's frond, unfurling a gesture,
Like a conductor whose music will now be pause
And the one note of silence
To which the whole earth dances gravely.

The mouse's ear unfurls its trust,
The spider takes up her bequest,
And the retina
Reins the creation with a bridle of water.

And, among them, the fern
Dances gravely, like the plume
Of a warrior returning, under the low hills,

Into his own kingdom.

It's weird little poem, with that strange configuration of three apparently unrelated images in the second stanza. Looking at the poem more closely, one sees that these represent three different ways of accepting the given. The mouse is a cautious putting out of feelers, the spider an acceptance of the world as its inheritance, working it deliberately but perhaps undiscriminatingly into its system. Finally there is that extraordinarily beautiful and tender image of the retina that 'reins the creation with a bridle of water', suggesting more powerfully than the other two the indissoluble knot between inner and outer on which vision itself depends. It leads us into seeing experience, and so consciousness, as a complex, counterpoised, vulnerable whole that can't be picked apart.

I don't know whether we are to think of the fern as a fourth principle to be added to these, or as something derived from a compound of the three, or as a point that the three other points define or frame in. But the meaning of the fern seems simply to well up out of the poem at this point. Finally the fern becomes the plume, evidence of where the warrior has gone. The warrior himself has disappeared where we can't follow him. Or rather, he's dived into some part of us where we can't see him—only know he's there.

In *The Bear* such a conviction of some such ultimate human resources shows itself only in the tone, in the wonderful trenchancy of Hughes's final rejection of what the bear stands for:

> The bear sleeps
> In a kingdom of walls
> In a web of rivers.
>
> He is the ferryman
> To dead land.
>
> His price is everything.

As in the poem *Wodwo* what we are left with is the poet's courage. And the amazing thing is that even in so terrifying a poem the courage suffices. The language is shot through with irony, but the irony is outstripped by a level seriousness. The poet 'means what he says' in a sense unknown to ordinary speaking. This level seriousness is what we're left with, and the force of the courage is just enough to hold the power of the bear in balance—only just enough.

Hughes's latest book of verse, *Crow*, is again quite different from its predecessors. Crow is a mythological creature, who is born in a series of poems that form a kind of anti-Genesis (with begats and all, and a black rainbow, which is Crow's plumage). Crow adds his own twists to creation, tries various experiments, finds out things about himself (usually by taking much punishment); he is irrepressible—and indestructible. The one thing he doesn't do is die. In fact Crow seems to stand for so many different things in different poems that the one indubitable significance or quality one can pin down as his is that of indestructibility.

He has many adventures. He tries to get free of his mother. For Hughes this means also Mother Earth, the tyranny of the instincts and physical needs—hence his obsessive interest in the Oedipus myth. Crow tries science to get away from his mother, gets on a rocket that finally drills a hole through her heart, crashes on the moon, comes to, and crawls out—under his mother's buttocks. God tries to teach him to say 'Love', but every time he opens his mouth he vomits up creatures imprisoned in murderous hunger or lust. Crow tries to get into relation with the sea, the infinite, but it just rejects him and makes him feel small. He believes at one stage that he can run away from the mental tyranny of knowing about death, but death picks him up by the leg and teaches him otherwise. Crow makes himself gods to play with, but then he realizes he's making them out of himself and there's now hardly any of him left. He tries to see his face in the mirror but all he can see is romantic images. He tries to be a hero, but makes all sorts of horrible mistakes. Se he decides he can be no more than he is: stories can't add anything to him. He tries to get a hold on Proteus, on change, but when Proteus changes into a bomb—Bang!—he's blown up. He holds a running battle with stone, the unliving, which goes on for aeons. The stone turns to flying dust and Crow gets better at dodging, but basically nothing changes: neither can defeat the other. Crow is indifferent to technology, indifferent to ideologies, indifferent to words. The latter simply slide off him, like water off a duck's back. Perhaps he is that which escapes expression, and so can't be done to death by a word.

No need to go into the devilish situation for a poet of writing about something which by definition escapes all words! Hughes deals with the problem in *Crow* by a technique of exhaustion. It's as though man can only find back to himself after hurling himself up against all the closed doors of the universe, and finally, exhausted, of force having to give up. Hughes shows Crow

exhausting all avenues—testing all the possibilities of illumination. transcendence, freedom, escape, and being rejected by them all—and this has the effect on the reader of a different kind of exhaustion: an exhaustion physical, mental, nervous and emotional. The experience is like having gone through some terrible destructive fight.

The *Owl's Song* shows this pattern in microcosm:

Owl's Song

He sang
How the swan blanched forever
How the wolf threw away its telltale heart
And the stars dropped their pretence
The air gave up appearances
Water went deliberately numb
The rock surrendered its last hope
And cold died beyond knowledge

He sang
How everything had nothing more to lose

Then sat still with fear

Seeing the clawtrack of star
Hearing the wingbeat of rock

And his own singing

The owl having apparently destroyed the world with his song, this very world suddenly and perversely comes terribly alive; it becomes also like an extension of himself, a mirror. It's like hearing one's heart beat so wildly that it seems to be beating outside oneself. Here the emotion this evokes is fear. In *How Water Began to Play* (a song sung by an Eskimo friend of Crow's) the emotion we are left with after the process of exhaustion is different, and quite indescribable—unearthly.

Water wanted to live
It went to the sun it came weeping back
Water wanted to live
It went to the trees they burned it came weeping back
They rotted it came weeping back
Water wanted to live

It went to the flowers they crumpled it came weeping back
It wanted to live
It went to the womb it met blood
It came weeping back
It went to the womb it met knife
It came weeping back
It went to the womb it met maggot and rottenness
It came weeping back it wanted to die

It went to time it went through the stone door
It came weeping back
It went searching through all space for nothingness
It came weeping back it wanted to die

Till it had no weeping left

It lay at the bottom of all things
Utterly worn out utterly clear

It is essentially a poetry by denial. It finds things by denial. And it seems a pity that such evidently great poetry should need to make its affirmation negatively like this. Conceivably Hughes might reply that this is the only way left for poetry to be written—as a last-ditch defence. But there was a greater complexity in *Wodwo* which meant also that larger areas of what a word can be made to mean were being brought into play. At any rate it seemed a complexity that couldn't permanently be lost. *Crow* seems to be a kind of splinter, an experiment that has split away from Hughes's main stem: it'll be interesting to see whether his next book is another splinter like *Crow,* or another attempt to allow all his powers to work at once, as in *Wodwo.*

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NOTE

Hughes has published poems since the publication of the Crow volume which still centre around the figure of Crow, but are once again richer in texture, reminding one of the poems in *Wodwo.*