

**Ted Hughes and Christianity:**

**Constant Revelation of the Sacrificed God**

**By:**

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# Ted Hughes and Christianity:

# Constant Revelation of the Sacrificed God

How things are between man and his idea of Divinity determines everything in his life, the quality and connectedness of every feeling and thought, and the meaning of every action.

– Ted Hughes, ‘The Great Theme: Notes on Shakespeare’

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# Abstract

This study challenges the accepted critical line that Ted Hughes was an ‘anti-Christian’ poet. By looking past the superficial ‘God’-mocking of Hughes’s early collections and focussing instead on his creative deployment of symbols and structures such as the fall, incarnation and crucifixion, I develop a nuanced, theologically informed appreciation of Hughes as a genuine religious poet with strong affinities for Christian thought.

I read Hughes alongside a gathering of twentieth-century theologians, most significantly Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann and Karl Rahner, and locate many areas of resonance between Hughes’s preoccupations and those of his theological near-contemporaries. I argue that the most significant sign of Hughes’s alignment with Christian thought is his tacit endorsement of a fundamentally Christian anthropology and teleology. That is, he conceives of humanity as fallen from a state of divine continuity, and sees us oriented toward a *telos* of redemption by way of an often explicitly crucifixional ordeal.

A large number of prose statements evidence his comfort with unironic Christian invocation and his facility with Christian symbolism. Even as his poetry and prose gesture toward a pan-religious, syncretic understanding of the human condition, Christianity furnishes his work with those figures – Christ, Mary, the serpent – from whom his other characters acquire their significance.

Hughes’s strong countercultural streak and individualism (part and parcel of his Methodist inheritance) make him hostile to religion in the cultural, churchy sense, and he clearly delights in lampooning the enthroned creator-God of popular worship. But my study demonstrates that we fatally impoverish our appreciation for Hughes’s art if we fail to account for his debt to Christian thought.

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This study draws upon the following articles and anthology chapters I have published elsewhere, whose editors I kindly acknowledge: ‘Knowing the Bible Right Down to the Bone: Ted Hughes and Christianity’ (in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. by Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), ‘Intertextuality: Ted Hughes and the Transcendentalists’ (in *New Casebooks: Ted Hughes*, ed. by Terry Gifford, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), ‘Stevens and Hughes: A Confluence of Rivers’ (in *PN Review*, ed. by Michael Schmidt, 2014), ‘Putting the Primitive in Primitive Methodism’ (in *The Ted Hughes Society Journal*, ed. by Mark Wormald, 2016), ‘Ted Hughes and Religion’ (in *Ted Hughes in Context*, ed. by Terry Gifford, Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), and ‘Ted Hughes and the Biological Fall’ (in *Religion and Literature*, ed. by Romana Huk, University of Notre Dame, forthcoming).

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# Notes on referencing

For convenience, the following abbreviations are used for in-text references to Ted Hughes’s publications:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *A* |  | *Alcestis* |
| *CP* |  | *Collected Poems* |
| *CPC* |  | *Collected Poems for Children* |
| *DB* |  | *Difficulties of a Bridegroom* |
| *G* |  | *Gaudete* |
| *IM* |  | *The Iron Man* |
| *LTH* |  | *Selected Letters of Ted Hughes* |
| *P&C* |  | *Poet and Critic: The Letters of Ted Hughes and Keith Sagar* |
| *PM* |  | *Poetry in the Making* |
| *SGCB* |  | *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* |
| *TO* |  | *Tales from Ovid* |
| *WIT* |  | *What is the Truth?* |
| *WP* |  | *Winter Pollen* |

All other references are footnoted following MHRA guidelines, and a full bibliography is included at the end.

Regarding archival material, ‘Emory’ refers to the Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library at the University of Emory, Atlanta, Georgia, USA, and ‘BL’ refers to the Western Manuscripts collection at the British Library, London, UK.

All biblical quotations follow the *Authorized King James Version* (Oxford University Press, 1997) and reproduce all formatting, including italicisation for translators’ interpolations. As Hughes’s wife Carol confirmed to me by letter, this was the translation Hughes usually read.

# Chapter 1: The Deeper Life

It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era.

– Wallace Stevens, ‘The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words’

In a letter dated 2 July 1962 Ted Hughes writes of a recent visit to the Tate museum in London, where a large exhibition by the painter Francis Bacon was on display. ‘[S]eeing such a range of his work’, Hughes writes, ‘and particularly the latest three studies for a crucifixion, I was bowled over. It’s a shock, and not entirely disappointing, to find your deepest inspirations set out with such final power’ (*LTH* 203). Bacon’s crucifixional triptych, saturated with garish orange and featuring slaughterhouse carcasses and a pair of unconcerned human observers, offers not a drop of the grace or hope or purpose we would traditionally associate with the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The anonymous butchered victim of Bacon’s painting exists as untranscendent meat, the loudly glaring interior spaces denying it (and us) a sky or horizon from which to borrow a bit of perspective, or any sense of connection to other victims. There is no dignity, no composure, nor even a feeling of scandal at their absence. Nothing but meat, and the two onlookers already moving away.

In trying to understand what these images can tell us about Hughes’s ‘deepest inspirations’, we ask: is this how our world ought to be? Is Bacon simply representing the bottom-line truth of human life and all else besides, or does the work convey regret over something genuine that has been lost? Bacon’s title and format send us inevitably to Jesus’ crucifixion, but is this event cast in an ironic or a nostalgic light? Perhaps, for the atheist painter, it is the former. But the redivinisation of the human carcass is a career-spanning concern for Hughes, and the wholesale bleaching of the sacral from the  carnal which Bacon offers us is exactly the condition Hughes works to undo. Bacon’s brutal assessment of the modern condition may match Hughes’s, but Hughes’s artistic response is one of unwavering regret.

Like Bacon, Hughes regularly uses Christian images and motifs to formulate his ideas, situating these ideas – rarely with straightforward agreement, often with a kind of productive antagonism – within the Christian cultural tradition. His adaptations of the story of Adam, Eve and the serpent are the most visible examples, but there are many others. In doing this, he relies on both the plasticity and integrity of these motifs, just as he does with the full range of non-Christian myths and motifs which fill his work. Plasticity is essential if he is to enjoy artistic freedom; otherwise any use of a religious symbol would be little more than a pious repetition. Integrity is essential if something of value is to survive these artistic manipulations, so the finished poem or story has the power to reorient us toward the sacred; otherwise we are trapped within the utter pessimism of Bacon’s painting.

## 1.1: What we talk about when we talk about God: methodology and definitions

In a 1970 interview published in Ekbert Faas’s *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Hughes discusses modern Western culture’s inability to cope with ‘the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe’, which he also calls ‘God and divine power’:

If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control—rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Hughes clearly saw the religious impulse as an essential organ of the human condition, and saw the object of that impulse – ‘God and divine power’ – as credible. The extent to which Hughes discusses this aspect of our condition is the extent to which he does theological work, and the purpose of this study is to take this work seriously by reading Hughes’s poetry and prosethrough a theologically informed lens wiped of critical preconceptions.

To this end, I will be citing the work of four twentieth century theologians: German-American Protestant Paul Tillich (1886–1965), Swiss Protestant Karl Barth (1886–1968), German Protestant Jürgen Moltmann (b. 1926) and German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–84). Tillich and Barth especially are highly regarded, widely influential voices in twentieth century theology, and all four wrote during and after what Hughes calls, perhaps pre-emptively, ‘the last phase of Christian civilization’.[[2]](#footnote-2) Collectively their lives span both World Wars, and in their need to respond to those catastrophic events we find a particularly strong link to Hughes’s perspective. In assembling these writers I do not pretend to be providing a representative cross-section of Christian theology, nor to be proposing a systematic theological reading of Hughes’s work. My intention is to sponsor a conversation between Hughes’s work and a body of roughly contemporaneous theology for the purpose of identifying areas of sympathy and conflict, to demonstrate Hughes’s sophistication as a religious thinker within the Christian tradition. I aim to show that Hughes’s treatment of Christianity is not simply one of ironic pilferings from the Bible and Nietzschean dismemberment of the Christian cultural psyche, but a serious and deliberate engagement with Christian ideas rather in the spirit of a salvage operation – as opposed to a wrecking ball.

As a secondary aim for this study, I intend to develop a relationship between Hughes and those American writers and poets loosely gathered under the term Transcendentalism, beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62), proceeding through Emily Dickinson (1830–86) and culminating in Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). This tradition is the site of my own original enthusiasm for poetry, and when I first began to read Hughes I placed him quite naturally in this Transcendentalist company. The naturalness of this placement, and the illumination afforded of Hughes’s religious themes, will, I hope, become apparent through the intertextual and thematic links I establish between Hughes’s work and that of the Americans. Stevens in particular, with his continual need to justify imaginative belief in a time of waning religious faith, is a valuable figure for comparison – so apparently different in poetic temperament to Hughes, yet beset by many of the same misgivings, and tempted by the same elations – and he will feature throughout this study. I further hope (it is rather a hopeful hope) that by contextualising Hughes’s poetry within American letters I may do something to encourage an end to his neglect within the American academy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Let me admit right now that this gathering of Continental theologians and American poets and writers is entirely idiosyncratic of my own reading. This is the conversation I am sponsoring; another reader might gather a different set of voices and hear a different conversation. The value and fascination for me is to observe how readily Hughes’s work rises to the occasion: how frequently his work addresses serious theological concerns, and how frequently his thought harmonises, in substance if not in form, with that of these not-quite-peers.

My argument is organised along the lines of a general Christian soteriology or study of salvation. That is, it begins with the idea of a fall suffered by the first humans and traces a redemptive journey, through the tortured figure of Christ, to a state of restored divinity. The fall is approached from two angles: Chapter Two explores Hughes’s pseudoscientific idea that the evolution of human consciousness constitutes a fall from divine life, and Chapter Three examines Hughes’s many retellings of the story of Eden, including an attempt to tease out Hughes’s sense of human moral accountability. Chapter Four discusses the crucifixion in Hughes’s work as a central metaphysical statement of the human condition. Chapter Five tackles a range of cultural topics centred around the Protestant Reformation, and concludes with a discussion of Primitive Methodism, the religion of Hughes’s early childhood. Chapter Six returns us to the soteriological arc with a discussion of sacramental imagery and aspirations of redemption and transcendence.

Insofar as Hughes might explore any theme in any book, my reading of his workis not strictly chronological. It is broadly the case that the earliest books – *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960) and *Wodwo* (1967) – are overtly concerned with sardonic refutations of Christian religiosity while being covertly busy with quiet explorations of human fallenness; this leads to *Crow* (1970), in which the fall and crucifixion both feature prominently; *Gaudete* (1977), *Cave Birds* (1978) and *Remains of Elmet* (1979)further explore these themes with particular attention paid to the repercussions of the Reformation, with each book offering tentative gestures toward redemption; and *River* (1983)is certainly the high-water mark of both sacramental and redemptive/transcendent language. That is to say, Hughes’s output roughly – and only roughly – enacts a rejection of religion in the cultural sense followed by a re-staging of the Christian drama of salvation, almost as if Hughes had decided to begin the whole Christian project again, playing it out on his own terms. There is a certain chronological drift, therefore, to my thematic chapter structure. *Wolfwatching* (1989), *Tales from Ovid* (1997)and especially *Birthday Letters* (1998) deploy Christian themes and images earned in previous volumes but offer no real advances, and as such (and due to constraints of space) I treat them only incidentally in this study.

I return to this invocation of ‘God and sacred power’ which we access through ‘the machinery of religion’. It is certainly beyond the scope of this study to propose final answers to questions such as *Is there a God?* or *Did Ted Hughes believe in God?* We *can* say that the word ‘God’ appears frequently across the whole of Hughes’s *oeuvre*, and that this word does not gesture toward an empty space. What it does gesture toward is sometimes one thing and sometimes another, as we will see. ‘Religion’, meanwhile, comes from the Latin *ligare*, meaning ‘to connect’, as in the English words *liga*tureand *liga*ment. Religion, therefore, is etymologically a re-connection. Schleiermacher describes the essence of religion as a ‘feeling of absolute dependence’, the fact that ‘we are conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent, or, equivalently, as in relation with God’, who is ‘the *whence* that is implied in this self-consciousness’.[[4]](#footnote-4) God is the object of our dependence, and our self-consciousness of this dependence creates religious feeling. Tillich, the most philosophical and poetic of my assembled theologians, offers other definitions of ‘God’ which will help us avoid popular images of old bearded men:

‘God’ is the answer to the question implied in man’s finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Barth, the strictest doctrinaire of our theologians, writes of ‘God’ that ‘this word signifies *a priori* the fundamentally Other, the fundamental deliverance from that whole world of man’s seeking, conjecturing, illusion, imagining and speculating’.[[7]](#footnote-7) Rahner, the most epistemologically-focused (and downright wordy), refers to God as ‘the absolute mystery’, and defines the human as ‘a being oriented toward God’:

His orientation towards the absolute mystery always continues to be offered to him by this mystery as the ground and content of his being. To understand man in this way, of course, does not mean that when we use the term “God” in such a statement, we know what this term means from any other source except through this orientation to mystery. [[8]](#footnote-8)

Elsewhere he writes of the ‘unthematic and anonymous, as it were, knowledge of God’ available to us as human subjects, of our being ‘always oriented towards the holy mystery’ to which the word ‘God’ refers.[[9]](#footnote-9) To fuss over the theological technicalities of all this would be to pretend a false precision in Hughes’s use of the word ‘God’. The crucial observation is that all of these theological sketches approach God in *relational* terms, a relationality already present in the etymology of ‘religion’. It will therefore suffice for the purpose of this study to define God as *that to which we seek reconnection*, where that seeking, that need for reconnection, is allowed as a given of the human condition as construed by Hughes and constructed by our theological focus group.

Aside from these rather abstract treatments, of course, ‘religion’ and ‘God’ both have more culturally burdened definitions. ‘The critical consensus is […] strongly in favour of the view that Hughes’s project is, at bottom, a “religious” one’, writes Terry Gifford,[[10]](#footnote-10) and he directs us to Neil Roberts’s more exact observation that ‘Hughes’s whole *oeuvre* can be seen as a struggle to articulate spiritual experience in a vacuum of religious forms’.[[11]](#footnote-11) I would not join Roberts in declaring the absence of religious forms either in Hughes’s time or in his work, but the observation does point to a tension between Hughes and formal religion, a tension apparent in his many prose statements on the topic. In ‘The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly’, Hughes’s essay introducing *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, he writes that the ‘deeper life [of artistic insight], in other words, is not just deeper than ordinary life, or just more universal. It is elect and consecrated. One hesitates to call it religious. It is rather something that survives in the afterglow of collapsed religion’ (*WP* 84). Hughes may hesitate to call this deeper life ‘religious’, but he uses two other explicitly religious words, the sacramental ‘consecrated’ and the Calvinistic ‘elect’, to describe his friend and frequent collaborator’s life’s work. Yet we can grasp Hughes’s point easily enough: religion in this sense is an affair of institutions, of culture, often of politics, and too easily corrupted. Even at its best religion is the structure, the vessel; it is not the substance held.

He speaks similarly to Faas of ‘a shifting of your foundation to completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won’t be under the rubble when the churches collapse’.[[12]](#footnote-12) Formal religion is not to be regretted categorically; the regret comes later, when institutions have calcified and become unresponsive to the need they originally expressed. And although this calcification and worldliness may have overtaken Christianity as surely as it overtook its predecessors, Christianity did for a time serve as an apt vessel, as Hughes makes clear in his introduction to his translations of Ovid, in which he refers to ‘that unique moment in history – the moment of the birth of Christ’:

The Greek/Roman pantheon had fallen in on men’s heads. The obsolete paraphernalia of the old official religion were lying in heaps, like old masks in the lumber room of a theatre, and new ones had not yet arrived. The mythic plane, so to speak, had been defrocked. At the same time, perhaps one could say as a result, the Empire was flooded with ecstatic cults. For all its Augustan stability, it was at sea in hysteria and despair, wallowing at one end in the bottomless appetites and sufferings of the gladiatorial arena, and at the other searching higher and higher for a spiritual transcendence – which eventually did take form, on the crucifix. (*TO* x)

As Roberts points out, these references to religious cultural collapse, and particularly his account of Ovid’s situation, parallel Hughes’s understanding of his own era.[[13]](#footnote-13) Hughes remarks to Faas:

What Eliot and Joyce and I suppose Beckett are portraying is the state of belonging spiritually to the last phase of Christian civilization, they suffer its disintegration. But there are now quite a few writers about who do not seem to belong spiritually to the Christian civilization at all. In their world Christianity is just another provisional myth of man’s relationship with the creator and the world of spirit. Their world is a continuation or a re-emergence of the pre-Christian world . . . it is the world of the little pagan religions and cults, the primitive religions from which of course Christianity itself grew.[[14]](#footnote-14)

In naming these precursors in twentieth century literature, Hughes makes plain that he sees himself living in the aftermath of the collapse to which Eliot and the rest bore witness, at a time when ‘the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed.’ In such a time of disintegration ‘the energy [of ‘God and divine power’] cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive – and that is the position with us’.[[15]](#footnote-15) Hughes sees himself as bearing both the privilege and the burden of living ‘in the afterglow’ of religious collapse, a time in which new religious forms, new vessels, have not yet taken shape. If Hughes overstates the disintegration of religion in his own time (a kind of golden age fallacy), he does so for the vital purpose of opening an imaginative space within which a religious poet such as himself can operate.

These statements by Hughes suggest that religion and imaginative art are doing the same essential work – that in a time of declining faith, ‘poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost’, as Wallace Stevens says[[16]](#footnote-16) – that poetry ‘must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns’.[[17]](#footnote-17) We see this link in Hughes’s Foreword to the 1993 *Sacred Earth Dramas* anthology, a project he helped to found:

The Duke of Edinburgh had the idea that the new knowledge [of the need to ‘change the way we live’] needs to be couched in language that bypasses verbal argument – language that comes from the heart and soul and therefore speaks directly to the heart and soul. In 1986 he organized a conference of the heads of religions from all over the world, at Assisi, to consider how a new environmental awareness might be incorporated into religious teachings. After that, he asked whether the various languages of art could convey the same awareness.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Art and religion, by virtue of their communicative power, share a moral mandate in times of crisis. And we need only read Hughes’s passionate and polemical review of Max Nicholson’s *The Environmental Revolution* (discussed in Section 3.2) to realise how keenly he felt himself to be living in a time of crisis. The ability to write religiously, in the best sense of that word and not at all in the worst sense, is therefore of central importance to Hughes’s poetic career.

But how to write religiously – that is, to write about reconnection to God – without being immobilised by the miles-long baggage train of history and culture hitched to the word ‘God’? What to do with that word? It undergoes a notable reversal of fortunes across Hughes’s career, from reprehensible cultural product to (nearly) redeemed noun for genuine divinity. Speaking about the backstory to his landmark collection *Crow*, Hughes explains the God-character of that book as a misguided cultural contrivance: ‘This particular God, of course, is the man-created, broken-down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion, who bears about the same relationship to the Creator as, say, ordinary English does to reality’.[[19]](#footnote-19) This can scarcely be called atheism, as Hughes credits ‘the Creator’ in the same breath as discrediting the man-created God, but it is certainly a slight to organised religion.

Hughes’s description of the God of *Crow* readily adheres to many non-*Crow* poems, especially from Hughes’s first three collections, *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupecal* and *Wodwo*, where deployments of the word ‘God’ typically resemble little cannon-blasts of irony. Take for instance ‘Soliloquy’, whose seriously uncharming speaker ‘shall thank God thrice heartily’ (*CP* 26) to be buried alongside women who must at last tolerate his company. ‘God’ here is nothing but a rhetorical device for a man seeking some kind of revenge on people who couldn’t stand him alive. ‘Complaint’, which begins with an address to ‘Aged Mother, Mary’ (CP 32), may be gentler in tone than ‘Soliloquy’, but its reference to ‘times quiet with God’s satisfactions’ is pointedly ironic in the context of chilling allusions to sexual violence. Both poems, meanwhile, are slightly ironised by the frames of their stagey, formal titles, which suggest cultural rather than spiritual commitments.

Turning to *Lupercal*, ‘The Good Life’ introduces us to a would-be hermit who decides ‘Only a plump, cuffed citizen / Gets close enough to hear God speak’ (CP 74). His loud prayers go unanswered, and the rhyming iambic tetrameter singsong underscores the poet’s sarcastic attitude toward his subject. ‘The Perfect Forms’ is a three-course meal of religiously barbed sarcasm, with lines about ‘the undying tail-swinging / Stupidity of the donkey / That carries Christ’ and the ‘six-day abortion of the Absolute’ (CP 82). Hughes’s revulsion at the God-talk of Christian culture is undeniable, and it only increases in *Wodwo*. From the God who crafted the ‘Ghost Crabs’ (violent avatars of Schopenhauer’s will) as his ‘only toys’ (CP 149), to the inhuman formula ‘This has no face, it must be God’ offered in ‘Song of a Rat’ (CP 169), to the lazy-brained ‘what is not the world is God’ of ‘You Drive in a Circle’ (CP 177), the enthroned creator-God becomes in *Wodwo*, if it had not been before, a token of no currency. Indeed, Hughes’s relentless ironising of the term ‘God’ could become tiresome were it not part of an effort to clear away misapprehensions of divinity, an effort which elsewhere, even in the early books, begins to make positive compensations for the discrediting of that three-letter shorthand.

‘The Conversion of the Reverend Skinner’ from *The Hawk in the Rain*, for instance, omits any form of the word ‘God’ in its attempt to redirect (rather than reject) religious sentiment. Rebuffed by a prostitute for his condescension and haughty moralising, the Reverend is physically and spiritually humbled, lying ‘full length in the gutter’ (CP 32) and stewing somewhat literally in his own misery before he receives a vision: ‘Then he saw the thin moon staggering through the rough / Wiping her wound. And he rose wild / And sought and blest only what was defiled’. This passage anticipates the wealth of Goddess imagery we find in Hughes’s work – though ‘defiled’ is certainly a problematic word, hinting that the Reverend’s Puritanical morality has survived the arrival of this new infatuation, a potentially autobiographical pattern I discuss in Section 5.1. ‘Crag Jack’s Apostasy’ from *Lupercal* is a folksy persona-poem whose speaker has thrown off his Christian heritage but finds that his own ‘god’s down / Under the weight of all that stone’. The poem is addressed to ‘you, god or not god’, who arrives from ‘the world under the world’ (*CP* 84), language suggestive of atheism, pantheism, Gnosticism, and much else a reader might wish to go looking for; it also curiously echoes Tillich’s controversial assertion of a ‘God above God’ or ‘the God above the God of theism’, essentially his attempt to look beyond the God-object of worship to a divine principle existing prior to (above) the subject/object dichotomy.[[20]](#footnote-20) Hughes’s use of the lowercase ‘god’ for the religious sketch work in ‘Crag Jack’s Apostasy’ reflects his discomfort with affirmative religious language, a discomfort which leads him to use such language (especially words like ‘divine’ and ‘sacred’) loosely and inconsistently in prose, sometimes with scare quotes and sometimes not. These choices should not be over-interpreted: Hughes is clearly aware of the cultural attachments such language brings with it, and his need to defend against these attachments may be more or less on any given occasion.

Broadly speaking his tolerance for religious language, if not his precision with it, increases as his career progresses. If we look to the latter half of Hughes’s poetic output, on the far side of *Crow*, we find lines about a kingfisher as the creature through which ‘God, whizzing in the sun, / Glimpses the angler’ (*CP* 663), and mayflies ‘like Dervishes […] Touched by God, / Drunk with God [as] they hurl themselves into God’ (*CP* 719). The word ‘God’ functions in such lines, playfully but effectively, as an injection of positive value, a way of suggesting the closeness of these creatures to a divine principle. Later yet, in *Birthday Letters*, Hughes describes Sylvia Plath at their wedding as ‘ocean depth / Brimming with God’ (*CP* 1065); clearly this is not the God of ‘Soliloquy’ or *Crow*. Hughes’s autobiographically-inflected version of *Alcestis*, the last work published in his lifetime, includes what Roberts calls God’s ‘least ironised appearance in the whole of Hughes’s oeuvre’,[[21]](#footnote-21) in which God is the cypher of Hughes’s own refined religious polemic:

Prometheus: I freed him to be human.

I broke the chains

That made him the slave of your laws.

God: You cut the nerves

That connected him to his own soul. (*A* 58)

Such lines (which have no equivalent in Euripides’ original and are, in that way, pure Hughes) would seem unthinkable as coming from the author of *Wodwo*. More than any other religious word, the gradual shift in Hughes’s treatment of the word ‘God’ suggests a setting aside of the religious hostilities which motivated much of his earliest work.

Even the language I find myself using – ‘divine principle’ and so on – points to the difficulty involved in writing about religion and spirituality, about those aspects of the human constitution suggested by words like ‘spirit’ and ‘soul’, and about God, however defined. As Gordon D. Kaufman, in *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (1985), writes:

The concept of God is built up in our minds by playing off one metaphor against another, by criticising and qualifying *this* image through juxtaposing it with *that* concept, by carefully selecting finite models which will enable us to gain some sense of that behind and beyond everything finite, that which cannot be identified directly with anything finite. Our concept of God […] will never be finished or fixed on some particular form or image; it will always escape our every definition.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Hughes writes explicitly about the necessity-but-inadequacy of religious language: ‘[T]he word “divine”, with its relatives, can never be more than a convenient finger-post pointing towards those orders of experience which mankind goes on stumbling into, in terror and awe’ (*WP* 285). I will not try to systematise Hughes’s statements on divinity, for this would imply a finality which I do not believe Hughes ever intended. But if there is not a system there is yet a drift by which Hughes increasingly allows religious language to stand in his work without irony or apology. It is of course not necessary for us to agree with Hughes’s spiritual beliefs (insofar as we can discern them), but equally it is necessary that we not reduce spirituality to ecology or psychology and dismiss all forms of theism out of hand. I take up this vocabulary of divinity in the same spirit with which I accept as a Hughesian given that we must all reconnect to *something* beyond our ordinary, apparent selves, and I only ask the reader of this study to take seriously the idea that our understanding of reality – mediated by our senses, our thinking, our language, our culture and all the profound shortcomings thereof – may be woefully incomplete.

## 1.2: The ‘anti-Christian’ literature review

I have already mentioned Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford, two longstanding Hughes critics who, in collaboration and independently, have published three book-length studies of Hughes. Keith Sagar, Hughes’s earliest critical champion, has published three of his own, and other significant studies have appeared from Stuart Hirschberg, Leonard Scigaj, Ann Skea, Craig Robinson and Nicholas Bishop. Together, and often steered by Hughes’s own prolific prose output, these scholars have laid a foundation for Hughes studies focused on the insights and archetypes of non-Christian myth and folklore and their potential to restore our stupefied modern minds to a fuller participation in the natural world. Figures such as Trickster and the shaman, occult systems of knowledge such as alchemy and astrology, and precursive modern thinkers such as Carl Jung all take their place in this foundation, and rightly so. Few of these critics have devoted significant time to discussing Christian elements in Hughes’s work, though all must touch upon the topic occasionally, and I engage with these and other critics throughout this study.

The existence of an anti-Christian agenda in Hughes’s work is broadly accepted. Joanny Moulin is probably the loudest voice in this line, asserting that Hughes is ‘an anti-Christian polemist […] an English Nietzsche of sorts’.[[23]](#footnote-23) Particularly in *Crow*, writes Moulin,

the voice of the polemist […] is now pitting all its poetic power against the Christian God […] True, Hughes would explain this away by saying that he stood against puritan Christianity, but his ideological discourse is rather Nietzschean, that is to say anti-Christian.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Jarold Ramsey, citing the Faas interview quoted above, offers a similar take on *Crow*:

[T]he central impulse of the *Crow* poems is certainly an ingenious and unrelenting subversion of the Christian mythos, so as to reveal how it has got nearly everything wrong about Man’s origins – but the violence of the subversion, the sense of overkill in fact, indicates that for the author Christianity is still much more immediate and formidable that [sic] ‘just another provisional myth’. Better to say that in these poems, Hughes tries to fight his way free of a still-prevailing Christian-humanistic frame of reference that in its omissions and distortions of human facts makes our inherently bad lot a good deal worse.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Roberts similarly observes in a discussion of Hughes’s acceptance of the Laureateship that ‘Hughes’s “religious vision” is pagan in the strongest sense of the word and particularly hostile to post-Reformation Christianity’,[[26]](#footnote-26) a phase roughly coinciding with the humanistic Christianity to which Ramsey refers. The Nietzschean and pagan perspectives invoked by these critics are essentially countercultural, or subversive, as Ramsey says; Nietzsche was an enthusiastic burster of the West’s ideological bubbles but struggled to offer coherent substitutes, and paganism is virtually defined by contrast with a Judeo-Christian majority. My contention will be that Hughes’s antagonism of Christianity goes so far and no further, that he is concerned with removing mistaken cultural accretions from a basically sound metaphysic, and that fundamentals of the Christian worldview – the fall, the crucifixion, the incarnation – are left intact. Hughes argues both in poetry and prose for their truth-telling power, and he wages his cultural battles the better to avail himself of these cleansed Christian fundamentals in his own creative work.

This is not to say that Hughes sees Christianity as sole discoverer or source of these fundamentals, these symbols and structures and images. ‘[Hughes’s] unspoken, and all the more potent, poetic discourse’, writes Moulin, ‘is that Christianity (1) has invented nothing very new and (2) has drawn the wrong conclusions from its discovery’.[[27]](#footnote-27) I would want to qualify this second assertion on a conclusion-by-conclusion basis, but Moulin’s larger point about Christianity’s replication of ideas which predate it holds. Informed by wide reading in anthropology, religion and myth, Hughes’s syncretic imagination is immediately concerned, given any new set of symbols or characters, with drawing lines to symbols and characters from other sets (see *LTH* 605-6 for a vivid performance of this habit). Whenever we see Hughes use a Christian image or engage with a Christian theme we must look beyond Christianity for the moment’s final significance, yet remain open to the possibility that this final significance may be consonant with Christian belief. This attitude is summed up in a letter Hughes wrote to enthusiastic reader Nick Gammage: asked about his work’s presumed anti-Christian bent, Hughes responded, noncommittally and with apparent disinterest in the whole matter, that ‘if there is any consistent and clearly identifiable rejection, in what I’ve written, of the “harmful doctrines in this particular religion”, it is incidental’ (*LTH* 570). To say such rejection is incidental (and to introduce this with a qualifying ‘if’) is not to say it doesn’t exist, but that it must be understood in a larger context.

Other comments by Hughes offer few decisive pointers. Writing to his friend and ordained priest Moelwyn Merchant, he playfully offers ‘secular blessings’.[[28]](#footnote-28) Yet he agreed to write an endorsement for a book called *Living Christianity*, and an arresting endorsement it must be for anyone who thinks of Hughes as an ‘anti-Christian polemist’: ‘Your approach’, Hughes writes of the author, Martin Palmer, ‘seems to me the only possible one for a modern Christian in our tradition; the only one through which ours can transform the global tradition’.[[29]](#footnote-29) In responding to Palmer’s request, Hughes refers first to his own ‘pagan soul’ before coming round, with some qualifying, to calling himself ‘“naturally Christian”’.[[30]](#footnote-30) An invitation by the Anglican Bishop Ross Hook to attend a gathering of poets and religious affiliates for the exploration of common ground prompted Hughes to draft several lengthy replies in which he struggles to articulate his concern that attending such a gathering could destroy both his credibility and creativity; yet he does so while paying the Christian faith compliments which, echoing Hughes’s larger poetic discourse, are anything but merely formal:

It may be—one supposed that it unquestionably is so—that a full religious life, and particularly the Christian life, locates and embraces and redeems pain, and expresses the redemption, more fully and all-comprehendingly than any system human beings have yet devised. (*LTH* 457-62).[[31]](#footnote-31)

Even considering the natural desire to be polite and agreeable in correspondence, this is a remarkable statement for Hughes to make, and it gestures to a belief in the necessity of religious experience for human wholeness.

The incongruence between Hughes’s temperate attitude toward Christianity and critical insistence on an anti-Christian stance in his poetry suggests either that Hughes is being dishonest in these interviews, letters and book endorsements, or that critics have misinterpreted aspects of his work, looking to the God-mocking of *Crow* and the early poems discussed above and considering the case closed. We might expect Hughes to be evasive in his public self-revelations, but a look at his commentary on T.S. Eliot shows the same pattern of disagreement with critics, a negotiation by proxy of potential Christian resonance within his own work. Hughes’s letter to Bishop Hook continues from the above quotation to discuss Eliot’s acquisition of an intense Anglo-Catholic faith:

And it has been the case with many poets who have been drawn into the religious life, that they have attempted—sometimes successfully like Eliot, to take their poetry with them, widening the source of it from something that had been personal and particular to something communal and spiritual. (*LTH* 459)

And in one of Hughes’s interviews with Faas (in whose company Hughes would not have owed Christianity any compliments), he explains, ‘Developing inwardly, of course, means organizing the inner world or at least searching out the patterns there and that is a mythology. It may be an original mythology. Or you may uncover the Cross – as Eliot did.’[[32]](#footnote-32) Quoting this comment in his essay ‘Ted Hughes’s Anti-Mythic Method’, Moulin editorialises it with first a ‘failing that’ and then a ‘merely’, implying that Hughes regarded Eliot’s faith as the easy option[[33]](#footnote-33) – a gratuitous implication completely at odds with Hughes’s well-articulated esteem for Eliot as poet and *de facto* shaman. Sagar makes a similar judgement on the philosophical cop-out of Eliot’s faith:

Eliot followed the more familiar route. In *The Waste Land* (1925) he drew heavily on Pagan fertility myths in his critique of modern civilization, but, like Hopkins and Dylan Thomas, he could not cope with time, except by intersecting it with the timeless. Turning finally to Christianity, he reduced life in time to ‘dung and death’ [‘East Coker’].[[34]](#footnote-34)

I discuss time in the context of Hughes, Eliot and Christianity in Chapter 6; for now I want to juxtapose Sagar’s comments with some lines from ‘The Poetic Self: A Centenary Tribute to T. S. Eliot’, Hughes’s contribution to *A Dancer to God: Tributes to T. S. Eliot* (1992). Discussing Eliot’s ‘The Death of Saint Narcissus’, Hughes depicts Eliot’s Narcissus as having the explicitly Christological

potential for suffering, for spiritual and moral recovery and growth, for universality, and for the most intimately human historical significance.

In other words [… Saint Narcissus] anticipates, as Eliot depicts him, the greater part of Western spiritual developments till they coalesce, ultimately, into the person of Christ, and ramify through all the Christian values of our civilization. (*WP* 284-5)

These ‘values’ are not invoked disdainfully, though a reader may be so primed by Hughes criticism as to search for some ironic giveaway. Hughes sketches how this Christ-figure functions as a ‘skeleton key’ for a universal spiritual anthropology, and he tells us that, having started down this path, ‘the direction of his [Eliot’s] inner evolution became inevitable’ (*WP* 286) – an evolution consummated by religious conversion. For Eliot to have ‘uncovered the Cross’ is therefore, for Hughes, far from the failure implied by Moulin’s ‘merely’ or the evasion implied by Sagar’s ‘could not cope’: it is the report of a discovery of central human significance. Sagar tells us that ‘Eliot’s effort was to burn off the reader’s last attachments to “the life of significant soil”;[[35]](#footnote-35) Hughes tells us that Eliot through his writing became ‘united to his true self and to the world’ (*WP* 290).

Hughes’s may well be the less persuasive take on Eliot. But his commentary, like his commentaries on Shakespeare, Coleridge, Dickinson and others, reveals his own artistic preoccupations: all such commentaries function, secondarily or even primarily, as a form of self-assessment. For this reason, these critics’ misunderstanding or disapproval of Eliot’s Christianity is potentially symptomatic of a misunderstanding or disapproval of an aspect of Hughes’s own project. Hughes defends Eliot’s turn to Christianity in terms which ally the two men in the cause of spiritual health and insight, while Hughes’s critics draw a line of partisan conflict with Hughes on one side and Eliot on the other – the sort of zero-sum partisanship which Hughes implicitly rejects in his response to Gammage.

His private jottings reveal similar moments of ambivalence. In a long journal entry of introspection and self-mustering, Hughes writes:

If I truly am intended to make a closer communion with divinity, or with my sense of divinity and this is the steady illuminating thought in my waking life, I ought to make more serious moves. Any established church appeals + repels me. There is no possibility of my moving in that direction.

The contradiction of cultural religion’s power to both appeal and repel Hughes runs visibly through his work. Later in the same entry he notes Kierkegaard’s distinction ‘between those worshippers who merely imagine their relationship to the divinity, + those who really undergo it as a transforming experience’, calling the first group ‘poetical Christians’ and implying his own membership, or aspiration to membership, among the second, the genuinely transformed worshippers of divinity. But he immediately softens this binary by adding that ‘the first can become the second along the line of increasing intensity’, suggesting the unrealised potential of culturally restrained or misdirected religious enthusiasm.[[36]](#footnote-36)

My intention for this study is certainly not to present Hughes as a Christian in disguise. I do wish to dispel the ‘anti-Christian’ tag and replace it with a more nuanced, theologically informed reading of the relationship between his work and the Christian tradition. Ultimately, of course, Hughes’s innermost judgement of Christianity remains private. We can at least be certain he was well versed in Christian thought: his personal library (purchased by Emory University) contains his childhood copy of the Bible, scholarly editions of key Old Testament books, various non-canonical testaments and apocrypha, no less than nine works by Kierkegaard, usual suspects such as Augustine and Aquinas, as well as books on Gnosticism, Celtic Christianity and other early fringe elements. His engagement with the Christian religion, we can be sure, was well informed. We must be equally capacious in our appetite for Christian thought, or we do his work a disservice.

## 1.3: ‘Logos’ as first crisis

How can one write seriously about ‘divine power’ in a way which preserves key parts of the Christian metaphysic while refusing to give an inch to the worldly realm of cultural Christianity? This is the question to which the contrasts and disagreements outlined so far bring us, the question thrown up by all of the feints and inconsistencies of Hughes’s religious language in the early books. ‘Logos’, from *Wodwo*, records his confrontation with this dilemma. It also suggests the degree to which persona-driven irony will define his approach to religious exploration.

*Wodwo* is divided into three sections – poems, then stories, then more poems – which together form ‘a single work’ or ‘single adventure’ (*CP* 1249) concerning the ‘invitation or importuning of a subjective world’ by someone ensconced in ‘an undisturbed relationship with the outside natural world’. The protagonist refuses the invitation, resulting in ‘mental collapse into the condition of an animal’ (*LTH* 273-4). This progression of call, refusal, abduction, collapse/dismemberment and restoration to wholeness is essentially the template for shamanic initiation, familiar to Hughes from his reading in anthropology and evident in many of his other books, especially middle-career collections like *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds*. Bearing this structure in mind allows us to approach the poems of Part 1 of *Wodwo* with a suspicion of false simplicity, as poems which Hughes judged as lacking in challenge by ‘the bigger energy’.

‘Logos’, one of Hughes’s first overtly theological pieces of writing, belongs to this batch. Faas calls it ‘a key poem in Hughes’s development’,[[37]](#footnote-37) and both Faas and Sagar recognise its significance to the backstory of *Crow*.[[38]](#footnote-38) It certainly prefigures *Crow*’s ironical, polemical style. Sagar notes ‘Logos’ as one of the few places in Hughes’s poetry in which ‘Vitality is defeated’,[[39]](#footnote-39) Scigaj lists it as one of Hughes’s early ‘meditations on the denial of the instincts in Christianity’,[[40]](#footnote-40) and Moulin must have it in mind when he writes in his insightful if (to me) occasionally disagreeable essay ‘Psychoanalytic Readings’: ‘The stumbling block [to serving the Goddess] is the Logos – and to the Christian, Christ *is* the word – which Hughes kept storming against’.[[41]](#footnote-41) Moulin’s reference here is not just to Hughes’s poem, but to ‘the God of the Logos’ which Robert Graves describes in *The White Goddess*, the ‘chief holy book’ of Hughes’s poetic development (*LTH* 273):

The new God claimed to be dominant as Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End, pure Holiness, pure Good, pure Logic, able to exist without the aid of woman […] The outcome was philosophical dualism with all the tragi-comic woes attendant on spiritual dichotomy. If the True God, the God of the Logos, was pure thought, pure good, whence came evil and error.[[42]](#footnote-42)

In saying ‘new God’ and suggesting ‘woman’ as something external to that God, Graves can only be referring to a cultural construct – not ‘God and divine power’, ‘the God above the God of theism’, which takes final priority over all such God-objects. In other words, Graves refers to something that is *not actually God*. The inadequacy of this ‘God’ is plain in Graves’s account, an inadequacy which Hughes goes on to re-prove at some length in his attacks on the ‘man-created’ God of *Crow*. Perhaps this ‘militant, Puritan, Jehovan Christ, the new Christ’, as Hughes describes him in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (*SGCB* 18), really does approximate many Christians’ private understanding of God, though it seems as likely a straw man designed to satisfy the determined outsider while fitting a theoretical schema. If ‘Logos’ only went as far as rejecting this cultural God, there would be little to interest us. But Hughes is a cannier religious thinker than that.

We need first to define *Logos* accurately. Graves presents Logos as an autocratic deity claiming priority while failing to incorporate all aspects of creation, especially suffering and sexual procreation. Moulin emphasises ‘the interdicting Word of the Logos-God, which forbids human beings from fully enjoying the natural world’,[[43]](#footnote-43) and which Hughes ‘kept storming against’ because as a function of the Lacanian Symbolic it ‘alienates’ the human subject and the Lacanian Real.[[44]](#footnote-44) Quoting Sagar’s observation that for Hughes ‘“sacred” means nothing more nor less than “real”’, Moulin concludes that Christianity’s assertion of Christ as mediator of the divine/Real seals our exclusion from that divinity/reality.[[45]](#footnote-45) From a Christian perspective this misses the point entirely: we are already excluded from the divine because of the fall, and the Logos, that is Christ, as the interdiction between God and fallen humanity, is the only means by which we can restore ourselves to full participation with the divine. Discussing Christianity’s claim to theological priority, to being ‘*the* theology’, Tillich writes:

The basis of this claim is the Christian doctrine that the Logos became flesh, that the principle of the divine self-revelation has become manifest in the event of “Jesus as the Christ.” […] This leads to a point where the absolutely concrete and the absolutely universal are identical. And this is the point at which Christian theology emerges, the point which is described as the “Logos who has become flesh.” […] [In asserting this doctrine] the church announced its faith in the victory of the Christ over the demonic-natural powers which constitute polytheism and prevent salvation. For this reason the church fought desperately against the attempt of Arianism to make the Christ into one of the cosmic powers, although the highest, depriving him of both his absolute universality (he is less than God) and his absolute concreteness (he is more than man). The half-God Jesus of Arian theology is neither universal enough nor concrete enough to be the basis of Christian theology.[[46]](#footnote-46)

As David Chidester writes in his *Christianity: A Global History* (2000), the Arian controversy of the early third century A.D. concerned ‘the problem of the relation between the Father God and the Son of God in a Christian understanding of divinity’, a problem which reduced to an apparently simple choice: ‘Either the Son was the same as the Father or the Son was different from the Father’.[[47]](#footnote-47)

From an Arian perspective, those who equated the Father and the Son insulted God by proposing that the supreme deity could be born, suffer, and die. Affirming that the Son of God suffered, Arius insisted on the difference between the Son and the Father to protect the supreme God of Christian faith from such entanglement with the created world.[[48]](#footnote-48)

The theological implications of this choice, as Tillich explains, concern our relationship to God: either the absolutely concrete Jesus Christ allows reconciliation with the absolutely universal God, or Christ, participating completely neither in humanity nor God, becomes an impediment to reconciliation – a ‘stumbling block’ if you will. That is, Moulin’s presentation of the Logos replicates in Lacanian terminology the essence of the Arian heresy, a heresy rejected in the 325 Council of Nicaea. I don’t of course mean to say that Moulin is therefore wrong, only to point out that early Christianity was very aware of the problem of a Christ/Logos figure mediating between God and humanity while participating fully in neither, and that an awareness of the Arian controversy will help us to grasp the unresolved struggle at the heart of the poem ‘Logos’.

(And to the reader understandably bothered by Tillich’s disparaging of the ‘demonic-natural powers’ and certain that Hughes would never participate in such a ‘victory’, I say: hold on to those misgivings and stick with me to the end of Chapter 6.)

‘Logos’ begins with two stanzas full of resentment at God, and this God is not the drowsy simpleton of *Crow* nor the faceless, inhuman God of other *Wodwo* poems: it is both the supreme power and a frail human, a recognisably Christian God treated here with bald contempt. Always ‘the perfect strength is God’s’ and all accomplishment is ‘by God’s leave’ (*CP* 155). Well, yes. Insofar as God is ‘the inexhaustible depth and ground of all being’, the speaker of ‘Logos’ grasps the situation, though he clearly doesn’t like it. To use terms I’ll develop in Chapter 4, he resists the fulfilment of teleological freedom out of attachment to his existential freedom; that is, he wants to believe in his radical independence from everything, so he treats with disgust his radical dependence on God. This tone of protest fits with the poem’s placement in Part 1 of *Wodwo* as a form of resisting a spiritual call to closer relationship with ‘God and divine power’ – of a piece, for instance, with the speaker’s disgust in ‘Ghost Crabs’ at the realisation that ‘They are the powers of this world’ and ‘We are their bacteria, Dying their lives and living their deaths’ (*CP* 150). This protest also signals the origins of the *Crow* project, whose backstory includes a human who journeys to Heaven to ask that God ‘take life back’.[[49]](#footnote-49) Such an attitude is an insult to creaturely vitality, and it fits that the ‘biological optimism’ (*WP* 239) represented by Crow should atavistically erupt in reaction to such existential pessimism.

If stanza three seems to rehearse elements of Crow’s birth, especially in its description of Creation’s nightmare being spat out, it also speaks plainly of this birth as God’s own, complete with ‘God’s first cry’. It is also a human birth: an early draft of the poem is titled ‘About Being Born’,[[50]](#footnote-50) later changed to ‘Baby Cries’,[[51]](#footnote-51) and the finished poem features a ‘new-born baby […] lamenting / That it ever lived’. This blending of God, Crow and human child suggests an inclination against the abject dualism implied by Arianism, so the ‘Logos’ of the final title is defined as encompassing both a ‘blinding pentagram of […] power’ and a helpless infant. The speaker’s mention of the baby’s lamentation at life is a projection, and an unconvincing one at that. God and human life being united through the interdicting Logos, the speaker in protesting one must protest both. Much of the difficulty comes in the word ‘God’: having ridiculed the God of organised religion in so many other early poems, what choice has Hughes now but to carry on with his antagonism? Yet it is Hughes’s willingness to treat religious questions directly which has led him in this poem to the intersection of divinity and suffering, the entanglement of God and the created world – a fundamental part of both Christian theology and Hughes’s treatment of nature. He carries this problem forward into *Crow* and the *Creation Tales*, in which a God-character becomes the increasingly ridiculous bearer of cultural error; meanwhile, Hughes seeks other means to figure divinity.

The poem’s final line, ‘God is a good fellow, but His mother’s against Him’, requires special attention. Sagar offers the Gravesian gloss that ‘God has the best of intentions, but he is at odds with a goddess older and still stronger than himself’.[[52]](#footnote-52) As theology this is nonsense; any so-called god or goddess who exists contingently in historical time cannot be God, so we are still very much in the world of cultural constructs. The life-denying protest of the rest of ‘Logos’ still operates in this final line, leaving us to doubt the value of the speaker’s Gravesian cultural loyalites. Certainly the hypercorrect religiosity of those uppercase *H*s reinforces the religious sarcasm, but we should not allow this sarcasm to seduce us into accepting that the speaker is on the right track. This condescending dismissal of God is the error, the refusal of the call. The images of entropy and predation filling the fourth and fifth stanzas justify the speaker in his Egg-Headed arrogance, an attitude a reader would do well to avoid. Compare the line about ‘God’s first cry’ with these lines from Hughes’s adaptation of *Alcestis*: ‘As far as I’m concerned, their birth-cry / Is the first cry of the fatally injured’ (*A* 7). This sounds like the speaker of ‘Logos’, but it’s actually Death himself trying to persuade Apollo that the ‘fuzzy euphoria’ of life isn’t worth it. Vitality overcomes Death in *Alcestis*, but, as Sagar observes, death defeats vitality in ‘Logos’. We must therefore view its dismissive and condescending final line as entirely suspect, indeed as the very voice of death telling us not to bother. ‘Logos’, in short, demonstrates ignorant hubris in service to death.

By the time we reach ‘Theology’, the opening poem of Part III and the poem most frequently cited as anticipating the style *Crow*, this ignorant condescension has been educated into a knowing, self-aware irony, the sort of voice able to unroll so playfully cool a phrase as ‘God’s querulous calling’ (*CP* 161). The human intelligence engaged in a merely objective relationship with the world in Part I, whose stubbornness we see in the bitter protests of ‘Logos’, gives way to a tentative, perilous, far-from-complete continuity with the divine world glimpsed in such poems as ‘Skylarks’, ‘Gnat Psalm’ and ‘New Moon and Little Frieda’. And the pattern expands as we move into the other major collections. Christian figures such as the fall and the crucifixion are carried forward into a perennially renewed subjectivity to be studied and subverted, ridiculed and renovated, inaugurating a persistent religious irony which varies in tenor from book to book. In *Crow* it is caustic, postmodern and defensive; in *Gaudete* it is a humorously played dramatic irony of quotidian setting and mythic overlay; in *Cave Birds* the same dramatic irony is strained, humourless and hyperbolic; in *River* the irony softens into a general embrace of religious metaphor, as if the only thing Hughes objected to about church was the literal church itself. Examples of all of these approaches and more will be discussed in the following chapters.

Above all, this irony gives the instinctively countercultural Hughes a tolerable means of handling Christian material, essential to the task of diagnosing and treating the collective soul of the West. As Hughes writes at the close of *Poetry in the Making*:

The struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man’s principal occupation, wherever he could find leisure for it, ever since he first grew this enormous surplus of brain. Men have invented religion to do this for others. But to do it for themselves, they have invented art—music, painting, dancing, sculpture, and the activity that includes all of these, which is poetry. (*PM* 124)

Hughes here calls himself out, calls himself to his life’s work, to the writing of a religious poetry equal at once to his own and his people’s needs. The spiritual poverty illustrated in Bacon’s triptych is, I suggest, Hughes’s deepest inspiration insofar as it is the condition he sets out to cure. And given Hughes’s upbringing and literary heritage, such a cure could not be attempted without continual engagement with Christianity.

# Chapter 2: The Biological Fall

If in the least particular one could derange the order of nature,—who would accept the gift of life?

– Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘Fate’

The idea of a fall, some decisive original moment when the human and divine were sundered, is foundational to the Christian perspective. It is the *felix culpa*, the happy fault whereby human transgression incites Christ’s redemptive intercession. It begins the causal chain of divine action fulfilled in Revelation. It also addresses the more-than-Christian need to understand our apparently unique position within nature: why does no other creature ask the questions we ask? Why do we, alone, stare into the void?

Hughes’s lifelong interest in the intersection of the human animal and the non-human world virtually guarantees a central place for the fall in his work, where it appears in both explicitly Christian and more generalised forms. At its broadest application the fall is, as Roberts points out, ‘the template for a crucial aspect of Hughes's world-view – recurrent in history as Socratic rationalism, the Reformation, the scientific and industrial revolutions, events which cumulatively alienate humanity from nature.’[[53]](#footnote-53) It is also a means for Hughes of comprehending private lived experience – for instance his expulsion from the moorland ‘paradise’ of hunting and trapping he shared with his older brother Gerald, which occurred with the family’s relocation to Mexborough. Hughes’s incorporation of the fall into his thinking and writing is anything but mere convenience; he returns to the idea obsessively, approaching it from all sorts of angles and setting up resonances among a wide array of texts, as we will see. At the heart of the matter is a tension between the fallen ego and our unfallen and ongoing continuity with the divine. This tension, though it may have social repercussions, is essentially experienced as a private drama of the individual human subject, a matter of internal negotiation and reconciliation. Though we do find divinity personified in Hughes’s work, most commonly as a Gravesian Goddess figure, such figures merely externalise the internal divine content of the individual human. The fall, for Hughes, is as much a matter of self-estrangement as estrangement from deity in a traditional sense, and the lapsarian division which Judeo-Christian orthodoxy would place between creator and creature runs, as it were, through the centre of each of us.

## 2.1: Self-regard and the wodwo

Our search for the fall in Hughes’s work begins with the earliest composed poem of his first book. ‘Song’ was written when Hughes was eighteen, and predates everything else collected in *The Hawk in the Rain* by five years at least.[[54]](#footnote-54) Understandably for a poem salvaged from such an early period, ‘Song’ holds a place of particular significance for Hughes as ‘the one piece I got hold of before I stepped into the actual psychological space of contemporary literature […] the one song I sang in Arcadia’ (*LTH* 617). The poem’s Arcadian significance is set off not merely by looming adulthood, but specifically by the university world of literary study, ‘the critical exhalations and toxic smokestacks and power stations of Academe’, as he puts it in the same letter. Naturally, what Hughes saw as the un-self-regarding literary innocence behind ‘Song’ would not survive long in an academic environment. We may wonder how long it would have survived in any case for such a committed reader of poetry. But it is exactly the issue of poetic self-regard which forms the crucial difference between ‘Song’ and the poem Hughes names as ending his Cambridge-induced creative frustrations, ‘The Thought-Fox’. Roberts casts doubt over the accuracy of Hughes’s recollection (or indeed recreation) of that period,[[55]](#footnote-55) but autobiographical accuracy is less important to us here than the psychologically revealing distortions Hughes gives these recollections. ‘The Thought-Fox’ is above all a poem of poetic self-regard, in which the reader watches the poet watching himself attempting to write. The poem’s final line, ‘The page is printed’ (*CP* 21), with its neat pun on the earlier ‘prints’ left by the fox in the snow, keeps our attention squarely on the poem’s word-surface, which is to say it remains reflexive, inward-facing, aware of its own status as text. ‘Song’, by contrast, however steeped in convention it may be, gives every indication that it believes its own conceits and accepts its procedures without question: the poem behaves as though it were transparent expression, untroubled by the self-awareness evident in ‘The Thought-Fox’. Hughes calls ‘Song’ Arcadian, but I suggest ‘Edenic’ as a closer fit, for in manner it is markedly prelapsarian: naked, and innocent of the knowledge of its nakedness. If the poet’s sister is correct in suggesting that Hughes had not kept a copy of the poem’s pre-Cambridge composition but had been able to reconstruct it from memory post-Cambridge, our sense of the poem as deliberate prelapsarian gesture is only heightened. This gesture is accentuated by the poem’s placement in *The Hawk in the Rain* directly after ‘Famous Poet’, with its caricature of a once-great poet utterly spent and fallen from greatness, ‘wrecked’, ‘a Stegosaurus’, ‘obsolete’ and ‘behind bars’ (*CP* 24). For Hughes to follow such a portrait with ‘Song’ sets up a pointed juxtaposition, declaring that he, at least, still has one foot in Eden.

So the progression in poetic perspective from ‘Song’ to ‘The Thought-Fox’ is exactly a fall into self-regard, and this becomes the central psychological aspect, invoked in a myriad of contexts, of Hughes’s idiosyncratic understanding of the fall. Beginning with this example lets us see how the fall for Hughes is not just an abstract metaphor for some past cosmological or evolutionary event, but a way of figuring the lived experience of the individual human being.

Self-regard in the sense of prideful self-interest is clearly a motivating factor for the biblical fall, as when the serpent says to Eve ‘that in the day ye eat thereof [the fruit of the forbidden tree], then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil’ (Genesis 3:5). Having eaten, Adam and Eve perceive their own nakedness (3:7), a more literal self-regard. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton – whose intervention upon the biblical original can scarcely be separated out for an English readership – amplifies this theme by having the newly-created Eve gaze innocently at her own reflection in a pool:

As I bent down to look, just opposite,

A shape within the wat’ry gleam appeared

Bending to look on me, and I started back,

I started back, but pleased I soon returned,

Please it returned as soon with answering looks

Of sympathy and love[[56]](#footnote-56)

Eve does not recognise herself in her reflection until God lets her in on the trick. Yet the education seems hardly to take hold, and upon meeting Adam, her first reaction is to turn away from his less attractive form and back to ‘that smooth wat’ry image’,[[57]](#footnote-57) language which struggles to acknowledge that the image Eve saw was her own self.

This prelapsarian inability to see one’s own self is taken up by Hughes in a poem with a source Milton shared: ‘Echo and Narcissus’, from Hughes’s 1997 volume *Tales from Ovid*. Gossips ask whether so beautiful a creature as Narcissus can long survive, to which a seer riddlingly replies, ‘Yes, unless he learns to know himself’ (*CP* 916). Narcissus is at the cusp of adulthood, ‘Still a slender boy but already a man’; like the Miltonic Eve he is sexually mature yet still in a state of innocence. The familiar story unfolds: Echo, a nymph cursed to speak only by repeating the last few words she hears, falls in love with Narcissus but he rejects her as he does all such admirers. He is cursed to fall in love with his own reflection in ‘a pool of perfect water’ (*CP* 919) which Hughes paints as a kind of deathless Eden: ‘No twigs rotted in it, and no leaves’. Just as Milton’s Eve gazes at herself ‘with answering looks / Of sympathy and love’, so does Narcissus fall in love with himself: ‘Not recognising himself / He wanted only himself’. Hughes explores Narcissus’s folly in lines busy with existential and psychological overtones:

Why clutch so vainly

At such a brittle figment? What you hope

To lay hold of has no existence.

Look away and what you love is nowhere.

This is your own shadow. (*CP* 920)

The narrating voice, at least, understands that the image of ourselves we project upon the world is a fiction, or at best a distortion of our own interiors. Narcissus suffers his own fall into self-regard: ‘You are not me. Now I see that. / I see through my own reflection’ (*CP* 921). Yet he cannot remove his gaze from his image, tormented by what has become a dualistic understanding of himself: ‘Why can’t I get apart from my body?’ All of the themes present here – the pitfalls of existential navel-gazing, the uneasy confrontation with one’s shadow-self, the puzzling differentiation-but-entanglement of spirit and body – flow from Hughes’s lapsarian preoccupations.

Hughes’s more fascinating water-watcher is the wodwo, from the title poem of that volume (*CP* 83). A wodwo is a wild man or troll who makes only a brief, adversarial appearance in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, but for Hughes it becomes a central figure of human potentiality. As Sagar (quoting Hughes) puts it, the wodwo is ‘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’.[[58]](#footnote-58) This creature, somewhere between beast and human, poses a long series of questions which reach toward the beginnings of self-knowledge: ‘what shall I be called am I the first / have I an owner what shape am I’. The wodwo’s few and exceedingly provisional assertions are the rudiments of an ecological awareness, a knowledge of its relationship to the life around it. Twice in the poem the wodwo sees a reflection in the water and appears not to understand. Near the beginning of the poem it notices ‘the bed / Of the river above me upside down very clear’, and more than twenty lines later the poem concludes ‘and here’s the water / again very queer but I’ll go on looking’. The rhyming progression from ‘very clear’ to ‘very queer’ belies any suggestion that the wodwo is coming to comfortable terms with its surroundings or itself: the longer it looks, the stranger things get. A similar movement away from certainty and finality is evident in the rapid loss of the poem’s few formal conventions. The first six of the poem’s twenty-eight lines have capitalised first letters, as per Hughes’s practice in every other poem he published, but after these six lines the capitalisation is dropped. Punctuation similarly evaporates, with the poem’s only comma in line 1, its only full stop in line 3, and its last question mark in line 15 despite the continuing proliferation of questions. More subtly, the first few lines have moments of poetically assembled language, such as the slight plait of alliteration and assonance in ‘Following a faint stain’, and the alliterative, glass-comprehending metaphor of ‘glassy grain of water’. Such poeticisms disappear as the poem proceeds, and the wodwo expresses itself in an increasingly literal, unsophisticated and defenceless way. The loss of these trappings becomes a riddance of civilisation generally, and the wodwo paradoxically develops toward an unfallen, un-self-regarding state, giving no indication that it recognises itself in the water at which it continues to stare as the poem closes.

In his discussion of ‘primitive’ or ‘archaic man’ in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung suggests that

primitive man is somewhat more given to projection than we because of the undifferentiated state of his mind and his consequent inability to criticise himself. Everything to him is perfectly objective, and his language reflects this in a radical way.[[59]](#footnote-59)

This is an apt description of the condition Hughes’s wodwo finds itself in by the end of the poem, with the loss of figurative language attesting to its ‘perfectly objective’ understanding of reality. The ‘threads’ in line 11 and ‘wall’ in line 23, though arguably metaphorical to a modern reader, are better taken as literal statements of the wodwo’s understanding of the physical world. As Jung says, ‘If we take our metaphors in a concrete way we return to a primitive point of view’.[[60]](#footnote-60) The wodwo’s ‘primitive’ predilection for projection is most apparent in lines 24 to 26:

if I sit still how everything

stops to watch me I suppose I am the exact centre

but there’s all this

The wodwo is sufficiently aware of its own existence to use the pronoun ‘I’, but sufficiently innocent not to understand its own reflection, and it projects this undifferentiated subjectivity onto the whole of an objectively-comprehended nature, becoming the ‘exact centre’ of ‘all this’. The wodwo knows it is not the only living thing, but it cannot yet (or any longer, depending on whether we regard the poem as progress or collapse) question the presumption that everything shares in its own subjectively oriented curiosity. There is much ecological profundity suggested in the repetition of ‘roots’ in lines 26 and 27, and as much psychological profundity in the wodwo’s final return to stare at the reflecting water, and this convergence of incipient exterior and interior knowledge may be the poem’s most vital message.

In his Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes* Terry Gifford cites ‘Wodwo’ as the ‘most obvious’ of ‘a number of poems in which the hubris of transcendence is exposed with irony as a self-deception’.[[61]](#footnote-61) He quotes the above lines as an example of Hughes parodying ‘the arrogant assumption of being at the centre of the universe’. Such a judgement might be true of a poem like ‘Egg Head’, whose thoroughly post-Enlightenment protagonist is ‘Walled in translucencies’, ‘shuts out the world’s knocking’ and faces the day with ‘wide-eyed deafness’ and ‘the upthrust affirmative head of a man’ (*CP* 33). But the wodwo is by contrast a genuinely curious and *open* creature, and I hear no parody and no irony in its poem. The wodwo supposes it is the exact centre as a consequence of precisely that convergence of ecology and subjectivity noted above, by which it has become aware of the myriad connections extending radially, joining it to the rest of creation – ‘a voice of centred connectedness’, to use Gifford’s apt description of the *Gaudete* Epilogue poems.[[62]](#footnote-62) ‘Wodwo’ presents a challenge, saying to the reader: consider yourself the hub of an intricate miracle, yet look in the mirror and see nothing. This is, alas, the inverse of the modern condition: we consider ourselves well to one side of an easily circumscribed ‘nature’, and compulsively record our own face.

## 2.2: Golding, Gould and the biological fall

Self-regard, the ability to be the object of our own subjectivity, is the key Hughesian symptom of fallenness. Other epistemological and ontological notions can be mapped onto this lapsarian structure, for instance the correspondence of Hughesian sacredness to Lacanian Realness discussed in the previous chapter. The most startling of these assimilations, and one mapped out in detail by Hughes himself, recasts the biblical fall as a parable of human evolution. Hughes posits that the emergence of the modern human species effectively exiled us from the perfectly divine reality of our animal existence. This exile is not physical but instead psychological or spiritual, an exile from our truest inner self and the sacred ecology with which that self is contiguous.

Hughes maps this territory in the essay ‘Baboons and Neanderthals: a Rereading of *The Inheritors*’, his contribution to *William Golding, the Man and His Books: a tribute on his 75th Birthday* (1986). Golding’s novel dramatises the persecution of a tribe of Neanderthals by an advancing population of Cro-Magnons (‘Cro-Magnon’, a term Hughes takes up, is an outdated word for anatomically modern humans from what we now call Europe). The Neanderthals are more animalistic and instinct-driven, inhabiting their world with a brutal sort of harmony. The Cro-Magnons by contrast are intellectually more advanced, able to ponder the future and consider their own existence abstractly. Golding’s Neanderthals exhibit a nascent ability to think figuratively, but these figures are in turn handled almost literally as thought-objects. Mental images, for instance, are referred to as ‘pictures’:

“You will sleep to-night by the falling water. It has not gone away. Do you remember?”

“I have a picture of the water and the cave.”[[63]](#footnote-63)

Lok, one of the main Neanderthal characters, experiences his own body, even his sensory impressions, as exterior to an unincorporated self, demonstrating that while the development toward modern human subjectivity has begun, the process is thus far only crudely negotiated:

Lok’s ears spoke to Lok.

“?”

So concerned was he with the island that he paid no attention to his ears for a time.[[64]](#footnote-64)

Such a passage reminds us of the wodwo’s incomplete self-awareness, the troubled puzzling-out of its own existence. The novel’s most striking example of incomplete Neanderthal self-understanding comes as Lok attempts to cross a river by climbing along tree branches:

The water under him darkened. There were ripples on the surface behind each bough, weed caught and fluttering length-wise, random flashes of the sun below and above. He came to the last tall bushes that were half-drowned and hung over the bed of the river itself. For a moment he saw a stretch of water and the island. He glimpsed the pillars of spray by the fall, saw the rocks of the cliff. Then, because he no longer moved, the branches began to bend under him. They swayed outwards and down so that his head was lower than his feet. He sank, gibbering, and the water rose, bringing a Lok-face with it. There was a tremble of light over the Lok-face but he could see the teeth. Below the teeth, a weed-tail was moving backwards and forwards, more than the length of a man each time. But everything else under the teeth and the ripple was remote and dark. A breeze blew along the river and the bushes swayed gently sideways. His hands and feet gripped painfully of themselves and every muscle of his body was knotted. He ceased to think of the old people or the new people. He experienced Lok, upside down over deep water with a twig to save him.[[65]](#footnote-65)

Golding’s narration of the Neanderthals employs a finely pitched third person omniscience which reveals how slight an inner life they possess. The details of the water, weeds and light indicate the Neanderthals’ rich experience of their surroundings. By contrast, the appearance of the ‘Lok-face’ – a phrase which pointedly avoids more self-aware alternatives such as ‘his reflection’ – shows us how intermediate is the Neanderthals’ state of self-regard, reinforced by the observation that Lok’s limbs act ‘of themselves’, and the odd construction of that final sentence, ‘He experienced Lok’. This is just the sort of language we might expect in descriptions of a creature at the start of what Jung calls ego-differentiation, as when the wodwo comments, ‘me and doing that have coincided very queerly’ (*CP* 183).

Hughes relates the supplanting of Neanderthals by Cro-Magnons explicitly to the biblical fall, referring to the newly-evolved Cro-Magnons as ‘provisional Adams’[[66]](#footnote-66) and the vanished Neanderthal existence as a ‘lost Primate Paradise’.[[67]](#footnote-67) In a key 1990 letter to his friend, the sculptor, Shakespeare scholar and Anglican priest Moelwyn Marchant, Hughes reproduces his ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’ argument in sketch form and refers to this paradise as the state of being ‘united’ to ‘the processes of creation & created life […] a subjective, inexpressible state, a condition of a different order of “awareness” than our usual human one, & an infinitely desirable one’ (*LTH* 580). He develops his lapsarian reading consistently throughout the Golding essay, well beyond the point of mere colorful metaphor. His argument rests finally not on scripture, however, but on science:

Quite late in its term, the ape’s foetus passes through a stage where the face and head arrive at an uncanny resemblance to the human being. The neck is long and comes in more from beneath than from behind the skull, the jaw is small, the face vertical, the brow smooth and vertical, the skull globed, smooth and high. Conversely, one of the most curious things about modern (Cro-Magnon) man is that his distinguishing physical features – smooth, high, globed skull, smooth, vertical brow, vertical face, small jaw, long, erect neck, body covered with downy lanugo – are all, considering him as an anthropoid, foetal characteristics. This neotany [sic] has long been recognized for what it is, and the idea of man as a premature ape has had a lively history. [[68]](#footnote-68)

If an ape foetus resembles a modern human for a time, it follows that a modern human might actually be a prematurely born ape.

In some isolated group, a Neanderthal mother sported a gene that ejected her foetus at nine months, carrying the same gene. In conditions which evidently nursed him, the miscarriage got a hold. […] He found others like himself – a few sisters carrying the same gene. So he bred true and multiplied.[[69]](#footnote-69)

Is there any scientific basis for this view of human origins? Hughes’s essay provides no citations for his assertions, though one likely source is paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Panda's Thumb: More Reflections in Natural History* (1980), which we know Hughes read.[[70]](#footnote-70) With characteristic flair, Gould notes that ‘The morphological features of eternal youth have served us well,’ and briefly sketches the singular extremity of human neoteny: ‘In all mammals, the brain grows rapidly in utero but often very little after birth. We have extended this fetal phase into postnatal life’.[[71]](#footnote-71) The physiological detail of human neoteny Hughes relates is not all available in *The Panda’s Thumb*, and Gould’s more technical 1977 book *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* suggests itself as a source. Chapter 10 provides an overview of human neoteny, roughly along the lines Hughes lays out: we are born in an apparent continuation of the foetal state, significantly more helpless and underdeveloped when compared with other great apes, and we retain juvenile characteristics well into maturity, never completing the developmental programme which might be expected from comparison with our anthropoid peers. The history of this idea is indeed a ‘lively history’, in which ingrained notions of White European superiority and a teleologically tinged belief in internally (as opposed to environmentally) motivated evolution have been shed only with great difficulty. Citing a much earlier study by the German zoologist Adolf Portmann which dramatically characterises humankind as ‘a primate foetus that has become sexually mature’, Gould writes:

What a tenuous position for the crown of creation! An ape arrested in its development: holding the spark of divinity only through a chemical brake placed upon its glandular development; retaining a corporeal reminder, so to speak, of original sin—the potential of sinking again into the Tertiary abyss, should that brake ever be released […][[72]](#footnote-72)

Gould’s own use of biblical language is striking enough, though hardly surprising culturally, and certainly ironic – an irony which Hughes does not appear to share. But why has this neoteny developed? Gould dismisses Portmann’s belief that ‘inner factors controlled the direction of evolution by transforming entire organisms along harmonious and definite paths of vitalistic determination’ as an ‘anti-Darwinian’ perspective which gives short shrift to the *in situ* advantage offered by adaptation. [[73]](#footnote-73) Portmann, says Gould, ‘argues that humans, as learning animals, need to leave the dark, unchallenging womb to gain access, as flexible embryos, to the rich extrauterine environment of sights, smells, sounds and touches’.[[74]](#footnote-74) Gould offers what have become the conventional explanations for our relatively premature births, namely the obstetric challenges posed by our large brain size, continued rapid development after birth, and human physiology as upright walkers, all of which is part and parcel of our self-evident adaptive success.[[75]](#footnote-75) We are born at nine months because to delay any longer would place mother and infant at serious risk of death, and we persist in a semi-foetal or paedomorphic state to allow our brains to continue to grow in size and complexity. The tall, flat faces and relative hairlessness noted by Hughes are the outward signs of this halted development as apes. What unites Portmann and Gould is an emphasis of human neoteny as a net benefit, whether in service of vitalistic inner forces or environmental fitness.

It is here that Hughes dissents. While never quite saying that we would have been better off as Neanderthals, Hughes describes the newly arrived modern humans as ‘wrenched right out of the order of natural adaptation […] never properly born, still equipped only for the mysteries of the womb, still only three-quarters attuned to the world as it really is […] born outside the laws’.[[76]](#footnote-76) That last phrase compares illuminatingly with Hughes’s statement elsewhere that his hawks and pike are ‘at rest in the law’ (*WP* 262), and the predatory thrush and shark of ‘Thrushes’ exhibit ‘divine law as it operates in created things’ (*WP* 259). ‘Law’ is a provocatively biblical word (‘For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law’ – Romans 6:13) which logically requires a law-giver, an authority of some sort. This authority cannot be the mechanics of nature, for such a law would permit no transgression: humanity is self-evidently within the laws of what nature will allow. I do not suppose that Hughes means to be straightforwardly theistic in his talk of laws, but he does necessarily appeal to a vision of how things *ought to be*, an implied *telos* along the lines of Portmannn’s inner vitalism, the basis of which must transcend self-evident nature. Wherever he locates this authority, Hughes believes that humanity has from its first mutated birth been outwith this divine law: a biological fall. The very moment of the fall for Hughes is the moment *Homo sapiens* came into being.

Characteristically, Hughes emphasizes the consequence of this mutation for the individual human over that of society or species.

So Cro-Magnon came to, from his fallen birth, burdened with a vision of a more real second birth, into a more real reality – which would simultaneously be bliss and perfect life. But this vision, as the impossible thing, had to make its home in the subconscious.[[77]](#footnote-77)

If holding a vision of bliss and perfect life within one’s subconscious sounds like a good thing, Hughes assures us it is not – at least, not without serious reservations. This divine content, neglected by a species progressively unwilling or unable to acknowledge the sacred, becomes a volatile substance which Hughes elsewhere refers to as ‘man’s baser nature shoved down into the id and gown cannibal murderous with deprivation’.[[78]](#footnote-78) As he puts it in the Golding essay, ‘One wonders what became of that frustrated, only three-quarters completed gestatory programme of the Neanderthal foetus. Suppressed – or out of gear – or suspended – it can only have become a convulsive drama, in the subconscious’.[[79]](#footnote-79) The self-regard and self-estrangement brought about by this evolutionary development has left each of us with an echo of divinity, a portion of divine life, which must be acknowledged and properly managed. Failure to undertake such a reconciliation only increases the psychic drama and murderous volatility of our divine Neanderthal component, leading us to ‘our peculiar mentality and our peculiar unhappiness’[[80]](#footnote-80) – that is, to the range of mental distress and violence comprising the modern human condition as depicted at large in Hughes’s writing.

Hughes’s dim view of the desirability of the biological fall is mirrored in debate over the desirability of the biblical fall. Indeed, notwithstanding the clear scriptural narrative of human offense against the divine, many have asked whether Adam and Eve’s momentous picnic could have actually been a good thing. Much of the debate is motivated by Genesis 3:22: ‘And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil’. Assuming that God is the ultimate good, to understand as God understands would seem a positive step for humanity to take. The orthodox tradition of biblical exegesis takes the necessary position that God was speaking ironically, as Thomas L. Pangle summarizes:

Augustine tries to interpret the words as ironic (as does Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis* ad 3:22), though Augustine expresses some bewilderment (*Genesis XII* 11.42 beg.; see also 11.39 end): ‘How are we to understand this except to say, that it is an example presented for the purpose of inspiring us with fear, because the man not only did not become what he wanted to be but did not even retain the condition in which he was created.’ […] Luther boldly explains (LG, *Werke* 42:166) that ‘this is sarcasm and very bitter derision’ […] a ‘bitter reminder’ both for Adam and for all his descendants of the precise nature of the sin that is fundamental to all sinning: ‘He wanted to become like God.’[[81]](#footnote-81)

A strong strain of heterodox thought, however, insists that although the fall brought definite woe, it also created the possibility of humanity’s eventual perfection. Pangle cites Hegel as one such thinker.[[82]](#footnote-82) Discussing the 1649 work *Adam Unvailed [sic], and Seen with Open Face* by one William Rabisha, William Poole writes:

The question remains for Rabisha, however, what God was doing prohibiting the Fall. Rabisha takes refuge in the long perspective: God suffered the Fall to convince man of sin; God, seeing that even this was not enough, had to become incarnate. When this view of gradual growth across the ages is combined with gradual growth in Eden – Adam, in a very strange phrase, ‘grew out of something’ – we are only a step away from the type of theodicy associated with Irenaeus, against that of Augustine, in which human history is now seen as a process of development, not of forlorn wandering.[[83]](#footnote-83)

Three centuries after Rabisha, Tillich, taking a heavily philosophical approach to which anything like a literal understanding of the Bible is anathema, nevertheless arrives at a similar appreciation for the necessity of the fall for human development:

Freedom and destiny are correlates. The point at which creation and fall coincide is as much a matter of destiny as it is a matter of freedom. […] It is the actualization of ontological freedom united with ontological destiny.[[84]](#footnote-84)

‘Actualization’ here is a twentieth century equivalent to the endpoint of the Irenaean theodicy, which justifies suffering as necessary for human development, often, as above, placed against the Augustinian theodicy of suffering as our just deserts for using our free will to turn from God. Hughes’s view of human evolution as transgressive places him squarely on the Augustinian side of this debate – quite an uncomfortable position, we must imagine, considering Augustine’s role in shaping some of the more repressive aspects of the Christian tradition. Gould jokes that our ape inheritance is our ‘original sin’, but Hughes’s more serious implication is that our very status as human, the genetic hubris of mutating into existence, is our original sin, our violation of divine law. Tillich formulates the relationship between creator, creature and the fall in a passage which replicates most of the features of Hughes’s own discourse, yet turns the value system on its head:

Fully developed creatureliness is fallen creatureliness. The creature has actualized its freedom in so far as it is outside the creative ground of the divine life. This is the difference between being inside and being outside the divine life. […] To be outside the divine life means to stand in actualized freedom, in an existence which is no longer united with essence. Seen from one side, this is the end of creation. Seen from the other side, it is the beginning of the fall.[[85]](#footnote-85)

Tillich’s terms ‘essence’ and ‘existence’ may be rendered as ‘potential’ and ‘expression’, and he defines the fall as the movement from the first category into the second. [[86]](#footnote-86) The fall is, in other words, ontological. It is how we become; it is how everything becomes. On this Hughes and Tillich agree: as human beings, we were never unfallen.

Be that agreement as it may, we find a vital distinction between Hughes’s understanding of the fall, and that of the Christian tradition. Tradition considers nature, indeed the whole of creation, to have fallen alongside humanity. Tillich gives this belief a very technical shape in his talk of ‘essential unity’ and ‘actualised freedom’, but we can turn to *Paradise Lost* for a literary rendition of the same theme, where Milton depicts the effects of Eve eating the fruit:

Earth felt the wound, and nature from her seat

Sighing through all her works gave signs of woe,

That all was lost.[[87]](#footnote-87)

Adam eats, to similar effect:

Earth trembled from her entrails, as again  
In pangs, and nature gave a second groan;  
Sky loured, and muttering thunder, some sad drops  
Wept at completing of the mortal sin  
Original[[88]](#footnote-88)

Finally, as Satan’s influence spreads, greased by human transgression, the very heavens are corrupted:

[T]he blasted stars looked wan,

And planets, planet-strook, real eclips

Then suffered.[[89]](#footnote-89)

The Bible itself suggests this uproar of nature, as God declares to the just-fallen Adam, ‘cursed *is* the ground for thy sake’, commanding that the earth bring forth ‘thorns’ and ‘thistles’ (Genesis 3:17-18). But for Hughes, the tragedy of the fall is uniquely human, the double edge to the evolution of the human brain. This view preserves nature as a paradise to which we might yet return, at least partially, through ‘the machinery of religion’ and the mustering of inner resource. In the meantime, however, our sense of estrangement from the rest of creation is profoundly multiplied. Tillich and Milton, by contrast, stress our unity with the natural world within the lapsarian plight. In his sermon ‘“Nature, Also, Mourns for a Lost Good”’ (the title derived from a Schelling quotation on ‘the sympathy of man with nature’[[90]](#footnote-90)) Tillich argues that ‘man and nature belong together in their created glory, in their tragedy, and in their salvation.’[[91]](#footnote-91) From an ecological point of view Tillich’s may be the truer position, especially with regard to the tragedy of the modern environmental crisis: ‘man, by his trespassing of the divine law, leads nature into tragedy’. When Tillich refers to our estrangement from nature, he clearly refers on this occasion to a culturally rooted estrangement, a crisis of the modern world.

Do we not see everywhere the estrangement of people from nature, from their own natural forces and from nature around them? And do they not become dry and uncreative in their mental life, hard and arrogant in their moral attitude, suppressed and poisoned in their vitality? They are certainly not the images of salvation.[[92]](#footnote-92)

Tillich implies that until we overcome our cultural estrangement from nature we cannot effect its salvation, much less our own. For Tillich, our cultural estrangement from nature repeats our more profound estrangement from God, while for Hughes these degrees are one and the same. The fall, for Hughes, was not a fall *with* nature, but from it.

The cause of this fall, for Hughes, as I have said, is the evolution of the modern human brain. I want now to pursue the point of his (mis)appropriation of scientific knowledge a little further, for the ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’ essay dresses the biological fall in such an appearance of scientific legitimacy, and it bears (as we will see) on such an array of Hughes texts, that such pursuit is necessary for an appreciation of just how eccentric Hughes’s perspective was.

As noted, Hughes depicts the fall into humanity as having taken place within a single generation, in which Neanderthal siblings of the same mother, all carrying a dominant gene for a nine-month premature birth, ‘breed true’ and thus begin the modern human species. To this end, Hughes tells us that ‘[t]he debate about Cro-Magnon’s takeover from Neanderthal is unsettled, but there is at least a strong likelihood that the one did evolve from the other’.[[93]](#footnote-93) The first part of this sentence is certainly true. As recently as 2008, in *Neanderthals Revisited: New Approaches and Perspectives*, T W Holliday is able to survey a wide range of positions among recent scientific literature and conclude that ‘the Neanderthal question’ – the question of the degree of Neanderthal genetic contribution to anatomically modern humans – is ‘the longest-running controversy in human evolution’.[[94]](#footnote-94) But the question remains one of interbreeding and hybridisation on the one hand and total evolutionary divergence on the other, and Hughes’s suggestion that modern humans evolved *from* Neanderthals in a single-generation event, after which there was zero interbreeding, is profoundly mistaken. Modern humans arose in Africa, far from the Neanderthals’ European range. However much debate there may be about the details of early human migration and the degree of Neanderthal and other archaic human contribution to our genetic makeup (generally seen as 3% or less[[95]](#footnote-95)), the idea of a Neanderthal origin to humanity is patently unsupportable.

It is possible to suppose that Hughes’s argument, though unworkable with regard to Neanderthals, could be transposed to another early human species, one which did live in Africa when modern humans appeared. But whichever hominid we look to, the argument founders on its insistence on humanity’s single-event emergence. Hughes claims that ‘gradual change via Natural Selection does not account for everything. In fact, it has to be accepted that most species appear full formed’.[[96]](#footnote-96) Gould is again the likely source of this statement, which distorts the *punctuated equilibrium* hypothesis formulated by Gould and Niles Eldredge in their 1972 paper ‘Punctuated Equilibria: an Alternative to Phyletic Gradualism’.[[97]](#footnote-97) Eldredge and Gould challenge the view that speciation occurs only gradually and steadily, suggesting instead that long periods of stasis within a species are punctuated by periods of change in which an isolated population of one species may develop rapidly into a new species. Superficially this may sound like what Hughes is suggesting for Neanderthals and modern humans, but his statement about the fully-formed appearance of new species in fact reflects a common misreading of the idea of punctuated equilibrium. The pace of change may dramatically increase, but only on a geological timescale: we are still talking about tens of thousands of years at least, and gradation of form in response to changing environmental pressures is still the rule. Hughes’s proposal is best described as *saltationism*, a largely discredited perspective on speciation positing the single-step appearance of new species. Saltationism arose from nineteenth century attempts to reconcile growing scientific understanding of the fossil record with belief in instantaneous divine creation, and retains a strong whiff of intellectual compromise, notwithstanding the identification of scattered saltation-like events within nature.[[98]](#footnote-98)

A final postscript in Hughes’s Golding essay refers to ‘recent biological research’ indicating that all modern humans have genetically identical mitochondria. Mitochondrial DNA is inherited only from the mother, which Hughes says ‘means that all living human beings descend from one mother, some unique female in Prehistory, and from her daughters. If this is true, then my hypothetical first neotanous mutant, my Ariel, should not be “he” but “she”’.[[99]](#footnote-99) An article published in the January 1987 issue of *Nature*, ‘Mitochondrial DNA and human evolution’, does indeed make this claim, summarising pages of technical information with a headline-grabbing abstract:

Mitochondrial DNAs from 147 people, drawn from five geographic populations have been analysed by restriction mapping. All these mitochondrial DNAs stem from one woman who is postulated to have lived about 200,000 years ago, probably in Africa.[[100]](#footnote-100)

Although neither the authors of this article nor Hughes invoke the name, science has clearly provided, for anyone willing to allow some imaginative licence, an Eve. But Hughes’s direct linking of this ‘Mitochondrial Eve’, as the media came to refer to her, with his posited ‘first neotanous mutant’, is groundless. Even if we indulge the idea of a more or less saltational origin for humanity, the paper is explicit in disassociating Mitochondrial Eve from the appearance of our species:

[O]ur placement of the common ancestor of all human mtDNA [mitochondrial DNA] diversity in Africa 140,000–280,000 years ago need not imply that the transformation to anatomically modern *Homo sapiens* occurred in Africa at this time. The mtDNA data tell us nothing of the contributions to this transformation by the genetic and cultural traits of males and females whose mtDNA became extinct.[[101]](#footnote-101)

There happens to be one woman from whom we are all matrilineally descended, with all other maternal lines eventually failing to produce a breeding female – which is a fascinating enough idea to wrap our minds around – but she was not in any sense the *first woman*.

There may seem something slightly perverse in my picking scientific nits from a highly literary essay. Partly I do this because Hughes rests his argument on supposed scientific fact, and it must be engaged with on this level. But I also hope to demonstrate just how compellingly close Hughes’s theory comes to fitting the broader facts as they do presently stand. For there is much that Hughes gets right: we are all descended from one woman; relative to other apes we are born developmentally suspended; this premature birth is linked to our singular intellectual resource; when species change they change quickly. He clearly took an interest in the study of human origins – responding to a letter about ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, he mentions regularly reading *New Scientist*[[102]](#footnote-102) – and brought the strength of his tirelessly syncretising intellect to the task of reconciling modern science and scripture. Scads of scientific detail prevent these points from interlocking as he may wish, and the theory of origins presented in ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’ remains a fiction. But fictions told of the physical world can reveal truths of the metaphysical and psychological worlds. These we call myths. In *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) Richard Dawkins, believing himself to be making a criticism, anticipates the true utility of Hughes’s argument when he opines that ‘[c]omparisons between modern punctuationism on the one hand, and catastrophism or saltationism on the other, have a purely poetic force’.[[103]](#footnote-103) Perhaps Hughes is seduced by this poetic force, or perhaps he deploys it cannily, fully aware of his distortions. The subjunctive tag we find toward the end of his essay, ‘It would explain a lot, if it were true’, suggests the latter. ‘The point is,’ as he adds, ‘there could well be truth in it.’ [[104]](#footnote-104) The essence of this truth is that an unfallen, animalistic vision of the world persists in each of us, buried in our subconscious. Our urge to release this trapped entity and ‘complete mentally the process that has been foreclosed physically’ gives rise to culture and religion in ‘a fevered lust to find substitutes for what cannot possibly be found after the shortfall of [our] untimely birth’.[[105]](#footnote-105)

I have been quoting from the second half of ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, but the first half – the baboon half – softens the reception of the Neanderthal material, and exculpates Hughes somewhat from the charge of bald pseudoscientific speculation. Discussing zoologist Eugene Marais’s highly qualitative study of baboons early in the twentieth century, Hughes makes much of Marais’s observation that the more intelligent baboons tended to be the less happy within a community, setting up an opposition between ‘instinctive know-how’ and ‘the hyperactivity of a free intelligence’. Hughes tells how Marais hypnotised human subjects, suspending their conscious human intelligence and liberating their animal instincts for the performance of extrasensory feats. ‘By asking what happened to all that awareness, during ordinary dull wakefulness, he got the answer that it lived on “subconsciously”, in a state of suppression.’[[106]](#footnote-106) We can allow this to inflect our reading of Hughes’s subsequent Neanderthal argument, turning it from a rigid theory of origins to the excited recognition of yet another resonant snatch of self-knowledge.

## 2.3: The biological fall in Hughes’s work

It is interesting to see that Tillich, in a challenge to abandon old patterns of Christian thought, speaks squarely to Hughes’s own position, even to the point of clarifying the theory of punctuated equilibrium two decades before the publication of Eldredge and Gould’s paper:

[…] Christianity must reject the idealistic separation of an innocent nature from guilty man. Such a rejection has become comparatively easy in our period because of the insights gained about the growth of man and its relation to nature within and outside himself. First, it can be shown that in the development of man there is no absolute discontinuity between animal bondage and human freedom. There are leaps between different stages, but there is also a slow and continuous transformation. It is impossible to say at which point in the process of natural evolution animal nature is replaced by the nature which, in our present experience, we know as human, a nature which is qualitatively different from animal nature. The possibility that both natures were in conflict with each other in the same being cannot be denied.[[107]](#footnote-107)

This last sentence anticipates one of the most intriguing aspects of Hughes’s essay: his depiction of the miscarriage of Neanderthal into Cro-Magnon not as the altered development of a single individual, but as an *in utero* struggle between coexistent alternatives:

He [Cro-Magnon] was there all the time. He had come along with Neanderthal the whole way, evolving within the same womb, a fellow-traveller in Amnios, phasing himself out three months before each Neanderthal birth – perpetually superseded doppelgänger – till this accident gave him the chance.[[108]](#footnote-108)

This is clearly a difficult passage to accept on anything like scientific grounds. Hughes suggests that the modern human is not merely the product of evolution, but existed as a specific unexpressed potentiality, something with an identity prior to its evolutionary appearance. This privileges humanity as something evolutionarily willed, instead of the product of environmentally cued adaptive happenstance. Hughes runs close to Portmann’s view of human evolution as the expression of an internal vitalism, and indeed the crucial observation to make of Hughes’s exploration of human neoteny is the persistence of his loyalty to a vision of humanity at once teleological and lapsarian, one which identifies modern humans as emerging from within the pre-human animal in an event interpreted as *a fall from what should have been*.[[109]](#footnote-109) Once this fall, this mutation, has taken place the Neanderthal becomes the unexpressed potential, the ‘perpetually superseded doppelgänger’, persisting only as an echo in the subconscious. Leaving all science to one side now, we can immediately see that this is an extremely *poetic* idea, one which owes much to *The White Goddess*: Graves explains how the archetypical hero’s ‘rival is his blood-brother, his other self, his weird […who] often appears in nightmares as the tall, lean, dark-faced bed-side spectre, or Prince of the Air […but] takes countless other malevolent or diabolic or serpent-like forms’.[[110]](#footnote-110) Similar figures in Hughes’s own work unite his biological vision of the fall to a disparate group of poems and other texts.

The word ‘doppelgänger’ alerts us to the most salient of these, ‘The Gulkana’ from *River* (*CP* 665-9). Narrating an Alaskan fishing trip across 140 lines, the poem describes the narrator’s descent into a kind of mild insanity or psychological susceptibility: ‘In that mercury-light, that ultra-violet, / My illusion developed. I felt hunted’. In language which clearly anticipates the Golding essay, the narrator explains his agitation as

my fear of one inside me,

A bodiless twin, some doppelgänger

Disinherited other, unliving,

Ever-living, a larva from prehistory,

Whose journey this was, who now exulted

Recognising his home,

And whose gaze I could feel as he watched me

Fiddling with my gear – the interloper,

The fool he had always hated.

Removed from the habits of civilisation in the Alaskan wilderness, the narrator’s unexpressed Neanderthal perfection begins to surface, which the modern human experiences as an anxious, internal challenge. This psychological threat is elsewhere dramatised as an actual physical conflict between ontological counterparts. ‘The Head’, a 1978 short story collected in *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, tells the tale of two brothers on a hunting expedition for furs and heads. Great numbers of animals are gathering ‘to be counted by their Lord’ (*DB* 135), and the brothers take advantage of the occurrence to indulge in outrageous slaughter. The narrator’s brother, by far the more violent and ‘disturbed’ (*DB* 150) of the two, presents the pelt and flayed body of a large, humanlike ape, relating an encounter with what appears to be a close human cousin.

Then he told me it had come up out of the river, inside the forest. First he had thought it was a wild man. Then he knew he had discovered a new kind of ape.

There was nothing for him to do but kill it. There was no other kind of negotiation possible. It came on so purposefully, with its arms out wide, seven feet or so from tip to tip, he realized zoology was not the priority.

The brother fires his gun repeatedly into the creature’s throat, mouth and heart.

And the strangest thing, he said, and he kept on repeating it, the strangest thing was the way it gazed at him all the time as it came on, with the strangest expression in its eyes.

He stopped speaking and sat for a while silent, as he remembered. I stared at him and tried to imagine exactly what he had seen. Then he told how he went on firing, until the creature’s right hand took hold of his rifle barrel and lifted it aside, quite gently, like a twig at face level. Then the great arm embraced him, powerfully but still gently, and all the time the brown eyes were gazing into his. They stood for a while like that until it began to cough, and suddenly blood gushed from its mouth on to his head and face, its arms relaxed and it slid down at his feet, still embracing his legs. And so it bowed there, with its head between his feet, and it died there, and the blood poured over his feet. (*DB* 149-50)

The kinship implied in the creature’s ‘strangest gazing expression’, the grotesque tragedy of its gentle embrace of the man desperate to murder it, the one-sidedness of the violence – in short, the utterly failed reconciliation of the modern hunter to his animalistic counterpart – make this one of the story’s most affecting passages. The disturbed brother, possessed by bloodlust out of all natural, predatory proportion (much of the story is a numbingly hyperbolic catalogue of hunting kills), represents an eruption of ‘man’s baser nature shoved down into the id and gown cannibal murderous with deprivation’, an eruption of the ‘convulsive drama’ of our mismanaged subconscious content. Two of the story’s few characters, including the murderous brother, end up decapitated, their heads skinned, which carries more than a merely penal significance: if it is our fall into self-regard which has created our madness, then our head and face become the natural targets of retaliation and self-loathing.

The saner narrating brother has meanwhile rid himself of his rifle and sworn off hunting. Earlier in the story he comments tellingly about his brother:

[T]he familiar thought came creeping back, that my brother was not properly human and that he kept up a show of being human only by great continuous effort of imitating the human beings around him. Then he laughed again, his hard excessive laugh, as if the laughter were scratching some unbearable itch deep inside him. (*DB* 145)

The narrator is glimpsing the first signs of the convulsive drama’s impending eruption. The fall for Hughes is an evolutionary event and therefore a condition into which every human is born, but it is equally an individually negotiated condition. ‘[B]liss and perfect life’ may be the ‘impossible thing’, but the persistence of animalistic bliss within the individual unconscious means that the fall is both subjective and, to a point, reversible: everything depends upon the state of negotiations with one’s unconscious, as ‘The Head’ illustrates with the comparison implicit between the two brothers. The narrating brother, we cannot help but feel, would not have botched the ape encounter so badly. True, he failed to spare a wolf who earlier approached in an equally nonthreatening manner (*DB* 142), but he does in time correct himself and retain his sanity. His phrase ‘properly human’ gestures toward the sort of negotiated balance between inner forces required of the human condition. Any achieved reconciliation or wholeness is always precarious; we are quick to break apart in atavistic outbursts of depraved animalism and slow to reform, as when the fisherman of ‘The Gulkana’, returning from his adventure, comments, ‘I came back to myself. A spectre of fragments’.

The motif of physical conflict between counterparts repeats elsewhere. *Gaudete* tells the story of an Anglican priest, the Reverend Lumb, who is abducted into the spirit world to aid an injured woman, an avatar of the Goddess. He is meanwhile replaced in our world by a changeling crafted from a log. The changeling Lumb organises the local Women’s Institute into a love-cult and has sex with as many of his female parishioners as possible for the purpose of conceiving the messiah and rerunning Christianity anew. In one of the nightmarish episodes when ‘[t]he consciousness of the original real Lumb and that of the changeling leak into each other’ (*LTH* 384) the two Lumbs struggle in a lake:

Lumb brings him down in the shallows and the two wrestle in knee-deep water.

On the painful irregular rocks.

And now Lumb realises

That his antagonist is his own double

And that he is horribly strong. (*G* 81)

Underlying the structure of the book is a tension between the changeling Lumb’s efforts to translate his animalistic, nature-spirit instincts into the social realm of an English parish, and the original Lumb’s efforts to translate his rarefied sense of Christian duty into the bloody world of nature-as-it-really-works. Viewing the tale as psychological allegory, we understand that these are two sides of the same man, the primitive and the evolved, the unfallen and the fallen, fighting for supremacy. It is significant that Lumb’s double, like the ape in ‘The Head’, emerges from water (*G* 79), for this allows the counterpart in each case to function as the reflection it is: a glimpse into the character’s own self, a harrowing moment of profound self-regard.

Hughes relates his own physical struggle with the unconscious in a 1979 letter to Keith Sagar, describing a dream encounter with an upright-walking jaguar, a sequel to his more famous burnt fox dream: ‘[I]t stepped towards me & began to push me back,—I resisted & wrestled for a moment, before it pushed me backwards over my armchair’ (*LTH* 422). This story is part of Hughes’s own myth of poetic self-identification, when he, as he writes, ‘abandoned my efforts to adapt myself’ to the study of English literature at Cambridge. In shamanic terms, such a struggle typically signals resistance to the shamanic call and precedes the subject’s violent abduction and dismemberment in the spirit realm. But there are biblical precedents as well. In the ‘Poetry and Violence’ essay collected in *Winter Pollen*, Hughes uses the story of Saul’s conversion on the road to Damascus as an example of ‘admirable violence’:

When Saul fell on the road, as he is said to have done, and ceased to exist, while Paul the Father of the Church rose up in his place and in his skin, Saul could justifiably have called it ‘homicidal violence’ (since he was not merely displaced but annihilated), but Paul could properly have called it ‘admirable violence’, since it united him with Christ and his highest spiritual being. (*WP* 251)

Hughes’s sketch, while not exactly inaccurate with regard to the original in Acts 9, introduces details which suit the adaptation of the story to the motif of the conflicted self. Most glaringly, Hughes writes about Saul and Paul as two distinct individuals, one of whom is destroyed in the encounter, and one created or released. They are not two bodies, for they share a skin; yet, when Hughes refers to their divergent perspectives on the same event, he is explicit in their differentiation. This differentiation exists nowhere in the original, and in fact Acts 9 refers to the man as ‘Saul’ even after he rises (9:8), and he isn’t named as ‘Paul’ until a passing comment at Acts 13:9 presents the new name as an alternative. Such a change in name is itself of course a potent symbol of conversion, but the ontological violence Hughes perceives in the scene is present by virtue of his own interpretive template rather than anything in the original text. We can see this template at work in the epilogue poems of *Gaudete*, presented as written by the reappeared Reverend Lumb, which begin, ‘What will you make of half a man / Half a face’ (*G* 176) and end, ‘So you have come and gone again / With my skin’ (*G* 200). That these lines are addressed to ‘a nameless female deity’ (*CP* 1200) and not the changeling is beside the point: the changeling and the Goddess both stand for a procreative earthiness suppressed by the Reverend’s (as Hughes saw it) stifling Protestantism, and both projected relationships demonstrate how Lumb’s education is a matter of inner conflict experienced as physical violence.

We find a compelling fit for Hughes’s Neanderthal/Cro-Magnon theory of *in utero* sibling rivalry in Genesis 25, where we meet Jacob and his twin brother, the slightly older Esau. Their mother Rebekah, who is ‘barren’ (25:21) but conceives with the Lord’s intervention, feels the brothers fighting in her womb: ‘And the children struggled together within her’ (25:22). She asks God the meaning of this, and in reply is told, ‘Two nations *are* in thy womb, and two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and *the one* people shall be stronger than *the other* people; and the elder shall serve the younger’ (25:23). Esau arrives first, and we are told that he ‘came out red, all over like an hairy garment’ (25:25). Already we can see that Esau is implicitly the more bestial of the ‘two manner of people’. Jacob is not described at birth, though we do learn that ‘his hand took hold on Esau’s heel’ (25:26) – perhaps a continuation of the struggle, or a sign of Jacob’s reliance on Esau’s physical strength. The comparison between the brothers’ natures fits easily into Hughes’s distinction between Neanderthal ‘instinct’ and Cro-Magnon ‘intelligence’:[[111]](#footnote-111) ‘And the boys grew: and Esau was a cunning hunter, a man of the field; and Jacob *was* a plain man, dwelling in tents’ (25:13). Their father, Isaac, loves Esau best, but their mother Rebekah prefers Jacob. So the rivalry begins. First, Jacob tricks Esau out of his birth right (25:29-34). Later, in a scene rich with dramatic irony, the old, blind Isaac speaks a blessing onto Jacob, who he believes is Esau, for Rebekah has dressed him in Esau’s clothing:

And he came near, and kissed him: and he smelled the smell of his raiment, and blessed him, and said, See, the smell of my son *is* as the smell of a field which the Lord has blessed:

Therefore God give thee of the dew of heaven, and the fatness of the earth, and plenty of corn and wine (27:27-28)

Isaac intends these earthy words as a fit blessing for Esau, his son the hunter; that Jacob receives them through deceit only underscores his divorce from such earthiness. The parallel between the biblical story and Hughes’s theorising on human origins is clinched if we compare his description of the Cro-Magnon as having ‘instead of coarse hair all over her body, a delicate lanugo’ (*LTH* 581) with Genesis 27:11: ‘And Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, Behold, Esau my brother *is* a hairy man, and I *am* a smooth man’. It seems unthinkable that Hughes would not have been aware of so strong a resonance as he put together his biological/ontological reading of the fall. Indeed, it is remarkable how often such moments of syncretic concordance arise to underwrite different aspects of Hughes’s project. This intertextuality also provides a chance for implicit commentary. Jacob is the clear hero of the biblical story, but Hughes’s general ecological bent and specific ambivalence over the desirability of the biological fall leave us to wonder whether we should rather condemn this patriarch as what he appears to be: a dishonest usurper whose tricks have made a mere prize of ‘the fatness of the earth’. From a Hughesian perspective this story records not a triumph but a repetition of our seminal transgression.

But there are always opportunities for redemption. Later in life, making camp along a brook, Jacob finds himself literally wrestling with God[[112]](#footnote-112) in another scene with a strikingly Hughesian flavour:

And Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.

And when he saw that he prevailed not against him, he touched the hollow of his thigh; and the hollow of Jacob’s thigh was out of joint, as he wrestled with him.

And he said, Let me go, for the day breaketh. And he said, I will not let thee go, except though bless me.

And he said unto him, What *is* thy name? And he said, Jacob.

And he said, Thy name shall be called no more Jacob, but Israel: for as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed.

And Jacob asked *him*, and said, Tell *me*, I pray thee, thy name. And he said, Wherefore *is* it *that* thou dost ask after my name? And he blessed him there.

And Jacob called the name of the place Peniel: for I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved. (Genesis 32:24-30)

Such a wrestling match would hardly be out of place in *Crow*: its conflation of physical and spiritual interaction into a single violent encounter (in which God actually fights dirty by afflicting Jacob’s thigh joint) anticipates any number of passages in Hughes where a spiritual or metaphysical dilemma is given physical dimension.[[113]](#footnote-113) Like Saul, Jacob emerges from his trial with a new name, symbolically a recreated or purified self, earned by boldly grappling with the original for his own higher spiritual self. God is most impressed by Jacob’s demand to know his name, and there are echoes to be heard in *Crow*’s ‘The Black Beast’ (*CP* 223-4), in which Crow seeks a physical confrontation with an unperceived interior aspect.

Immediately following this encounter Jacob and Esau are reconciled, in a passage extolling humility and fraternal love. Travelling with his family toward Esau’s new home, Jacob ‘bowed himself seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept’ (33:3-4). This is not the end of conflict, however, for the Israelites and Edomites[[114]](#footnote-114) would often come to war, and the same narrative rhythm, a momentary embrace of recognition followed by the inevitability of violence, recalls for us the strange and strangely moving embrace between the murderous brother and wild ape of ‘The Head’.

In all of this we can discern a pattern of which Hughes partakes, and in partaking helps to shape, a subtle resonance of scripture, literature and science which his art consolidates and amplifies. It is a pattern of alternatives, in no way programmatic, accommodating to the narrative demands and artistic purposes of the text under consideration. On the one side is the Primitive or Archaic Human: Esau, Golding’s Neanderthal, the murdered ape of ‘The Head’, the hallucinated doppelgänger in ‘The Gulkana’, the changeling Lumb in *Gaudete*. These are older and often wilder than their counterparts, with markedly less of an interior life as presented in the text. On the other side is the Modern Human: Jacob, Golding’s Cro-Magnon, the two brothers of ‘The Head’, the fisherman of ‘The Gulkana’, the original Reverend Lumb. These are younger, civilised tent-dwellers whose interior life is developed and illuminated in the text, and the shift in power and ontological primacy from the Archaic to the Modern Human, variously depicted and deployed across Hughes’s work, is a repetition of the fall as Hughes understood the term. Each of these latter types has sacrificed an un-self-regarding, animalistic relationship with creation for the opportunity to develop self-knowledge. Each is no longer ‘of the earth, earthy’, as Paul said of Adam (1 Corinthians 15:47, a verse curiously echoed in one of the poems of Crow’s origins (*CP* 220)), but men whose relationship with the earth must be renegotiated. The fisherman in ‘The Gulkana’ sips at a state of primordial bliss through the religiously-couched ceremony of fishing. The Reverend Lumb suffers his un-narrated trials in the spirit world to be reincarnated as a poet of the Goddess. The brothers in ‘The Head’ are a special case by which Hughes uses two characters to show us what failure and success at the same test may look like. The murderous brother fails in his renegotiation; he is a hunter, yes, but of trophies only, with an irredeemably exploitative view of nature, utterly beyond the pale, and he pays for this failure with his life, leaving his saner brother to disown shooting and retreat from the wilderness he has so wronged. In a recursion of the theme, the brothers can also be understood as internally warring sides of the same person, so that, in the murderous brother’s transformation from jabbering head to nightmarish bird to maiden whom the sane brother finally marries, we see Hughes’s narrative enactment of his anthropological and psycho-spiritual designs.

Jacob’s wrestling match with God and Hughes’s own dream-fight with the jaguar are likewise recursions of the theme, dramatising opportunities for inner or spiritual reconciliation with a source from which we have fallen. If we are made in God’s image then ‘see[ing] God face to face’ must be a kind of self-regard, as surely as meeting a dream-jaguar is meeting one’s own divine aspect projected as a totemic spirit-creature: a glance in the mirror which reveals us more than our mere blinkered individuality. Such occasions do not speak to simple Narcissistic obsession with self-image, but rather to a desire to see through the image of the self to the profound whole in which the self participates, both the ‘highest spiritual being’ of the fully integrated self and its relation to an all-encompassing, ecological reality. Such a twining of ecology and spirituality is the essential message of ‘Crow’s Theology’ (*CP* 227), in which the image of Crow ‘reclin[ing], marvelling, on his heartbeat’ parallels the wodwo’s ecologically inclined self-wonderment. Thus we understand the captivating final poise of the wodwo: to seek self-knowledge in a context of world-knowledge, nature-knowledge and God-knowledge is to have redeemed our highly evolved, thoroughly subjective fallen-ape brains by transforming self-regard into a gesture which reaches through and beyond the self. This is exactly the test the murderous brother in ‘The Head’ fails. It is the test we hope the wodwo will not fail as it continues to renew its relationship to nature’s ‘all this’ in that poem’s dramatically incomplete renegotiation of the fall.

# Chapter 3: The Biblical Fall

There may be always a time of innocence.

There is never a place. Or if there is no time,

If it is not a thing of time, nor of place,

Existing in the idea of it, alone,

In the sense against calamity, it is not

Less real.

– Wallace Stevens, ‘Auroras of Autumn’

I turn now to the many poems which portray Adam, Eve and the serpent explicitly. The Book of Genesis provides Hughes with a set of reliably universal characters with which to explore ideas of sexuality, ecology and morality – a sandbox for allegorical experimentation in which he can at once avail himself of ready-made symbols and address what he sees as those symbols’ misinterpretations. Most of these poems predate ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, so it may be inappropriate to think of them as being informed by Hughes’s fully articulated concept of the biological fall. Nevertheless, it will be useful to have this concept in mind as we approach the Eden poems. Hughes may well have thought through the general concept –evolution of human consciousness equals the fall – years or decades before encountering the scientific discoveries which fully justified it to his own satisfaction, and his entire imaginative corpus is, thematically, remarkably of a piece.

## 3.1: Eden rewritten in *Wodwo* and *Crow*

The first Eden poems to confront a chronological reader of Hughes are ‘Reveille’ and ‘Theology’ from *Wodwo*. These poems, very much a pair, straddle the book’s three part structure, with ‘Reveille’ in Part I. It is therefore pre-abduction, pre-trial. Significantly, ‘Reveille’ follows directly after ‘Logos’, as if its titular call to arise were an attempt at a fresh beginning after the previous poem’s demotivating bitterness.

‘No, the serpent was not / One of God’s ordinary creatures’, it begins (*CP* 156). With whom is the speaker arguing? The serpent’s first appearance in Genesis makes its unordinariness clear: ‘Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made’ (Genesis 3:1). Milton likewise agrees that the snake was of singular quality, the ‘subtlest beast of all the field’ and ‘fittest imp of fraud’.[[115]](#footnote-115) Hughes’s speaker upholds the gravity of the biblical moment against, presumably, some attempt to discredit the story wholesale.

Adam and Eve are bitten by the serpent as they sleep, an event absent from the Bible – though in *Paradise Lost* Satan tempts Eve as she sleeps.[[116]](#footnote-116) The motif of sleep and sleep-like postures repeats in several of Hughes’s Eden poems; sometimes, as in ‘Reveille’, it is a natural and seemingly desirable state, but elsewhere, especially in *Crow*, it becomes a way of lampooning humanity’s Edenic purposelessness, the unchallenged and therefore unfinished project of our becoming, as in ‘A Childish Prank’: ‘Man’s and woman’s bodies lay without souls, / Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert’ (*CP* 215). Bearing in mind the sharp irony of *Crow*, this disdain at humanity’s lazy state reflects the speaker’s lapsarian anxieties, the mingled sense of loss and opportunity issuing from the fall. Tillich brings both Christian and Hughesian perspectives together in commenting on the appeal of ‘dreaming’ a prelapsarian innocence.

In myth and dogma man’s essential nature has been projected into the past as a history before history, symbolized as a golden age or paradise. In psychological terms one can interpret this state as that of “dreaming innocence.” Both words point to something that precedes actual existence. It has potentiality, not actuality. It has no place, it is *ou topos* (utopia). It has no time; it precedes temporality, and it is suprahistorical.[[117]](#footnote-117)

In ‘Reveille’ it is the serpent’s bite which wakes the pair from their dreaming. Recall Hughes’s description of the Cro-Magnon as ‘a fellow-traveller in Amnios’ alongside Neanderthal: the serpent’s bite in ‘Reveille’ is, I suggest, a proto-symbol for the evolutionary ‘accident’ that ‘gave him [Cro-Magnon] the chance’ to exist. ‘In the Genesis story it is the serpent which represents the dynamics of nature in and around man’, says Tillich, fully aware, as is Hughes, that from a modern evolutionary perspective those dynamics are to thank (or blame) for our being human.[[118]](#footnote-118) The serpent’s body blossoms grotesquely, ‘crush[ing] all Eden’s orchards’ and spreading as a ‘black, thickening river […] Around desert mountains and away / Over the ashes of the future’ – a dark vision of what modern, lapsed humans will bring to the earth – but all without any mention of forbidden fruit or human transgression. The darkness of the poem comes not from a sense of human sinfulness as traditionally understood, but from the speaker’s resignation to the corrupt, destructive behaviour of the awoken human being, a resignation to be expected from a poem of *Wodwo*’s Part I.

Part III opens with ‘Theology’, the counterpart poem to ‘Reveille’. As with its predecessor, ‘Theology’ begins with a mood of refutation, this time a genuine contradiction of the original story of Eve’s capitulation to the serpent’s persuasions. The reference to ‘the facts’ in line 4 can be as ironic or sincere as we like. It is certainly humorous, mocking biblical literalists whilst joining in the game. The heart of the poem’s polemic is its middle stanza, which recomposes the relationship between Adam, Eve and the serpent as a Russian doll of biological interaction. What exactly Hughes means by telling us that ‘Adam ate the apple. / Eve ate Adam’ (*CP* 161) and so on, if anything, is obscure. The crucial recognition is that the whole biological arrangement, ‘the dark intestine’, remains within paradise, removed only by our degree of understanding. Whereas in ‘Reveille’ Eden was crushed and the future turned to ashes, in ‘Theology’ the future remains open and undetermined.

This lack of determination, which Tillich calls ontological freedom, remains married to what he calls ontological destiny, the process of actualisation, the fulfilment of our *telos*. This *telos* includes the fulfilment found in sexual relationships, and Hughes avails himself of the Eden story to explore and expand upon this theme. The starting point for this expansion is inevitably Genesis 2: 22-25, the Bible’s opening statement of human sexuality.

And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man.

And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.

Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh.

And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed.

Hughes’s account of the same matter in *Crow* is rather different. From the drowsy opening lines of ‘A Childish Prank’ already quoted Crow proceeds with his prank, introducing the libido by severing a worm, ‘God’s only son’ (*CP* 215), and burying one half in man and one in woman. Joanny Moulin offers this poem as proof that ‘Hughes is certainly not a Christian’,[[119]](#footnote-119) a statement whose possible accuracy is beside the point: the question is not whether the poet is a Christian, but how the poetry attacks, supports or otherwise complicates our understanding of Christianity. The reference in ‘A Childish Prank’ to God’s son as a worm ties the poem to key biblical texts in a provocative but hardly anti-Christian way. Christ, crucified and near death, despairs, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Matthew 27:46), repeating the opening verse of the prophetically christological Psalm 22, a psalm which then declares, ‘But I *am* a worm, and no man; a reproach of men, and despised of the people’ (Psalms 22:6). In a similarly wretched vein, one of Job’s companions declares, ‘Behold even to the moon, and it shineth not; yea, the stars are not pure in his [God’s] sight. How much less man, *that* is a worm? and the son of man, *which is* a worm?’ (Job 25:5-6). Hughes’s *Crow* poem, cartoonish though it is, insists on the line connecting God to humanity through Christ indicated by Christ’s own crucifixional cry, refuting the infinite degrees of separation between God and man put forward by Job’s ignorant companion. Hughes’s suggestion that sexuality is an aspect of human participation in the divine is scarcely news, even for Christianity, which has long interpreted the erotic poetry of the Song of Solomon in spiritual terms. Woman’s plea to man ‘to join up quickly, quickly / Because O it was painful’ is a comical though otherwise straightforward restatement of the scriptural assertion that man and woman ‘shall become one flesh’ (Genesis 2:24) – Hughes merely teases the Bible’s modesty. His 1984 children’s book *What Is the Truth?* offers a coda on this theme, with its final poem featuring two mating lobworms, explicitly called ‘Adam and Eve’, who ‘twisted together like two loving tongues’ (*WIT* 111-2). The book’s final piece of prose framing drives the point home: ‘“The Truth,” said God finally, is this. “The Truth is that I was those Worms”’ (*WIT* 113). All of this worm business – and we might add, from the *Remains of Elmet* poem ‘Mount Zion’, ‘Christ was only a naked bleeding worm / Who had given up the ghost’ (*CP* 481) – is the sort of play we must come to expect from Hughes on matters of central religious, and especially Christian, importance. His apparent disdain for received religious ideas frequently masks a determination not to overturn those ideas, but to follow them though to their conclusions. Yes, he says: Christ is God, and Christ is also as creaturely as a worm. He merely adds: and creatures have sex.

The link between sex and the fall is ancient and tangled, and has its biblical origins in Adam and Eve’s post-lapsarian shame at their own nakedness in Genesis 3:7, a literal self-regard, as already noted. But the profounder expansion of the idea of self-regard, in the sense of self-knowledge which becomes the means of external knowledge, is indicated by the female worm-half’s peering out of the woman’s eyes – perhaps a literal rendering of the lover’s declaration in the Song of Solomon: ‘then was I in his eyes as one that found favour’ (8:10) . The two halves of the worm, God’s only son and therefore the Logos, are seeking each other, seeking wholeness. The individual human in a sexual encounter approaches the heart of the confluence of interior and exterior knowledge discussed earlier regarding ‘Wodwo’, with the added biological urgency of procreation. Hughes’s approach may be defensively crude, and ironic insofar as this crowy crudeness gestures toward beauty, but the irony ultimately works towards the biblical precedent of metaphysically charged sexuality, not against it. ‘A Childish Prank’ argues for the specialness of sex as both biological entanglement and metaphysical self-regard, and the final image of the God-character sleeping and Crow laughing illustrates the bursting-out of life through the barriers of social control.

Elsewhere in *Crow* Hughes writes about sex in much more negative, solipsistic terms, as in ‘A Grin’, with its image of ‘two lovers in the seconds / They got so far into each other they forgot / Each other’ (*CP* 213), or ‘Lovesong’, in which sex becomes a kind of possessiveness: ‘In the morning they wore each other’s face’ (*CP* 256). ‘Notes For a Little Play’ offers a vision of life restarting after the apocalypse of an exploding sun.

Horrors – hairy and slobbery, glossy and raw.

They sniff toward each other in the emptiness.

They fasten together. They seem to be eating each other.

But they are not eating each other. (*CP* 212)

This is about as unsexy as sex gets. Yet the very extremity of this ugliness alerts us to the urgency with which the poem is trying to speak. The creature’s coupling is called a ‘dance’ and a ‘marriage’, terms of mutuality, and though the civility they imply sounds an ironic note given the context, the poem nevertheless celebrates sexual union as the first business of this new, nuclear Eden. This emphasis on marriage-as-mating opens Hughes to Jonathan Bate’s criticism that ‘the question of same-sex desire is a conspicuous absence from nearly all of Hughes’s work’.[[120]](#footnote-120) In emphasising the ontological significance of procreative sex, Hughes commits himself to a fundamentally heterosexual reading of the human condition, including human relations with the divine. The lines quoted from ‘A Grin’ and ‘Notes from a Little Play’ may be ungendered, but they provide no disruption to *Crow*’s highly gendered perspective, in which the hero is male, the object of his pursuit is female, and Adam and Eve are frequently invoked (playfully though effectively) as the originals for humankind. Of course much of life, human life included, reproduces itself through heterosexual intercourse, and Hughes is being loyal to this biological condition. That said, some – myself included – will consider this reading of humanity reductive and insufficient, perhaps the most glaring symptom of which can be seen in the oxymoronic title of Hughes’s great work of critical prose, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. True completion would not partake of a gendered title which cannot but imply its partiality and partialness.

This vision of a fundamentally sexualised creation helps explain the lampooning of God in *Crow* and the *Creation Tales*, and particularly God’s continual humiliation by the serpent, first seen in ‘Theology’ and repeated in *Crow*. What Roberts calls the ‘sexless (though not genderless)’ male God of ‘traditional monotheistic religion’ is, to Hughes, simply an inadequate source of nature in all its dynamic, organic, out-spiralling glory. [[121]](#footnote-121)

The God-character’s embarrassment is most evident in ‘A Horrible Religious Error’, in which the appearance of the serpent provokes God to a writhing ‘grimace’ (*CP* 231). Man and woman, meanwhile, prostrate themselves before the snake, whispering, ‘Your will is our peace.’ In published letters Hughes marked this poem out as the last of the *Crow* poems written. Immediately upon drafting the poem he reports receiving a blow to the head by an unseen hand (*LTH* 307) and the deaths of Assia and Shura Wevill five days later effectively put an end to the *Crow* project. This autobiographical context may be responsible for Hughes’s interpretation of the poem, later canonised in Sagar’s prose narrative, as Crow ‘bungl[ing] the encounter’[[122]](#footnote-122) with his creator and would-be bride. Roberts cautions against the inflexibility of such an authorial interpretation, noting that ‘the function of the “story” [the prose narrative] […] is to close down interpretation of the poems, to control their enigmatic, provocative quality by hitching them to a moral.’[[123]](#footnote-123) I myself find it impossible to read this poem convincingly from the angle Hughes prescribes. Hughes’s reading essentially reproduces the story of Saint George and the dragon, in which St George (Crow), tragically kills the dragon (the serpent, which is to say, nature) in order to rescue a bystanding maiden (Eve, which is to say, woman denuded of her status as goddess and divine creator). Such a reading, though symbolically consistent, requires that we condemn Crow for eating the serpent in the final lines – and eating snakes is, after all, something that crows do. Many other *Crow* poems end with Crow eating or searching for food, as Roberts points out, and these are not failures, but signs of his creaturely determination to go on living. The first eight lines of ‘A Horrible Religious Error’ are among the most typically poetical in the book, and would not be out of place in several other Hughes collections, collections unmotivated by an aesthetic principle of ‘super-ugly and super-simple language’.[[124]](#footnote-124) The use of alliteration is especially fine: the dirt-miming lumpiness of ‘earth-bowel brown’, the phrase ‘double flameflicker tongue’ whose repeated *fl*s do indeed make a reader flick the tongue twice, and the reptilian sibilance audible in ‘A syllable like the rustling of the spheres’. But it is this very linguistic finery, this beauty, which makes the poem susceptible to such a show-up by Crow’s appetite. Too many *Crow* poems have taught us to be suspicious of language – ‘A Disaster’ (*CP* 226), ‘Crow Tries the Media’ (*CP* 231), ‘Crow and the Birds’ (*CP* 210), ‘Crow Goes Hunting’ (*CP* 236) – for us not to hear a kind of special pleading in Hughes’s masterly evocation of the serpent. Standing for the whole of the natural world, the serpent is handled with exquisite poetic skill; but Hughes, in his imaginative honesty, must let Crow behave as he should, indeed as Neo-Darwinism tells us he must. It is the nature of all nature to act out of self-interest, and Crow in his search for a meal does just this, without regard for his author’s artistic performance. In this poem Crow outruns Hughes, as surely as creation has outrun God, and Hughes’s statement that Crow here misses the point of his quest has the censorious ring of God condemning Adam and Eve for eating the fruit of a tree planted in the middle of their garden.

This censoriousness is already implicit in the poem’s title. Whosever error the poem may be said to depict, why is it described as a *religious* error? As discussed in Chapter 1, we know Hughes was alert to the cultural denotations of that word. Has Crow’s – or Hughes’s – intention ever been to achieve religion in the common cultural sense? In *Gaudete* the changeling’s attempts to mould a new religion are seen to be misguided and ultimately self-destructive, pointedly ridiculous in comparison with the genuine spirituality of his final moments. Hughes refers to the Primitive Methodist services he attended as a child as ‘a performance at the expense of the real thing’ (*LTH* 579). In all, it seems unlikely that ‘A Horrible Religious Error’ gestures unironically toward a suggestion of *correct* religion. The title is rather a moment of polemical wit. In eating the serpent Crow may have failed religion, which is to say cultural expectations of belief and behaviour, and the as-if-timeless systems of myth which underpin them. He has, however, been true to the principle of organic life for which the serpent itself serves as consistent symbol, dispensing (as if Hughes needed to) with the notion of nature as a stable and harmonious realm which any human belief system could account for or contain.

## 3.2: On the genealogy of Hughesian morals

None of this precludes us from taking seriously Hughes’s *attempt* to regret that the serpent has been killed. The poem’s desire to be read unironically, and Hughes’s encouragement of such a reading, amount to a moral statement: it is a shame that Crow must kill to live. It is a shame that Crow, who will become human, has such a hard-wired aptitude for killing. The beauty of the first eight lines of ‘A Horrible Religious Error’ invests the serpent with real value, and it is difficult to watch that value come to nothing. Crow appears unperturbed by the necessity of killing to eat, the regret instead being felt by author and reader, but two other poems, ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’ and ‘Crow’s Nerve Fails’, demonstrate that Crow too experiences regret and even guilt at this necessity. ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’ crafts a particularly engaging fable of the advent of morality, in which Crow wonders whether he should abandon eating and rather ‘try to become the light’ (*CP* 214). Of course, short of suicide no creature can stop eating, and Crow’s internalisation of the pain he causes merely by living is a significant moral achievement, depending as it does on a line of thought contrary to self-preservation. As Gifford and Roberts write in their perceptive discussion of this poem, ‘Whatever humanity Crow achieves in this poem is most powerfully revealed in the transfer of the weepings from grubs to Crow, from victims to killer who himself becomes victim of his guilt.’[[125]](#footnote-125) They may be justified in referring to the ‘pretentiousness’ of Crow’s earnest desire to forgo eating and ‘become the light’, but we must realise that such overblown pretentiousness is a stylistic device visible throughout *Crow*: the uglier or more derisive the language, the more central to Crow’s progress is the matter under consideration. In this instance the seeming mockery of becoming the light only briefly disguises Crow’s genuine intention to act on his new moral perception.

Gifford later dismisses Crow’s desire to become the light as ‘another false consciousness’, writing that ‘Only human beings fool themselves with some pretentious form of “the light”’[[126]](#footnote-126). Of course, the achieved humanity he and Roberts earlier argued for is incited by precisely Crow’s desire to become the light – that is, to transcend his creaturely status and act with moral consideration – so the question of a reader’s attitude toward Crow’s moral ambition and the weeping it triggers amounts to a valuation of humanity. In the last chapter, discussing ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, we saw Hughes expressing significant ambivalence, if not outright regret, about the evolution of human beings; and we remember that little human in the *Crow* backstory asking God to ‘take life back’. Crow himself, on the other hand, becomes more human, not less, as his quest continues – a quest which, however fraught, is never seen to be fundamentally mistaken. And we may wish to listen to that ‘tiny trickle of lizard’ whispering to Prometheus, ‘Even as the vulture buried its head – / “Lucky, you are so lucky to be human!”’ (*CP* 294). We can be glad of Hughes’s inconsistency on this point, and the self-searching it encourages. The threat of absurdity attends our every assertion, just as Crow’s desire to ‘be the light’ is at once absurd and recognisably, poignantly human. Gifford may be right that humans are alone in pursuing such ends; I only object that he calls the pursuit foolish.

‘Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.’ This commandment, found at both Matthew 22:39 and Mark 12:31 and echoing Leviticus 19:18, encapsulates an ideal unity of interior and exterior knowledge. It is also the crux of Crow’s dilemma. He would rather not be eaten, so does this mean that he should not eat others? Is this the right interpretation of love? Of course, in saying ‘neighbour’ the Bible surely only means other humans – certainly not grubs. ‘Crow’s First Lesson’ makes this point memorably apparent as God attempts to teach Crow to say ‘Love’ and Crow responds by vomiting up first a shark, then various flesh-eating insects and finally a grotesque simulacrum of human sexuality (*CP* 211). Hughes tests the biblical commandment by applying it as widely as possible, finding that clearly there is much in the world that ‘love thy neighbour’ does not cover, including predation and the mechanics of sexual reproduction. All such natural processes, where they cause suffering, are classically placed in the category of ‘natural evil’: processes and events which cause suffering and are therefore experienced as evil, but which cannot be blamed on a moral agent. In a 1959 letter to his sister Olwyn, Hughes put this concept in explicitly Christian terms, describing ‘God as the devourer—as the mouth & gut, which is brainless & the whole of evil’; these ‘lower orders of life do not have any love’ and will even ‘devour their own offspring’, while ‘Mary’ represents ‘mother-love’ as ‘the only protection against evil’ (*LTH* 148). Hughes’s argument is a mere sketch, yet enough to establish love as the province of the higher orders of life, as exemplified by a mother’s selfless love for her children in opposition to the ‘evil’ of ceaseless predation, competition and suffering which he relates to an Old Testament creator-god. A decade later, seeking to be human and therefore to love, Crow tries to act in accordance with this moralistic view, but cannot see how to extricate himself from natural evil. Whatever he does, it’s all white sharks and dead grubs.

Don’t worry about it, says Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morals*:

To talk of right and wrong *as such* is senseless; *in themselves*, injury, violation, exploitation, destruction can of course be nothing ‘wrong’, in so far as life operates *essentially*—that is, in terms of its basic functions—through injury, violation, exploitation, and destruction, and cannot be conceived in any other way.[[127]](#footnote-127)

Hughes imitates Nietzsche’s fourfold description in ‘Poetry and Violence’, referring to ‘our extraordinary readiness to exploit, oppress, torture and kill our own kind’, behaviour he describes as an extension of the predatory activity of wild animals (*WP* 256). Imagining a state of moral law intended to prevent such strife and minimise conflict and suffering, Nietzsche concludes that such a law ‘would be a principle *hostile to life*, would represent the destruction and dissolution of man, an attack on the future of man, a sign of exhaustion, a secret path towards nothingness.’[[128]](#footnote-128) We can note Nietzsche’s teleological bent here, similar to Portmann’s and a clear artefact of the Christian perspective he labours to dismantle. Suffering is to be accepted as the instrument of this *telos* and an essential condition of life, and any further comment is superfluous moral hand-wringing.

Where Nietzsche’s blunt assessment of the essential operation of life meets Crow’s desire to be the light, we witness the incommensurability of nature and morality. For morality to operate, humanity must remove itself to some degree from nature, even if this removal is only possible in the realm of idea and belief. We can see this remove, for instance, in Kant’s restriction of the categorical imperative to rational beings, that is (for him) human beings. In nature, in the world of predation and survival, any morality which aspires to more than ‘survival of the fittest’ or ‘might makes right’ has nowhere to settle. Yet, as we have seen in ‘A Horrible Religious Error’ and ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’, Crow does regret natural evil and the necessity of suffering. He has no choice but to consume the serpent and the grubs, and the wider world of life and resource they stand for. Outside of suicide, no living thing really has such a choice. So why this regret, this clear moral expression? To put the question another way, by what means does Hughes defend human morality against Nietzsche’s claim that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with injury, violence, exploitation and destruction?

Our search for an answer begins with Hughes’s 1970 review of Max Nicholson’s *The Environmental Revolution*, his clearest, most sonorous prose statement about humanity’s presumption to exploit the earth.

The fundamental guiding ideas of our Western Civilization are against Conservation. They derive from Reformed Christianity and from Old Testament Puritanism. This is generally accepted. They are based on the assumption that the earth is a heap of raw materials given to man by God for his exclusive profit and use. (*WP* 129)

Hughes here is rehearsing an argument popularised by Lynn White in his well-known 1967 article ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis’: ‘Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism […] not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends’.[[129]](#footnote-129) In specifying ‘Reformed Christianity’ as the guilty party Hughes is more precise in his criticism than White, and elsewhere he further implicates the Enlightenment’s aim of rational scientific mastery of nature, which merely secularised certain attitudes of the Reformation.[[130]](#footnote-130) Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hine make an eloquent restatement of the case in *Uncivilisation* (2009):

This story has many variants, religious and secular, scientific, economic and mystic. But all tell of humanity’s original transcendence of its animal beginnings, our growing mastery over a ‘nature’ to which we no longer belong, and the glorious future of plenty and prosperity which will follow when this mastery is complete. It is the story of human centrality, of a species destined to be lord of all it surveys, unconfined by the limits that apply to other, lesser creatures.[[131]](#footnote-131)

And Sagar offers no contradiction when remarking:

Man will always live by myths, true or false. But the twin myths of Reformed Christianity and technological progress (supporting each other in their fanatical rejection of Nature) have proved to be false because they involve hubristic lies about the supremacy of Man to Nature.[[132]](#footnote-132)

The primary target of all this is Genesis 1:28: ‘And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.’ The issue of ‘dominion’ will be discussed later in this chapter; for now we continue to trace the moral sensibility which emerges in Hughes’s work in the teeth of that conflict between natural brutality and human sympathy.

Hughes’s review of Nicholson’s book proceeds through vehement condemnation of the Christian cultural psyche to a pantheistic vision of ecological divinity:

a vision of the real Eden, “excellent as at the first day”, the draughty radiant Paradise of the animals, which is the actual earth, in the actual Universe […] But while the mice in the field are listening to the Universe, and moving in the body of nature, where every living cell is sacred to every other, and all are interdependent, the Developer is peering at the field through a visor, and behind him stands the whole army of madmen’s ideas, and shareholders, impatient to cash in the world. (*WP* 130)

Such rhetoric is difficult to resist. But this is a prose statement, a review of someone else’s book, and the sentiments expressed, excellent as they are, sit uneasily alongside Hughes’s own poetry. The giveaway may be his selection of mice as the ambassadors for this new world. A vision of mice in a field listening to the Universe is a charming bit of lyricism, an image of calculated gentleness. But the mice in Hughes’s poetry have different things to listen out for: ‘he’s listening for danger – so sensitive / He’s trembling it’s like a tenderness / So many things can hurt him’ (*CP* 631). This is what mice actually listen for: the many, many things which want to eat them.

Predation is everywhere in Hughes’s poetry, but it is perhaps most memorably evoked in ‘Hawk Roosting’ from *Lupercal*. Hughes remarked of this poem: ‘what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature.’[[133]](#footnote-133) If the poem is truly Nature thinking, then we must acknowledge that nature exhibits a very Nietzschean nonchalance toward exploitation and suffering, and a very biblical presumption of dominion:

I hold Creation in my foot

Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly.

I kill where I please because it is all mine. (*CP* 68-9)

This is not the voice of a creature recognising that ‘every living cell is sacred to every other’, but it is blatantly the voice of a creature reclining in the satisfaction that ‘the earth is a heap of raw materials given to [it] by God for [its] exclusive profit and use.’ Leonard Scigaj acknowledges the dilemma:

Hughes deliberately intends to have his readers recognize an aggressive, amoral impulse in the libido as having a divine counterpart, but without idealizing or moralizing it. Paradoxically, the predatory operations of certain animals, unchecked by sophistry or “Falsifying dream,” indicate that the “distracting devils” (“Thrushes”) of human cerebration often act as civilizing checks upon the will.[[134]](#footnote-134)

What would the hawk do with a hunting rifle? With dynamite? With a pile of investment capital? It is the nature of nature to compete and exploit, and it is only the appearance of human technology which has brought this fact to a crisis. Humanity’s committed usurpation of the earth is exactly what we should expect from a citizen of nature who had the good fortune to evolve opposable thumbs and large, complex brains and, as Scigaj implies, what sets humanity apart is precisely our *resistance* to this drive to predate and exploit. The hawk does not even regret the necessity of exploitation, showing absolutely no sympathy and no aesthetic response to its surroundings. The world is pure resource, pure hawk-expedient.

This may lead us to read the poem differently, as the very human voice of exploitation projected upon an emblem of divinely enfranchised nature, disregarding Hughes’s ‘Nature thinking’ comment. It is, after all, something said in an interview ten years after the publication of *Lupercal*. Such a reading, however, would silence one of Hughes’s most compelling pieces of commentary on one of his most popular poems, turning the poem into a somewhat pathological performance in which a human speaker uses the hawk image to authorise his own rapacity, tacitly condoning human exploitation of the earth as part of the natural order. Readers are free, of course, to take a variety of perspectives on the dilemma. My own feeling is that Hughes’s review of *The Environmental Revolution*, as fine a piece of writing as it is, presents a simplified and slightly falsified version of his thinking. The occasion of reviewing that book handed him an agenda and demanded a rallying cry, and such conditions inevitably lead to distortions. The ‘Nature thinking’ comment, by contrast, strikes me as an unguarded, unconstructed statement, and one which rightly points up the difficulty of recognising human continuity with the natural world while permitting the exceptional task of human morality. We begin to understand Crow’s torment in ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’ as a realisation not only that its life – every life – is paid for by many deaths and much suffering, but also that this moral consciousness appears completely unaccommodated in nature.

A moment after telling Faas that the roosting hawk is ‘Nature thinking’, Hughes remarks, ‘There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from *Job*’ – fittingly, for the *Book of Job* is a story about suffering and evil and the difficulty of reconciling human notions of morality with the divine/natural world. Can we say that *evil* has anything to do with nature? The whole thrust of Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals* is that evil is a purely interpretive category, invented by the weak as a tool for reversing fortunes with the strong: ‘Fortunately, I have since learnt to separate theology from morality and ceased looking for the origin of evil *behind* the world.’[[135]](#footnote-135) Anyone who does attempt to locate an origin of evil behind the world runs up against the *problem of evil*: how to reconcile the existence of evil with belief in an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent God. Of course, one may decide that no reconciliation is possible, and that the existence of evil precludes any belief in God so defined. Two common theodicies (justifications for evil) of the Christian tradition, Iranean and Augustinian, were mentioned in the last chapter. Hughes offers his own ‘Genesis of Evil’ in the poem of that name, published in a Rainbow Press limited edition but never collected into the main Faber *Crow* sequence. The poem presents evil as a moralistic interpretation of natural fact. This fact is whispered by the serpent to Eve, who relays it nightly to Adam, on which conversation God – not really God, remember – disguised as a mouse, eavesdrops, growing ‘blind with Jealousy’ (*CP* 269). God seems hardly involved in creation; he is only there to impose a superfluous moral code in opposition to the serpent’s truth-telling. ‘Apple Tragedy’ takes essentially the same tack, with the serpent responsible for creation and everything apparently getting on just fine without God. When God does turn up he squeezes alcoholic cider from an apple, and several bad jokes later ‘everything goes to hell’ (*CP* 250). The implication is that people were relatively untroubled until religion supplied both the temptation to commit sin and the penalty for doing so. Both poems lampoon a simplistic, religiously policed understanding of suffering and evil. Such an understanding can do nothing to illuminate Crow’s weeping, nor the roosting hawk’s moral obligations – or lack thereof.

I return to the Book of Job, a very different text than Genesis, and one, a reader senses immediately, much more to Hughes’s tastes. Even for Nietzsche, ‘Job affirms’, and displays ‘an instinct of power and magnificence in the artist’.[[136]](#footnote-136) Job is a good man, ‘a perfect and an upright man, one that feareth God, and escheweth evil’ (1: 8), and yet God allows Satan to put Job’s faith to the test by ending the man’s prosperity, butchering his family and afflicting him with boils. The God of *Job* is fully aware of the evil that he permits, and Satan is seemingly part of God’s inner circle, present at a gathering of ‘the sons of God’ (1: 6), just as he is at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*. Job’s friends spend several chapters trying and failing to comfort him with reasons for his predicament, and though Job does not speak against God he still nurses a great bitterness at his undeserved plight:

When I looked for good, then evil came *unto me*: and when I waited for light, there came darkness.

My bowels boiled, and rested not: the days of affliction prevented me.

I went mourning without the sun: I stood up, *and* I cried in the congregation.

I am a brother to dragons, and a companion to owls.

My skin is black upon me, and my bones are burned with heat.

(Job 30:26-30)

Lines such as these, and the whole suicidal, nihilistic bent of the *Job* narrative thus far, makes it clear that the Bible supplies *Crow* with far more than source material for parody.

In Chapter 38 God himself appears ‘out of the whirlwind’ (38:1), pummelling Job with a long series of rhetorical questions to demonstrate the paltriness of human understanding. Images of the physical enormity of the earth and natural spectacles such as lightning storms and torrential rivers lead on to invocations of the unframable power of wild animals. God makes a point of his commitment to the non-human world, sending storms ‘To cause it to rain on the earth, *where* no man *is; on* the wilderness, wherein *there is* no man; To satisfy the desolate and waste *ground;* and to cause the bud of the tender herb to spring forth’ (38:26-27). This display culminates with the primordial beasts Behemoth and Leviathan. As Stephen L Harris notes, the Behemoth is ‘a monster so powerful, so grotesque, and so removed from any possible relation to human experience that God’s admiration for the creature forces Job to realise that the world is not a place designed for human welfare.’[[137]](#footnote-137) The Leviathan is introduced in verses delicious with mockery – and doubly so when we think of them being read by the poet of ‘Pike’, for they give the lie to any thought of mastery, whether physical or aesthetic: ‘Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook? or his tongue with a cord *which* thou lettest down? […] Wilt thou play with him as *with* a bird? or wilt thou bind him for thy maidens?’ (Job 41:1, 4)

In the midst of this invocation of the Leviathan we find the line Hughes adapted for ‘Hawk Roosting’: ‘*whatsoever is* under the whole heaven is mine’ (Job 41:11), which Hughes turns into, ‘I kill where I please because it is all mine’ (*CP* 69). The intertextual relationship here is not as straightforward as it may first appear. The hawk qua nature may speak similar words to God’s, but are they saying similar things? The hawk is declaring its prerogative to predate whatever it wants; the whole of nature answers only to the requirements of the hawk’s survival. At both the individual and ecological level, the hawk offers a blunt statement of material self-interest. But when the God of Job speaks the original line, it is in the context of a facetious offer to reward anyone worthy enough to subdue the Leviathan, knowing full well that no such individual exists. It is, in other words, a statement of *non*-interest, of indifference to materiality; God makes a mocking gift of the world but this is rhetoric only, for God transcends such creaturely transactions. For the hawk, the need to take is very real. This difference may account for readers’ and critics’ frequent uneasiness with the poem – Hughes remarks that the hawk has been accused of being a fascist, and admits that it ‘sounds like Hitler’s familiar spirit’ – for the poet has put words presuming omnipotence and infinitude on the tongue of a finite creature, thus inviting a human comparison. The hawk’s amoral, unperturbed, self-justifying soliloquy does not contradict Job’s harsh vision of the divine, for, as Harris notes,

When Job hears Yahweh’s acknowledgement of Leviathan’s continuing power, he recognizes that his earlier questions about God’s ethical character are irrelevant. The universe is as it is, an unfolding process in which Light and Dark, Gentle and Violent, and Good and Evil are intrinsic components. “The satan,” who (unknown to Job) attends Yahweh’s heavenly court as one of the “Sons of God,” and the primordial sea beast Leviathan, whom Yahweh has reduced to a plaything, are perhaps manifestations of the same mysterious, seditious force that Yahweh tolerates as part of the cosmic whole. [[138]](#footnote-138)

Job, seeking some kind of explanation for his suffering, receives what amounts to a lesson in the world’s final unaccountability to human beings. Even in the Book of Job, human notions of morality are unaccommodated by Nature, precisely as the hawk becomes morally outrageous only when thought of as humanly accountable.

How therefore are we to think about Crow’s weeping in ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’ – a folly? A pious self-indulgence? I think not. Especially in light of Hughes’s review of *The Environmental Revolution*, we must take seriously Crow’s regret that he kills to eat, and the psychological defences he throws up to comfort himself by impeding sympathy, the ‘eye’s roundness’ and ‘ear’s deafness’. These defences grasp toward what Gifford and Roberts call the hawk’s ‘necessary blindness’,[[139]](#footnote-139) but can never fully restore what for the hawk has never been lost: innocence. Such a statement fits neatly into the motif of the fall and satisfies Tillich’s assertion that, ‘Like every higher being, man desires to return to the lower level of life out of which he has arisen. The pain inflicted by the higher level drives toward the lower’.[[140]](#footnote-140) Hughes joins Tillich in suggesting that a return to animal ignorance – the impossible dream – would indeed be a return to bliss. Gifford and Roberts remark that ‘the whole magnificent structure of Creation is built upon ignorance of death’,[[141]](#footnote-141) and that, contrary to this ignorance, ‘the determined and disciplined pursuit of knowledge of death is central to Hughes’s achievement’. This comment comes in regards to ‘Hawk Roosting’, but it is entirely applicable to ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’: apart from Crow, the creatures in that poem seem not to hear each other’s weeping, nor to understand the weeping they cause, while his awaking to such death and suffering is inseparable from Crow’s acquisition of humanity. Yet the moral component of that acquisition remains unaccounted for: *why* does Crow weep as he eats? A crow eating grubs is acting just as a crow should. Nor is Crow the victim of any religious dogma: he acquires his knowledge through listening to the creatures around him. From a naturalistic perspective there is no cause for moral disturbance, yet such disturbance is clearly felt. Hughes’s continual unflinching evocation of the violence of nature, the whole bloody, morally unaccountable works, cannot answer to Crow’s very human weeping.

This is the quantum of human exceptionalism. Emerson identifies it in 1850 when he writes:

The final solution in which scepticism is lost, is in the moral sentiment, which never forfeits its supremacy. All moods may be safely tried, and their weight allowed to all objections: the moral sentiment as easily outweighs them all, as any one. This is the drop which balances the sea.[[142]](#footnote-142)

Richard Dawkins, in a very different idiom, speaks on its behalf in the conclusion to *The Selfish Gene* (1976):

We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism—something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators. [[143]](#footnote-143)

Dawkins does not account for this motivation to defy the selfishness of our genes in the name of ‘pure, disinterested altruism’, but its source is by definition outside of the genetic determinism he sees informing every other aspect of our lives.[[144]](#footnote-144) Nor does Emerson account for the ‘moral sentiment’, apart from reference to an ‘Eternal Cause’.[[145]](#footnote-145) Dawkins and Emerson both appeal, implicitly or explicitly, to a transcendent morality, incommensurable with nature.

Gifford touches upon this concern, taking the opposite view and rejecting the existence of any ‘transcendent moral position’[[146]](#footnote-146) in Hughes’s work. He argues that ‘human life, in all its tensions and contradictions, can be understood to be part of those in the wider ecology in which we live. Of course, from that position a responsibility comes with being human.’[[147]](#footnote-147) I agree with the latter assertion: our singular success as a species, and the disproportionate impact we have on the planet, burdens us with an equally singular responsibility. But how have we come to this moral realisation? The answer is not to be found within the nature of Hughes’s poetry: his ‘Nature’ would have us thinking like the hawk, who presumes to speak with the voice of God, who takes what it wants because ‘it is all mine’, whose desires are pursued ‘Through the bones of the living’ (*CP* 69). Nature is the seething of ghost crabs, ‘mount[ing] each other’ and ‘tear[ing] each other to pieces’ (*CP* 150). It is the ‘all // One smouldering annihilation’ of ‘Green Wolf’ (*CP* 160). When human beings act in accordance with this nature, the result is a brutal lesson in the single category of ‘Reality’, with ‘Its mishmash of scripture and physics, / With here, brains in hands, for example, / And there, legs in a treetop’ (*CP* 222). Like the pike, nature ‘spares nobody’ (*CP* 85). In ‘Us He Devours’, from *Wolfwatching*, we watch a small bird searching a winter garden

With such anguish, such foregone despair

It finds nothing, or barely enough

To keep it alive to its pang and that echoing

Immanence of famine.

The pathos of these lines is so much of a piece with Crow’s weeping, yet it is not intrinsic to the scene described, but the result of human imagination, our ability to regard our own suffering and relate this to a bird looking for food. All the poem’s creatures are ‘Casualty of a peculiar cry: / Eloi Eloi’ (*CP* 774-5) – a reference to Christ’s cry from the cross of ‘Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?’ which translates as ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ (Mark 15:34). The irony is ours alone; the animals described in ‘Us He Devours’ do not comprehend their suffering, like the wolves in ‘The Howling of Wolves’ who ‘never learn how it has come about / That they must live like this’ (*CP* 180). Perhaps we too never learn how this life of suffering, full of these as-if-godforsaken moments, has come about. But Hughes’s keen sense of the suffering of all creatures – his resistance, enacted in his poetry, against the roundness of his eye and the deafness of his ear – opens a distinctly human moral space in which sympathy and altruism may compete, if not always successfully, against natural self-interest.

I wish finally to underscore how this morality presents in Hughes’s work as a lapsarian development, something unique to human fallenness. He refers to this morality as ‘the light’ in ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’, but the mocking simplicity of the phrase is a purely defensive gesture to take the edge off Crow’s earnestness, only ironic insofar as the apparent scorn is an actual statement of esteem. The moral confusion and despair threatened by Nietzsche’s observation that life operates by injury, violation, exploitation and destruction is contained by appeal to something beyond life, and beyond death, which is nonetheless incited by close attention to the natural cycles of life and death, and by the desire to undo the fall and reconnect with the sacred. The profound dislocation we experience as fallen – or, to use Tillich’s preferred term, *estranged* – creatures leads us, obscurely but undeniably, to Crow’s intuition of a human moral responsibility, however frustrated by nature’s indifference.

## 3.3: Dominion and *Moortown*

Estrangement cuts both ways: we are estranged not only from the essential – that is, God – but from creation, the purely finite. Wallace Stevens, though far too committed an agnostic to discuss estrangement as an article of faith, nevertheless offers an apt account of this side of estrangement, and its relevance to the Genesis story, in part IV of the first section of ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’, ‘It Must Be Abstract’:

The first idea was not our own. Adam

In Eden was the father of Descartes

And Eve made air the mirror of herself,

Of her songs and of her daughters. They found themselves

In heaven as in a glass; a second earth;

[…]

There was a muddy centre before we breathed.

There was a myth before the myth began,

Venerable and articulate and complete.

From this the poem springs: that we live in a place

That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves

And hard it is in spite of blazoned days.[[148]](#footnote-148)

The ‘first idea’ is Stevens’s figure for the imagination’s necessity, the human mind applying itself to a new world – literally new as in the Genesis story, or figuratively new as in that which is created by a new way of understanding, ‘A new knowledge of reality’.[[149]](#footnote-149) As we saw in the last chapter, this begins with a fall into self-regard: Adam’s Cartesian ‘I am’, Eve’s mirror upon the air. The ‘muddy centre’ and ‘myth before the myth began’ are a confluence of nature and deity, that from which we are estranged, ‘complete’ of itself, with no particular need for us. The final stanza quoted states the situation plainly. We are, as Hughes says, ‘the first animal to be out of phase with life on earth’, deploying the singular asset of our imagination in ‘a fevered lust to find substitutes’ for our lost continuity with the divine. If Stevens is right, that ‘we live in a place / That is not our own’, then we may see our assertion of dominion as a more or less brutal attempt to defend against this truth, substituting mastery as a second-best form of continuity. Harold Bloom connects this stanza to Emerson’s ‘lament’ in his 1844 essay ‘Nature’, that ‘our music, our poetry, our language itself are not satisfactions, but suggestions’, and his realisation that ‘we are encamped in nature, not domesticated’.[[150]](#footnote-150) ‘Domesticated’, literally at home, is a perhaps intentionally ironic word for what Hughes calls obedience to divine law, but the irony illustrates our tragic state: the hawk is domesticated to the mechanics of predatory behaviour while we, struggling to act well and do good, even to understand what these words mean, live in a wilderness of the soul unknown to any hawk.

We may live in a place which is not our own and, much more, not ourselves, but live here we do – and, as Stevens remarks elsewhere, ‘The greatest poverty is not to live / In a physical world’.[[151]](#footnote-151) One of Hughes’s strongest expressions of the need for such a commitment comes in the sequence *Adam and the Sacred Nine*, another reworking of the Genesis story. As in many of Hughes’s other Eden parables, Adam begins sullen and prostrate, dreaming of a future, the ins and outs of his fate: ‘Too little lifted from mud / He dreamed the tower of light’ (*CP* 443). We must not be too quick to read ‘tower of light’ as wishful fantasy: in the poem’s repeating structure Adam dreams of ‘bulldozers’, ‘cranes’, ‘the religion of the diamond body’ (see your local fitness club for membership details), and other signs and symptoms of human advancement. These may or may not be regrettable, but they are all real. In the following poems nine birds come and go, each bringing a lesson in self-possession, in being wholly themselves, and the sequence concludes with the poem titled ‘The sole of a foot’, on which Gifford comments:

But the transcendence of flying is not Adam’s mode of being. He discovers […] that he must have his feet on the earth to be fully human. Possibly taking a line from the devotional writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Hughes concludes this sequence with the words, ‘I was made // For you’ (*CP* 452)

Adam was indeed made both from and for the earth, and these lines restate the essence of Genesis 2:7-8: ‘And the Lord God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. And the Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed.’ Indeed, the name ‘Adam’, *hā’ādām* in biblical Hebrew, relates intriguingly to the Hebrew for arable land, *hā’ădāmâ*. As Ronald A Simkins explains, the Bible presents these ‘as masculine and feminine forms of the same word’, so that man’s formation from the earth ‘should be interpreted as a metaphor for the man’s birth’ from that land, a relationship ‘like that of a child and his mother’. Citing the dust-to-dust message of Genesis 3:19 and inflecting it with this biological/familial metaphor, Simkins infers an overall moral meaning: ‘Having his origin in the soil, the man is dependent upon the arable land from which he was taken. Yet the arable land is also dependent upon the man if it is to be anything more than a barren desert.’[[152]](#footnote-152) This co-dependency can be read into Hughes’s Adam’s final declaration that ‘I was made // For you’, turning what may have sounded like abject submission into something more mutual: I was made for you because you required me.

So we return to the question of dominion and relationality between humanity and the fecund world in which we find ourselves. In *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (1996),Michael Northcott clarifies the meaning of dominion.

Dominion has frequently been misinterpreted as meaning domination or possession. But the Hebrew root of the verb translated subdue or rule means vice-regent or steward and not ruler. God puts humans over nature not as owner or exploiter but as the steward who shares the creative care of the creator.[[153]](#footnote-153)

Sounding rather like the ‘direct responsibility for the management of [Nature]’ which Gifford identifies as one of the ‘post-pastoral’ features of Hughes’s poetry,[[154]](#footnote-154) this original meaning of dominion has regrettably ‘become associated with instrumentalist attitudes to nature which are linked with environmentalist exploitation’, as Northcott says. He suggests that ‘the association of stewardship with absolute property rights and land ownership patterns in Western civilization resulted in its mutation into a metaphor of human control and mastery over nature’.[[155]](#footnote-155) This fatal misinterpretation of dominion should not be blamed wholesale on Christianity, rather on the ‘abandonment’ of ‘the trinitarian doctrine of creation’ and its ‘replacement with a mechanistic cosmology’ in the early modern period. ‘In the absence of Christological mediation the creation appears in the early modern mind as sheer mechanism, as a realm of brute facts whose prior ordering reveals nothing of the beneficent intentions of the Creator’.[[156]](#footnote-156) Like Hughes, who blames the corrupt presumption of dominion on ‘Reformed Christianity and from Old Testament Puritanism’, Northcott sees Protestantism as complicit in the rise of this mechanistic view of nature, as the ‘inward and redemptionist shift in Protestant theology produces a doctrine of creation far more instrumentalist and secular than that of the medievals’.[[157]](#footnote-157) Thus purged of its salvific power, the natural world becomes subject to the Protestant work ethic which, especially as influenced by Calvinistic anxieties about membership among God’s elect, had designs on the conversion of natural resource into economic resource.[[158]](#footnote-158) The moral or theological status of non-human creation becomes a Protestant non-issue. As Northcott summarises:

The human refashioning of nature is thus freed from the moral restraints that arise in the trinitarian doctrine of creation, which posits an ongoing, purposive and ultimately redemptive relation between God and the order of creation. In a mechanistic cosmology the prior order of matter and organisms bears no intrinsic moral or teleological significance.[[159]](#footnote-159)

Indeed, Northcott argues, the degree to which Protestantism may be blamed for environmental destruction is the degree to which Christianity has turned from its own previous wisdom:

[T]he rise of instrumental views of nature has gone hand in hand with the demise of the traditional Christian view of creation as the sphere of God’s providential ordering, and with the gradual secularisation of European civilisation which began at the close of the Middle Ages and reaches its nadir in secularised modernity.[[160]](#footnote-160)

When Crow weeps over the grubs, or when Hughes makes show of lamenting Crow’s predation of the snake, we see a nostalgia for pre-Enlightenment, pre-Reformation notions of dominion and a crowy expression of belief that non-human nature bears an ‘intrinsic moral or teleological significance’. The intentional naiveté of these poems (‘the light’ and so on) makes it easy to dismiss this expression, and certainly they are more concerned with dramatising moral confusion than resolving it, but they do set a trajectory of moral accountability and responsibility toward the natural world in which the human need to consume must be balanced against the intrinsic rights of other creatures.

Dominion concerns more than just predation and consumption. In ‘Crow Hears Fate Knock at the Door’ (*CP* 221-2), Hughes links dominion to estrangement and a *telos* of estrangement overcome. Looking out at the majesty and intricacy of creation, meandering passively like a tipsy Romantic as the universe ‘Blow[s] in his ear cluelessly’, Crow feels ‘helpless’. Against this helplessness is weighed a ‘prophecy’ – another name, like the ‘Fate’ of the title, for a human *telos* – of physical and metaphysical entanglement:

i will measure it all and own it all

and i will be inside it

as inside my own laughter

and not staring out at it through walls

of my eye’s cold quarantine

Is this a good thing or a bad thing? We see dominion cast in blunt if not outright ugly terms, but we also see the offer of an escape from solipsism and estrangement, the ‘eye’s cold quarantine’ of Egg-Headed thinking. Coming so early in the sequence (seventh in the first American edition, eleventh in the 1972 expansion), we should expect the poem to perform Crow’s ignorance and resistance in similar fashion to Part I of *Wodwo*, a performance we see in the use of ‘grimace’ and ‘rending’ to describe the prophecy. Eden has been lost, it cannot be regained through facile Romanticism, and the way ahead will be difficult – indeed, to get momentarily ahead of myself, it will be crucifixional. The poem’s mood of least-worst choices is only to be expected from *Crow*, but to measure and own the world is self-evidently our fate, as no poet writing in the twentieth century could deny, and whatever victory over estrangement we are to achieve must be achieved under these conditions.

Adam and his descendants are agriculturalists. That is the context of their dominion. It is no surprise, then, to find that *Moortown Diaries* offers Hughes’s fullest exploration of the reality of dominion. These poems, originally published as *Moortown Elegies* as a Rainbow Press limited edition before becoming the opening section of the Faber & Faber volume *Moortown*, are, with only one or two exceptions, straightforward verse diary pieces which arose from the time Hughes spent operating Moortown Farm with his second wife Carol and her father Jack Orchard. The poem ‘Dehorning’ (*CP* 504-5) exemplifies the collection’s unflinching journalistic descriptions of the frequent gruesomeness of animal husbandry.

The horn

Rocks from its roots, the wire pulls through

The last hinge of hair, the horn is heavy and free.

And a water-pistol jet of blood

Rains over the one who holds it – a needle jet

From the white-rasped and bloody skull-crater.

Unsparing descriptions aside, what makes this poem remarkable is its authoritative voice: Hughes writes like a farmer, like a man who owns and works animals. There are references to certain animals’ personalities – the cows selected for dehorning are ‘spoilt’ and ‘Cantankerous’ – but we see no suggestion that anything lies beyond reach of the speaker’s perception, no hint of an occult resource possessed by the animals to the poet’s exclusion. Compare this with the *Lupercal* poem ‘The Bull Moses’: ‘something / Deliberate in his leisure, some beheld future / Founding in his quiet’ (*CP* 75). The bull here is, as Gifford and Roberts comment, ‘subject to the farmer, and yet so removed in being from the farmer’s world as to be beyond the range of subjection’.[[161]](#footnote-161) But, crucially, it is not the farmer who writes ‘The Bull Moses’, but a boy, now grown, remembering. Even in the nightmare spirit-world of *Gaudete*, when Lumb is made to sacrifice a bull, we are told that the creature ‘gazes inward […] listening to the bull-music far back in the mountains of its body’ (*G* 18). But this is not how the farmer of *Moortown Diaries* sees his cattle. The conclusion to ‘Dehorning’ strikes a harsh note in this context, affectionate yet a little condescending: ‘What she’s lost / In weapons, she’ll have to make up for in tits. / But they’ve all lost one third of their beauty’. The farmer’s aesthetic revaluation in the last line combines with a clear-eyed acceptance of the traumatic procedure’s necessity to provide a psychological portrait of the human side of dominion.

This tempered sympathy is noted by other critics, with Scigaj writing, ‘If the persona views nature unsentimentally in the opening section of *Moortown*, he does characteristically view it sympathetically’,[[162]](#footnote-162) and Roberts describing Hughes’s farmer persona as ‘a sensitive but practical man who responds emotionally to the suffering of animals, but asks no metaphysical questions about it’.[[163]](#footnote-163) Where, we might ask, is Crow’s weeping? What would it mean for a farmer to ‘become the light’? Crow’s moral groping gives way in *Moortown Diaries* to a mature awareness that suffering may be at once necessary and regrettable, and that the singular authority of human dominion over nature is proved by our sensitivity to this balance.

The farmer may ask no questions about the metaphysics of suffering, but the related metaphysics of time and death – the nub of the lapsarian curse – increasingly preoccupy his thought. This often presents as a wilful naiveté, a luxury of belief in our ability to push back against death, as when we read of watching an animal recovering from an operation: ‘we sit, and smile, and wait, and know / She is not going to die’ (*CP* 520). Such a line might ring false when we consider that most farm animals are raised for the purpose of dying at a time and in a manner meant to maximise their utility to humans; yet it is no doubt honest to the moment that inspired it, the relief of having seen off an early death, a distinction which only assumes full force in a context of dominion and its precept of a well-ordered relationship between steward and animal. ‘Little Red Twin’ ends on the same note: ‘The warmed spices of earth / In the safe casket of stars and velvet // Did bring her to morning. And now she will live’ (*CP* 527). This anxiety over the looming death of animals becomes, when the animal is already dead, an anxiety over time itself. Finding a road-killed badger (not strictly a livestock casualty, but certainly a casualty of expansive human success), Hughes’s farmer takes the body home so it can rot, and the skeleton bleach in the sun:

I want him

To stop time. […]

A badger on my moment of life.

Not years ago, like the others, but now.

I stand

Watching his stillness, like an iron nail

Driven, flush to the head,

Into a yew post. Something has to stay. (*CP* 525)

We can read this in light of Tillich’s fuller comments on the human experience of time in our state of estrangement:

Man tries to prolong the small stretch of time given to him; he tries to fill the moment with as many transitory things as possible; he tries to create for himself a memory in a future which is not his; he imagines a continuation of his life after the end of his time and an endlessness without eternity. […] His existential unwillingness to accept his temporality makes time a demonic structure of destruction for him.[[164]](#footnote-164)

It is not the badger the farmer wants to preserve, so much as his own experience of the badger, the part of himself he has paid into it. The poem’s naked sense of ownership and heroic if unfulfillable groping for release from the totality of death demonstrates the complexity of our resistance to the biblical and biological truism: dust to dust.

We see the same complex of anxieties and emotions in ‘Orf’. A lamb, hopelessly ill with a fungal infection, is shot through the head by the farmer. The body collapses, the farmer tells us,

But the lamb-life in my care

[…] stood up in front of me,

[…] asking for permission to be extinct,

For permission to wait, at least,

Inside my head (*CP* 523)

The farmer’s mastery of the lamb is never questioned. Instead, it becomes the basis for an ethical responsibility toward the animal which outlasts death, assuming a metaphysical, spiritual or aesthetic quality. The farmer cannot disentangle his domination of the lamb from his anxiety over death and time, for the final loss of the lamb would bereave the farmer of whatever part of the animal now resides in his head. The lamb asks to be extinct; the farmer-diarist hesitates. Hughes’s published note to the poem describes ‘the stony grave in the wood that I dug for him, and the little oak sapling that I planted on it (an extraordinary sort of funeral for any livestock casualty)’ (*CP* 1208). The personal emotional investment of these poems in their animal subjects is quite unlike anything else in Hughes. Even poems of studied sympathy like ‘View of a Pig’ (*CP* 75-6) and ‘Wolfwatching’ (*CP* 754-7) maintain a distance between the human subject and animal object which upholds the creature’s first and last otherness, and prevents the warmth and wisdom which proliferates in the *Moortown Diaries*.

The farmer’s final object of contemplation in this light is not an animal but a man, Jack Orchard, Hughes’s father-in-law, who managed the Moortown operation until his death. This shift is particularly appropriate, as Gifford and Roberts point out: ‘Here is a human life that had the toughness, sureness, vitality and wholeness that Hughes and previously observed only in animals.’[[165]](#footnote-165) Indeed, their comment upon the earlier poem ‘February 17th’ applies equally well to the poems about Orchard: ‘There is no division between man and animal, which was such a dominant theme in Hughes’s early poems, and which often tended to be expressed to man’s discredit.’[[166]](#footnote-166) The final six poems in *Moortown Diary* credit Jack Orchard as the organising principle of the land: ‘From now on the land / Will have to manage without him’ (*CP* 533). After his death the land is left ‘childlike’, with ‘a great blank in its memory’.

Hughes’s presentation of Orchard as a man joined profoundly to the land he farms recalls an Old Testament theme which Northcott discusses as a possible corrective to the corrupt Protestant vision of dominion, a corrective in which the ‘relation between the fertility of the land and the health and wisdom of the king’ are inextricable.[[167]](#footnote-167)

Give the king thy judgements, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king’s son.

The mountains shall bring peace to the people, and the little hills, by righteousness.

He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers *that* water the earth. (Psalm 72:1,3,6)

Moral virtue is linked to environmental wellbeing. In a similar vein, such exploitative measures as the enclosure of common lands and the shift toward large-scale agriculture are seemingly anticipated and condemned by the author of Isaiah:

Woe unto them that join house to house, *that* lay field to field till *there be* no place, that they may be placed alone in the midst of the earth!

In mine ears *said* the Lord of hosts, Of a truth many houses shall be desolate, *even* great and fair, without inhabitant.

Yea, ten acres of vineyard shall yield one bath, and the seed of an homer shall yield an ephah. (Isaiah 5:8-10)

And human moral failure is seen to damage the earth’s natural fertility:

Behold, the Lord maketh the earth empty, and maketh it waste, and turneth it upside down, and scattereth abroad the inhabitants thereof.

The land shall be utterly emptied, and utterly spoiled: for the Lord hath spoken this word.

The earth mourneth *and* fadeth away, the world languisheth *and* fadeth away, the haughty people of the earth do languish.

The earth also is defiled under the inhabitants thereof; because they have transgressed the laws, changed the ordinance, broken the everlasting covenant.

Therefore hath the curse devoured the earth, and they that dwell therein are desolate: therefore the inhabitants of the earth are burned, and few men left. (Isaiah 24:1,3-6)

When God and creation are closely identified, offence against the divine damages humanity’s relationship with the rest of creation: it becomes inhospitable, infertile, just as when fallen Adam is cursed to farm ‘thorns’ and ‘thistles’ (Genesis 3:18), and murderous Cain is told that the earth ‘shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength’ (Genesis 4:12). ‘We have in this tradition’, says Northcott, ‘a powerful insight into the ecological nature of divine, and so of created, justice’, by which transgression against divine law is experienced as harmful ecological disruption. [[168]](#footnote-168)

Meanwhile the preoccupation with time and death and the urge to memorialise continue. The poem ‘A monument’ (*CP* 534) tells of Orchard’s efforts ‘Under December downpour’ to run a wire fence through an overgrown thicket. The first 12 lines of the poem form an impressive description of the labour involved, the phrase ‘memorable downpour’ re-emphasising the battle against time already explicit in the title. These lines and all the effort they report roll into the ‘monument’ of the well-placed wire in line 13, though the poem’s long opening sentence, a mimesis of Orchard’s heroic fence-laying, finally comes to an end only in line 20. Fence-laying is a powerful assertion of dominion, but in this eulogistic context it emphasises mortality, change, and lapsarian boundaries, the point driven home by the anti-consolation and slight melancholia of the closing phrase: ‘using your life up’. As Tillich writes:

Man tries to resist this situation. He tries in an absolute sense to make a definite place his own. In all longing for a final “home,” this desire is effective. But he does not succeed; he remains a “pilgrim on earth,” and finally “his place does not know him any longer” (Job).[[169]](#footnote-169)

This is, to be sure, a harsh piece of commentary to apply to Orchard’s tenure at Moortown. But it is, I believe, exactly the insight toward which Hughes gestures when he writes that the land is left ‘with a great blank in its memory’. Orchard is present only as an absence, and to phrase it as Hughes does is only to say in the most loving way possible that his father-in-law lived, as we all do, in a place which was ultimately not his own and not himself, though he took responsibility for a time.

Yet the poem tries hard to see beyond this bleak situation. The description of Orchard as ‘skullraked with thorns’ points to Jesus’ Passion, fulfilling the theological arc reaching from Adam to Christ, the farmer cursed to work among weeds and thistles and the skilled labourer at one with God: an arc of estrangement overcome. Tillich notes a distinction between ‘man in essential unity with God (Adam) and man in actual unity with God under the conditions of existence (the Christ)’:[[170]](#footnote-170) Orchard, in the thick of his work and with thorns cutting his scalp, approaches the latter state. In contrast to the materially-minded phrase ‘conditions of existence’, St Paul’s distinction between Adam and Christ is explicitly one of matter versus spirit:

The first man *is* of the earth, earthy: the second man *is* the Lord from heaven.

As *is* the earthy, such *are* they also that are earthy: and as *is* the heavenly, such *are* they also that are heavenly.

(1 Corinthians 15: 47-48)

Such pure spiritualism finds little purchase in Hughes’s poetry, and it is appropriate that Gifford and Roberts, in concluding their discussion of *Moortown Diaries* and Hughes’s work in general, should comment that ‘Hughes’s poetry has not been striving toward mystical transcendence’.[[171]](#footnote-171) And yet – we must note how provocatively Hughes comes, in ‘Now you have to push’ (*CP* 536), the penultimate Moortown poem, in which he addresses Orchard directly, to an image of the spiritualisation of matter. The old farmer’s body, lovingly detailed across sixteen lines, is pushed ‘into a gathering blaze’ which Orchard himself must tend ‘Right on, into total darkness’. This image of the evanescence of a body in fire partakes of an impulse for transcendence while never wholly surrendering to it. The suggestion that this could be just another brush fire emphasises the material grounding of the metaphor, withdrawing it from the purely mystical, while leaving the reader free to imagine the energy contained in the farmer’s body being released as light, an image with obvious spiritual resonance. The material and spiritual both attend the man: ‘And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly’ (1 Corinthians 15: 49).

The purpose of such a temptation into spirituality is not the fulfilment of cultural religion. It is a temptation away from the nihilistic consolations of the merely factual, the merely material. It is a divestment of understanding, an allowance to mystery. In ‘Esthétique du Mal’, Stevens writes,

It was the last nostalgia: that he

Should understand. That he might suffer or that

He might die was the innocence of living, if life

Itself was innocent. To say that it was

Disentangled him from sleek ensolacings.[[172]](#footnote-172)

The ‘sleek ensolacings’ of Christian hope accompany a belief that life, especially human life, is not innocent. Stevens was capable of dispelling such a belief, from time to time, as by a performance: ‘To say that it was’. Hughes’s sense of human transgression was much stronger. *Moortown Diaries* is too hard-won a collection to maintain such innocence, too studied in the suffering it reports, too aware of the reality of dominion. Hughes’s instinct for ‘opening negotiations’[[173]](#footnote-173) is a commitment to the nostalgia that he should understand, beckoning the metaphysical to crowd round the physical. Life is not innocent for Hughes, and he, for one, remains deeply entangled.

# Chapter 4: The Crucifixion

Gethsemane—  
  
Is but a Province—in the Being's Centre—  
Judea—  
For Journey—or Crusade's Achieving—  
Too near—  
  
Our Lord—indeed—made Compound Witness—  
And yet—  
There's newer—nearer Crucifixion  
Than That—

– Emily Dickinson, FIRST LINE TITLE

To believe, as Hughes appears to, that humanity exists in a state of transgression against a law at once natural and divine is to raise the possibility of a means of reconciliation. Building on ideas already discussed, we might expect this reconciliation to take the form of a reconstituted wholeness, a reintegration of the unfallen with the fallen, the ancient with the modern, the instinctive with the intellectual, the paradisal with the existential. Given the teleological perspective consistently implied in Hughes’s writing, we might further expect this reconciliation to be more than a recuperation of a previous state, but a new synthesis, something without precedent, in which human consciousness and self-regard combines with a renewed sense of connection to that which created us, the ground of our being.

Christ is the figure for this wholeness. In the image of the crucifixion Hughes finds an irresistible symbol for the simultaneity of divinity and suffering, a way of resolving his lapsarian reading of the human condition, and a razor with which to test and pare Christianity itself in his tireless seeking-out of essentials: the antimodernist nostalgia that he should understand.

The form and content of this understanding are identified in a letter Hughes, aged 60, wrote to Merchant, the same letter in which he sketches his theory of the biological fall:

I made the association, somehow, between the world of animals, which is excluded by culture, & persecuted (killed & eaten) & the “real thing” in human beings—the part which our own culture tortures, i.e. sacrifices, crucifies. I identified, you see, the sacrificed God, the divine self which has to die to come into life, with the whole animal & vegetable kingdom, which culture tortures & destroys.

This was a very primitive thing to do, but I did it in a completely literal sense. Somehow animal life (the whole of life outside the human ego, perhaps) became identified with Christ in particular, but with the divine world in general (the world from which ego has separated us.) (*LTH* 579-80)

As with all reconstructions of youth made in maturity, we should treat these claims cautiously as biography. But they reveal much about the mature Hughes’s attitudes toward the Christian symbolism in his work, especially the fall and crucifixion. Crucially, in relating these symbolic structures to his early years adventuring across the Calder Valley moors he incorporates them into the foundational myth of his poetic self. For the 60-year-old Hughes to call the identification of Christ with the natural world ‘primitive’ and ‘literal’ confers a particularly high value to the insight: not an educated reshaping of existing cultural material, nor a conclusion born of experience, but an intuitive connection made from what we might call an innocent state of mind. That, at least, is the suggestion of the older Hughes writing his letter. The phrase ‘the whole of life outside the human ego’ bears the stamp of much mature thought, and shows us how Hughes continued to develop an idea he believes originated with an insight of his young, innocent self.

## 4.1: Hawks, crosses and teleological freedom

The development of this idea – the broad application of the crucifixion to nature – becomes visible in the opening poem of his first book, ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ (*CP* 19). The poem, with its much remarked upon debt to Hopkins, translates the obstructive heaviness of matter into an aurally overburdened language, lumpy with alliteration, against which its extended syntactic contortions strain for progress: a mimesis of the man staggering through the mud. This is contrasted with the vision of the hawk, whose ‘wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet’. The poem ends with the walker imagining the hawk’s earthy and inevitable death, inviting an anti-transcendent interpretation, with submission to death the only available option for those who find themselves alive and the reincorporation of one’s body into the earth the only possible object of hope. As Sagar writes:

‘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 that presumes to raise itself. Air manifests itself only as wind which kills any stubborn attempt at life.[[174]](#footnote-174)

The poem’s grim superficial trajectory is complicated, however, by a contrary movement not of escape or transcendence, but of fixation upon a centre. The hawk’s death is a projection into the future, conditional on the word ‘maybe’, but in the present of the poem the hawk has not moved from the storm. In line 5 the hawk ‘hangs his still eye’; in line 10 ‘the hawk hangs’; in line 15 it ‘hangs still’. The creature’s ease in the midst of such tearing energy has a transfixing effect upon both speaker and reader, but the hawk itself is not the only object of this fixation. Consider these lines:

… and I,

Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting

Morsel in the earth’s mouth, strain towards the master-

Fulcrum of violence where the hawk hangs still.

What is meant by ‘master- / Fulcrum of violence’? The term is oddly precise, indicating a meeting of complementary forces, a balance (or the disruption of one) and this combines in language of intense physical exhaustion with a note of hope for release from the trials of the synecdochical mud.

I suggest this as a figuration of the crucifixion: a moment of violence in which the material and spiritual forces of the world were balanced across a single point. To begin at the level of visual rhyme, the very shape of a hunting hawk makes a felicitous comparison with the crucified Christ. Such comparison is surely the inspiration of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘The Windhover’, a poem whose dedication ‘to Christ Our Lord’ makes candid what in Hughes’s poem remains subtextual – although early drafts of the poem refer explicitly to the story of Christ walking on water.[[175]](#footnote-175) Indeed, we can read Hughes’s poem as an update of Hopkins’s, reflecting the burdens of modernism, Darwinism and trench warfare. The relationship between poems is neither one of straightforward agreement nor rebuttal, but refinement, as Hughes’s poem strips away Hopkins’s beautifying language for the achievement of sharper metaphysical insight.

Hopkins’s speaker is clear and unembarrassed in his adoration of the Christ-bird, whose collapse becomes the moment of supreme glory:

Brute beauty and valour and act, oh, air, pride, plume, here

Buckle! and the fire that breaks from thee, then, a billion

Times told lovelier, more dangerous, O my chevalier![[176]](#footnote-176)

The speaker witnesses, in the present tense of watching the hawk, the triumph of Christian fulfilment: if we go searching for the crucifixion and Resurrection in Hopkins’s poem, we can find them only in a single display, in which the ‘falling’, ‘galling’ and ‘gashing’ energy arrives simultaneously with the breaking out of a fire both dangerous and lovely, and the final eruption of a glory of dawn light. Far from theologically muddled, ‘The Windhover’ illustrates the essential unity of Christ’s dying and rising to Christian theology. As Barth writes:

But we ought not to erect and fix any opposition [between Crucifixion and Resurrection]; for there is no *theologia crucis* which does not have its complement in the *theologia gloriae*. Of course, there is no Easter without Good Friday, but equally there is no Good Friday without Easter![[177]](#footnote-177)

Tillich likewise states in his *Systematic Theology* that ‘The “Cross of the Christ” and the “Resurrection of the Christ” are interdependent symbols; they cannot be separated without losing their meaning.’[[178]](#footnote-178) Moltmann, too, stresses the need for a unified understanding of Christ:

To understand his death solely in the light of his resurrection would rapidly lead to a Christ-myth in which the death of the bringer of salvation was an important fact, but not Jesus himself and what brought him to the cross. If his death were considered only in the light of the life he lived, ultimately neither the death nor the life of Jesus would have any special importance beyond that of the comparable life and death of great prophets or demagogues. If it is *the same* Jesus who was crucified and rose from the dead – and this must be the starting point of Christian faith – then only an integral consideration from both points of view, constantly relating to [sic] the two aspects to each other, can do him justice.[[179]](#footnote-179)

The windhover’s buoyant physicality makes it an apt emblem of the resurrected Christ, for, as Tillich stresses, ‘The resurrection of the *body* – not an immortal soul – is the symbol of the victory over death’.[[180]](#footnote-180) In watching his symbolically freighted bird Hopkins gulps whole the emotional and spiritual impact of the Passion and Resurrection.

Hughes’s hawk, by comparison, is much less active. Whereas the windhover goes ‘riding’ and ‘striding […] off, off forth on swing’, the hawk ‘hangs’, ‘hangs’ and again ‘hangs’, a mere ‘hallucination’, maintaining itself ‘effortlessly’ in the storm. Hughes knowingly idealises the hawk to emphasise its poise and indifference to its environment. We are accustomed to speak of Hughes’s concern for humanity’s divorce from nature, yet here it is the hawk which seems not really to be present. Its death is both imagined and idealised; its suffering of the air, the weather, the shires and mud is a projection by the speaker into the future, and carries on this idealisation, pinned to that standout phrase, ‘in his own time’ – a phrase which sits uneasily in a naturalistic context. Notions of fate, destiny, necessity and *telos*, all implied by that line, translate in such a context into a picture of pure mechanical determinism. But it seems unlikely that the speaker is dwelling on this determinism as he watches the hawk in the rain. The language used to fix the hawk on the page is clearly one of esteem, with its effortless composure, its ‘diamond point of will’ and ‘angelic eye’, its perfect stillness and seeming impassability. The speaker sees in the hawk something more than the simple mechanical necessity of death. The statement that the hawk meets death ‘in his own time’ suggests that death has been both appointed and chosen, a duality contained within the two senses of the world ‘suffer’ in line 17, to endure and to allow. This language articulates a tricky convergence of fate and self-possession which resonates compellingly with the key concept of *freedom* as formulated by the theologians in our company.

We must bring two modes of freedom under discussion. The first is existential freedom. Responding in a notebook jotting to Dostoevsky’s ‘Without God, everything is permitted’ (from *The Brothers Karamazov*), Hughes equates God with a ‘Biological law’ from which we are fallen, ‘So existential man proceeds into a thinner + thinner alienation till he is a simple mechanism of empty decisions’. This is existential freedom, the unhappy dividend of the fall, existence divorced from essence. And however free we may feel in this state, in the way that matters most we are powerless to act: our ‘state of soul’ and ‘participation of soul in life’ is beyond our control, and ‘cannot be shaped’.[[181]](#footnote-181) The sham freedom of ‘existential man’ contrasts with and excludes what I will call teleological freedom, the freedom to progress toward reunification with the divine. For our theologians this is, unsurprisingly, the only form of freedom deserving of the word.

Tillich argues for ‘the essential unity of freedom and destiny’,[[182]](#footnote-182) a unity he elsewhere calls an ‘ontological polarity’: ‘Freedom in polarity with destiny is the structural element which makes existence possible because it transcends the essential necessity of being without destroying it.’[[183]](#footnote-183) Freedom for Tillich is a uniquely human possession – ‘Man is man because he has freedom’[[184]](#footnote-184) – and the exercise of this freedom raises the possibility, indeed the inevitability, of estrangement. But ‘freedom’ here means something more than the freedom to self-determine without teleological fetters. In elucidating just what he means by the freedom-destiny polarity, Tillich uses an analogy which joins his discussion to Hughes’s lapsarian discourse:

In terms of analogy we may speak of the polarity of spontaneity and law, of which the polarity of freedom and destiny is not only the outstanding example but also the cognitive entrance. An act which originates in the acting self is spontaneous. A reaction to a stimulus is spontaneous if it comes from the centered and self-related whole of a being. This refers not only to living beings but also to inorganic *Gestalten* which react according to their individual structure. Spontaneity is interdependent with law. Law makes spontaneity possible, and law is law only because it determines spontaneous reactions.[[185]](#footnote-185)

Recall Hughes’s hawk and pike ‘at rest in the law’. Tillich continues, ‘Nature does not obey—or disobey—laws the way men do; in nature spontaneity is united with law in the way freedom is united with destiny in man’.[[186]](#footnote-186) This unity of spontaneity and law is the restfulness of Hughes’s animals. It is their (in Hughes’s vision, but not Tillich’s) unfallen-ness, their at-homeness in the world, free from existential concerns. The spontaneity of the hawk in the rain – which is really just its being alive – effortlessly fulfils the law, even unto death, and in this way its death is both possessed (‘in its own time’) and endured (‘suffers the air, hurled upside down’). Hughes’s hawk is therefore both an unfallen creature living in a subjective paradise, and an emblem of perfectly centred teleological freedom.

Seeing the hawk in this light further underscores the crucifixion motif, for Christ represents the perfect congruence of freedom and destiny, the unity of divine omnipotence with creaturely contingency. As Tillich writes, ‘God has no destiny because he *is* freedom. The word “destiny” points to something which is going to happen to someone; it has an eschatological connotation.’[[187]](#footnote-187) The eschaton or end of the hawk is death, yet it is a death possessed, a spontaneity expressed in perfect and inevitable congruence with the law. Barth expresses the situation in a more overtly Christian manner when he writes: ‘Freedom is God’s great gift, the gift of meeting with Him. Why a gift, and why a gift of freedom? What it means is that this meeting of which the Creed speaks does not take place in vain.’[[188]](#footnote-188) This meeting is earlier defined as the mediating activity of Christ: ‘In Him God meets us.’ We can read this Godlike presence in Hughes’s poem as the master-fulcrum of violence, as the rain itself – which is indeed a ‘Storm’ in the poem’s title at first periodical publication (*CP* 1241), recalling God’s dramatic appearance at Job 38:1, ‘Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind.’ The immanence of God as phenomenal or meteorological power-centre can also be seen in the synoptic crucifixion narratives, in which ‘there was darkness all over the earth’ (Luke 23:44), ‘the sun was darkened’ (Luke 23:45) and ‘the earth did quake, and the rocks rent’ (Matthew 27:51). The anxious, anticipatory darkness between crucifixion and death is present in Hughes’s poem in the clear religious inflection of line 6, ‘His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet’; likewise, the raging of matter over the crucifixion is glimpsed in the ‘crash’ of ‘the ponderous shires’, a remarkably active verb for a spread of land. In face of such violence, we must remind ourselves of Hughes’s positive valuation of the encounter between hawk and storm: the arrival of death in the hawk’s own time, the speaker’s determined straining *toward* the master-fulcrum. This positivity, measured though it is, answers to Barth’s assurance that Christ – in spite, indeed because of the Cross – represents ‘a gift of freedom’, and a meeting between creator and creature which ‘does not take place in vain’ but will deliver us to self-fulfilment. The poem’s unspent teleological momentum in its present moment, the hawk still hanging, the walker still straining, is at once unsettling and liberating. The scene crackles with a charge of gathering prophecy, yet feels undetermined. In this way, ‘Hawk in the Rain’ is a masterful illustration of what freedom means for the fully contingent creature.

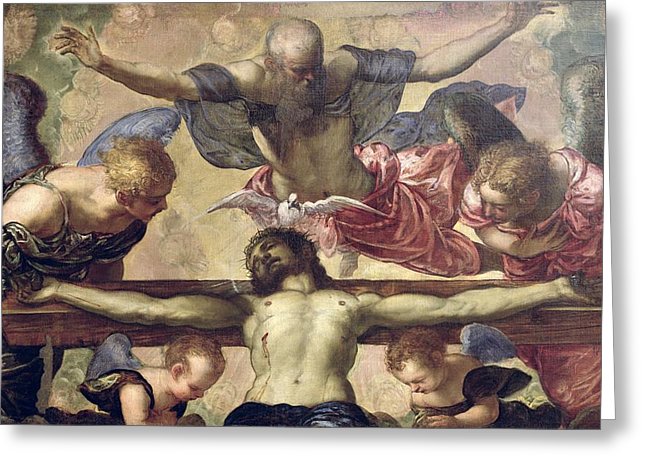
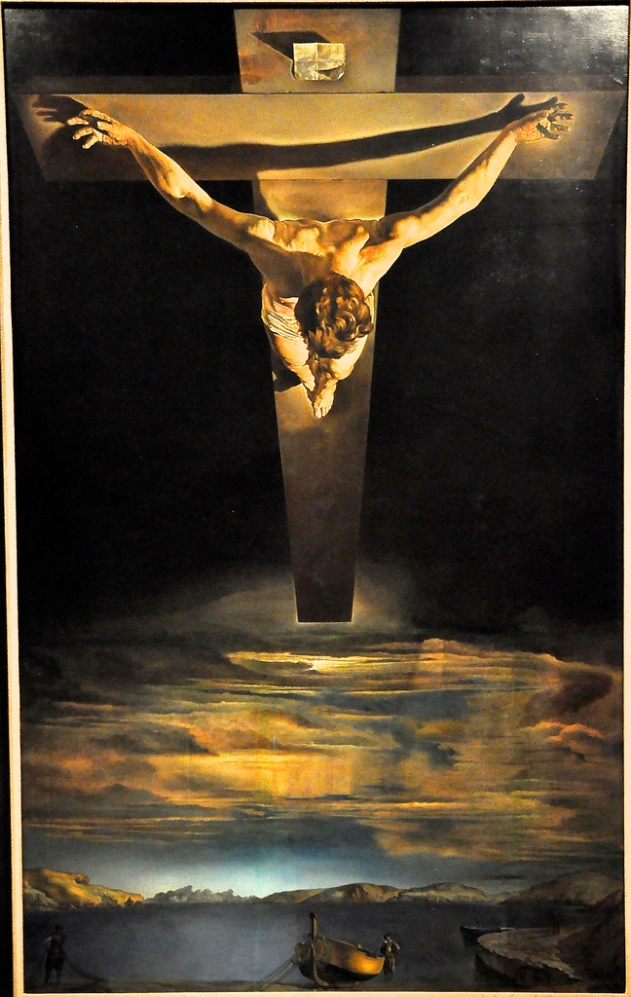
The hawk’s admirable self-possession at this moment of life on the brink of death answers equally to another theologian’s discussion of freedom. In *The Foundations of Christian Faith*, Karl Rahner defines freedom as not behavioural but ontological, not a freedom to act but a freedom to *be*: ‘In real freedom the subject always intends himself, understands and posits himself. Ultimately he does not do *something*, but does *himself*.’[[189]](#footnote-189) Nor is freedom a matter of mere physical existence (which would in essence be an act) but of existence as subjective agent:

[F]reedom has a single, unique act, namely, the self-actualization of the single subject himself. The subject’s individual acts must always and everywhere be mediated objectively in the world and in history, but he intends one thing and he actualizes one thing: the single subject in the unique totality of his history.[[190]](#footnote-190)

Thus, the wodwo, coming into awareness of its own subjectivity, declares, ‘I seem to have been given the freedom of this place’, a statement which immediately provokes the introspective question, ‘What am I then’ (*CP* 183). The wodwo wonders whether it is the exact centre, but it is the hawk’s more perfect centredness, coexistent with his utter physical contingency and poised in his state of intertextual crucifixion, which gives him his mesmerising quality. He is a creature whose life is clearly ‘mediated objectively in the world’, but his amped-up stillness and seeming indifference dramatises his perfect self-actualisation. By comparison, the muddy walker appears the less free of the two: the walker is uncentred, dispossessed of himself, too distracted by the threat of physical disintegration to self-actualise, straining toward the idealised hawk and the perfected self-possession it represents.

We see this freedom everywhere in Hughes’s creatures. The ‘wildernesses of freedom’ (*CP* 20) enjoyed by the caged cat of ‘The Jaguar’, though it may appear cruelly ironic or merely rhetorical, is really of the same order as the hawk’s freedom, for the jaguar’s freedom is likewise a function of its perfect submission to ‘the law’. That is to say, the jaguar is exactly and completely a jaguar; its self-actualisation as jaguar is perfect. In this sense its freedom is entirely of a piece with the freedom of Hughes’s many uncaged animals – though in a more commonplace sense, of course, the jaguar is not free at all, and the dissonance between physical and metaphysical freedom present in ‘The Jaguar’ gives the poem much of its distinctive energy. Is this dissonance wholly absent from the rained-upon hawk? If the hawk is a crucified figure – and the poem’s status as Hopkins pastiche makes this unmistakable – then the same dissonance is there in the hawk’s stillness, its hanging and hanging, the visual rhyme of flying hawk and crucified human. And because the hawk isn’t literally crucified or constrained as are Christ and the jaguar, the violence of crucifixion is subtly eroded and constructively ironised, softened by a hint of the physical freedom of flight. The poem, in short, esteems the crucified being.

## 4.2: Refuting the cult of the cross

Hopkin’s windhover and Hughes’s hawk both fit within a clear tradition of religious imagery. Indeed, the motif of crucifixion-as-flight is widespread in Christian and post-Christian art and culture. Jacopo Tintoretto’s painting *The Trinity* (c. 1574), to begin with a striking example, features a waist-up Christ over whose head the Father spreads his arms magisterially, and *on* whose head the Holy Spirit alights as a dove. The trinity’s concerted pose transforms Jesus’ plight into an expression of divine unity in which the spread arms of the crucified are explicitly compared to a bird’s splayed wings.[[191]](#footnote-191) Salvator Rosa’s mid-seventeenth century *The Resurrected Christ* depicts the ascendant messiah in a triumphant but still crucifixional pose, the nail marks prominent and sharp rays of sunlight replacing the crown of thorns: the crucifixion and resurrection are visually simultaneous.[[192]](#footnote-192) A host of other paintings – Rembrandt’s *The Ascension of Christ* and Jean-François de Troy’s *The Ascension* stand out among the endless examples[[193]](#footnote-193) – offers the posture of crucifixion as the appropriate pose for heavenly uplift, and this is the tradition into which our poets’ raptors arrive. Hopkins inclines more to the resurrection and Hughes to the crucifixion, but both are transfixed by those cruciform exemplars of suffering and fulfilment.

To this tradition we can add modern works as varied as Salvador Dali’s 1951 painting *Christ of Saint John of the Cross* and rock-and-roll band Pearl Jam’s 1998 song ‘Given to Fly’. Dali’s Christ hangs above a landscape of mountains and water, his body foreshortened and viewed from above so that we cannot see his face. The composition universalises the figure, leaving us to dwell not on the familiar desolation of a conventional Christ-face, but on the physicality of the body: the contorted muscles, the detailed hands and hair. We notice that there are no nails in Christ’s hands and no crown of thorns on his head. He is intact, uninjured, his attachment to the cross no longer a matter of violence but inevitability, rightness even. The sky meanwhile divides between darkness and stormy golds.[[194]](#footnote-194)

In ‘Given to Fly’, an unnamed protagonist leaves society to its lovelessness and heads for the sea:

He made it to the ocean, had a smoke in a tree

The wind rose up, set him down on his knee

A wave came crashing like a fist to the jaw

Delivered him wings, ‘Hey, look at me now’

Arms wide open with the sea as his floor

Oh, power, oh

The music conveys a sense of flight through an interplay of melody and chord structure: a high, reaching melody on the tonic followed by a more restrained melody on the dominant, reinforced by inverted bass notes, produces a sine curve of racing anticipation, while a tom-heavy rhythm mimes the buffeting wind. This messiah is eventually ‘stripped’ and ‘stabbed / By faceless men’, but both triumphant choruses shout that he is, like Dali’s Christ, ‘flying / Whole’.[[195]](#footnote-195)

Even when the cross is not the focus of a work of art, the flight motif can turn up unexpectedly. We find it, for instance, in *The Things The Carried*, Tim O’Brien’s 1990 metafictional novel on the Vietnam War.

Elroy Berdahl was no hick. His bedroom, I remember, was cluttered with books and newspapers. He killed me at the Scrabble board, barely concentrating, and on those occasions when speech was necessary he had a way of compressing large thoughts into small, cryptic packets of language. One evening, just at sunset, he pointed up at an owl circling over the violet-lighted forest to the west.

“Hey O’Brien,” he said. “There’s Jesus.”[[196]](#footnote-196)

Or consider two recent Superman blockbusters, 2006’s *Superman Returns* and 2013’s *Man of Steel*. In both films the soaring hero, whose qualifications for the role of Christ include being sent by an omnipotent father to save humanity and assuming this mantle at the age of 30, falls to earth at a moment of triumph in a blatantly crucifixional pose.[[197]](#footnote-197)

Hopkins’s gorgeous windhover, Dali’s woundless Christ and Pearl Jam’s messianic misfit are all examples of the positive transformation or beautification of the cross in art, what Moltmann, speaking more ecclesiastically, calls ‘roses’. Tracing a line of attack from Hegel and Goethe through Nietzsche and Marx which criticises Christian orthodoxy for embellishing the cross with cultural roses which have the effect of mitigating its fundamentally horrific nature, Moltmann concludes:

The more post-Christian humanism breaks away from the religious and humanist ‘roses’ of the cross, the more Christian faith today is forced back upon the naked cross without all the roses of tradition. It can no longer be a traditional faith in the roses which make the cross of Christ pleasant and wholesome for it. It is drawn into the full, undisguised bitterness and abandonment of Good Friday, where it can become true faith.[[198]](#footnote-198)

It is an open question whether humanist culture has truly broken from the roses of Christian tradition, or whether those roses have been subsumed more broadly into post-Christian culture. In either case, in his call for ‘true faith’ Moltmann is demanding honesty and theological accuracy when invoking the cross. Hughes, too, introducing János Pilinszky’s poetry, calls out the church for failing to confront the crucifixion, a symbol ‘from which theology retreats in confusion’ and ‘which Christianity has managed to cover only with a loud chord of faith’.[[199]](#footnote-199) The cross is not to be a facile comfort, but a source of difficult knowledge, both self-knowledge and God-knowledge. This is a matter of seeing the cross clearly, seeing it for the fundamentally horrific thing it is, and Moltmann stresses that ‘Christians who do not have the feeling that they must flee the crucified Christ have probably not yet understood him in a sufficiently radical way.’[[200]](#footnote-200) As Tillich puts it, ‘Those who dream of a better life and try to avoid the Cross as a way, and those who hope for a Christ and attempt to exclude the Crucified, have no knowledge of the mystery of God and of man.’[[201]](#footnote-201) Moltmann and Tillich warn against softening the crucifixion into an aesthetically engaging object which poses no serious challenge to one’s worldview or self-view, denuded of its iconoclastic potential. When the cross is properly apprehended,

[t]he fatal liberating contradiction which man experiences in his most sacred religious feelings when faced with the crucified Christ can then be applied to the tacit religious assumptions of his modern criticism of religion, with which he legitimizes his flight and his contempt: to the self-deification of atheist movements of liberation; to the post-Christian idolisation of the laws of history and historical success; and to post-Christian confidence in an eternally productive nature.[[202]](#footnote-202)

Elsewhere, Moltmann refers to the distortion and falsification of the true import of the crucifixion as the ‘Cult of the Cross’, which he defines as ‘the unbloody repetition of the event that took place on Golgotha on the altar of the church; that is, the making present of Christ in the sacrifice of the mass.’[[203]](#footnote-203) Moltmann is being strictly liturgical, referring to the Eucharistic sacrament which is the heart of Christian worship, but ‘unbloody repetition’ makes an equally effective test and tag for the various secular roses before us. For really, there is very little blood – that is to say, there is little true violence, little to make us squirm or seek relief. Even the most literal representation of the crucified Jesus, Dali’s painting, omits the nails and thorns. The actual, physical event of the crucifixion is subdued to the needs of a salvific theology, and in doing this, says Moltmann, we lose the essential thing: ‘What was unique, particular and scandalous in the death of Christ is not retained, but supressed and destroyed’.[[204]](#footnote-204)

Stevens enters the fray in section III of ‘The Man with the Blue Guitar’, a sequence in which playing the guitar is a conceit for imaginative representation and discovery.

Ah, but to play man number one,

To drive the dagger in his heart,

To lay his brain upon the board

And pick the acrid colors out,

To nail his thought across the door,

Its wings spread wide to rain and snow[[205]](#footnote-205)

‘[M]an number one’ could be Adam (the first created human), an ancestor along the lines of Hughes’s ‘first neotanous mutant’ (the first evolved human), Christ (the perfected human) or a kind of transcendent or essentialised human, partaking of Emerson’s Oversoul and Nietzsche’s Übermensch. Whoever this man is, his image quickly elides with that of a hawk or crow nailed to a door, though the exact reference remains obscure to anyone who has not read Stevens’s letters, or who does not share his knowledge of strange agricultural customs:

On farms in Pennsylvania a hawk is nailed up, I believe, to frighten off other hawks. Here in New England a bird is more likely to be nailed up merely as an extraordinary object to be exhibited; that is what I had in mind. My stenographer, who was raised on a farm in New England, says that I am wrong about New England, and that it is usually a crow that is nailed up for the purpose of scaring off other crows. But on several occasions I have seen eagles. I feel sure that a farmer would nail up an eagle because it was an eagle.[[206]](#footnote-206)

Harold Bloom may ‘marvel continuously at the critical attempts to find a Christian sensibility in Stevens’,[[207]](#footnote-207) but we glimpse something of the sort here, anxiously hidden in a complex of images: human exemplar, bird of prey, nails and wood, fierce weather. The transformation of the crucifixion from brutal historical event to aesthetic object is evident in Stevens’s curious confidence (coming as it is from an insurance lawyer) that ‘a farmer would nail up an eagle because it was an eagle’, and in the shift from the passages’s initially violent infinitives into the subsequent jauntiness of ‘To strike his living hi and ho, / To tick it, tock it, turn it true’. Yet despite this softening and poeticising, and however unconsciously on Stevens’s part, the crucifixion is present in his poem because of its potency as symbol of ontological freedom – the freedom of imaginative potential, of the human condition, blended here, as we should only expect, with nails and knives and an atmosphere of suffering. Freedom, Stevens tells us, is crucifying. It is brutal, and it is also beautiful. Seven decades later Mark Doty summarises the crucifying freedom of the human condition in an image with no need to spell out its provenance:

Never any beauty

greater than the body hung in the ceaseless wind of time

and repeating in that current its stream of postures,

skin perpetually lit from within

as if by its own failure.[[208]](#footnote-208)

The aestheticization of the crucifixion-as-flight-as-freedom motif, the bloodlessness of the cross, is plain to see. The image hints at a kind of existential violence, but it is not *of* violence: Doty shows us a thoroughly secularised crucifixion, in which beauty becomes the dominant note. Hughes, for his part, understood this aspect of the motif. Writing about Leonard Baskin’s prints in ‘The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly’, an essay abounding with references to Christ and his syncretic guises, he observes, ‘[Baskin’s] images bear witness to the “horror” within the created “glory”’, but ‘Above all, and before anything else, they are beautiful’ (*WP* 89).

We return to ‘Hawk in the Rain’. Is it another rose, another bloodless repetition? The final line imagines the Christ-hawk’s ‘heart’s blood’ mixing into the earth, which suggests that Hughes understands the metaphysical truth-telling at stake. We can likewise understand Hughes’s insistence that it is a master-fulcrum *of violence* where the hawk hangs still as an anxiety over the potential bloodlessness of his image. Few readers would doubt the bloodiness of Hughes’s world, but his explicitness on this point, the overt rhetoric of ‘violence’ and ‘heart’s blood’, especially in a poem with such crucifixional undertones, demonstrates his need to be understood on this crucial point. The detail of the heart anticipates ‘Truth Kills Everybody’ from *Crow* (*CP* 253), in which ‘Christ’s hot pounding heart’ is the penultimate form of Proteus’ escalating transformations, one step away from the apparently final truth, ‘The earth, shrunk to the size of a hand grenade’. In both poems the symbol emphasises the material or biological housing of religious mystery, and the *Crow* line in particular, though spoken with that protagonist’s usual irreverence, illustrates how Hughes relies upon the integrity of Christian referents. If the reference to Christ’s pounding heart is read as a mere joke or insult the mounting momentum is broken and the poem becomes purposeless. But the line no more insults Christ than the next line insults the earth. If it is an image which the comfortable Christian wishes on some level to flee, then Hughes has only fulfilled Moltmann’s call for a truer understanding of what happened on Golgotha.

Wherever we see a bird of prey hunting across a Hughes poem, references to the crucifixion, subtle or overt, are often quick to follow. In ‘The Owl Flower’ the convergence of owl and prey takes place ‘In the maelstrom’s eye, / In the core of the brimming heaven-blossom’ (*CP* 438), repeating the image of the divine storm of Golgotha, of Job, and of the muddy walker’s fixation. In ‘And the Falcon came’ the hunting raptor presents ‘The talons / Of a first, last, single blow / Of grasping complete the crux of rays’ (*CP* 445): another turn on the Cross, the fulcrum of violence, the maelstrom’s eye, just as in ‘A Sparrohawk’ the hawk’s eyes are ‘Still wired direct / To the nuclear core’ (*CP* 747).

Hughes is at his most explicit in this vein in ‘The Risen’, of whose triumphant resurrected raptor he writes, ‘When he soars, his shape // Is a cross, eaten by light, / On the Creator’s face’ (*CP* 439). Easy to see with the mind’s eye but difficult to transpose out of poetry, this confrontational image seems to demand a metaphysical interpretation which it refuses to fully endorse. Moulin reads ‘The Risen’ as one in a family of ‘revised’ or ‘positive crucifixion poem[s]’ which is at the same time an instance of Hughes’s overall anti-Christian polemic, the ‘dissolution of the Christian myth of the crucifixion’, in which ‘Hopkins’ aviary symbol of the Cross is being burnt out’.[[209]](#footnote-209) The positivity Moulin finds in the poem is linked to the destruction of the Christian symbol. My own attempt at a reading begins with the word ‘eaten’: does it function only visually, or is it trying to do ethical work in the poem? Does it imply a valuation of the Cross, either negative (so the light attacks it) or positive (so the light reclaims it)? Of course, the Cross is a complicated symbol even in purely Christian terms, implying the unity of suffering and divinity, ultimate wretchedness and ultimate blessedness. It is the symbol both of our transgression and of that transgression’s erasure. Our estimation of these lines – and this is only one image of apparent triumph in ‘The Risen’ among many – must take into account the tone of the whole poem, indeed the whole sequence.

‘The Risen’ is the final proper poem (omitting the brief ‘Finale’) of *Cave Birds*, a sequence tonally much at odds with the *Crow* project whose baton it appears to take up. *Crow* is a book defined by irony: an attempt to locate beauty as the negative space in a language of ugliness, an attempt to establish the eternity of God by parading ‘God’ around as a petty buffoon, an attempt to hymn the possibilities of humanity by insulting and degrading us at every opportunity, and, many critics argue, an attempt to mourn Sylvia Plath by writing a book which appears to do nothing of the sort. If *Crow* is essentially ironic, *Cave Birds* is essentially hyperbolic – notwithstanding a degree of irony residing in the performative aspect of this hyperbole. What it appears to say is what it actually says, only with a complicated mise-en-scene of alchemy and myth, and in a heavily clotted language which threatens to obscure the essentially psychological plot. The most familiar example of Hughes’s approach to these poems, and one of the most successful, is ‘Bride and Groom Lie Hidden for Three Days’ (*CP* 437), in which the joy of sex is amplified and made new by an unfolding conceit of mechanical assembly which, though certainly inventive and unexpected, never leaves us to question the sincerity of the expression of that joy. *Cave Birds* as a whole partakes of this hyperbole, this amplified sincerity. So when we read that the protagonist is a cross eaten by light on the Creator’s face, we must allow these images to point unironically towards their antecedents. The protagonist is himself a symbol of the unity of God and humanity, whose creaturely burden is lessened by a moment of rapture, as he becomes aware of the immanence of God and of his own sense of audience before the ground of his being. The poem flings out the symbols of Christ’s death and resurrection with hyperbolic abandon, but their essential meaning is never ironised or undercut. Moulin is right that the eating of the cross by light anticipates the cross’s dissolution, but this seems to me, if anything, almost painfully conventional in a Christian sense. The erasure of the cross in the light of God can only mean the end to humanity’s state of transgression, the defeat of the symbol of our separation from God. As Barth reminds his readers, ‘Jesus Christ […] had to suffer, not from the imperfection of the creaturely world, not from any pattern in nature, but from men and from their attitude to [God]’[[210]](#footnote-210) – just as Hughes says in his letter to Merchant that it is ‘our own culture’ which ‘tortures’, ‘sacrifices’ and ‘crucifies’ the ‘real thing’ in humanity, by which Hughes means our divine content. The dissolution – literally the consummation – of the cross in ‘The Risen’ implies the correction of this faulty culture through the psychological progress allegorised in the *Cave Birds* sequence as a whole. The poem does not present the ‘dissolution of the Christian myth of the crucifixion’, but its fulfilment.

Robinson Jeffers’s poem ‘Hurt Hawks’, from his 1928 collection *Cawdor and Other Poems*, makes an illuminating comparison for our discussion. In many ways more Hughesian than Hughes, the craggy Californian writes about having to put down an injured red-tailed hawk.

We had fed him six weeks, I gave him freedom,

He wandered over the foreland hill and returned in the evening, asking for death,

Not like a beggar, still eyed with the old

Implacable arrogance. I gave him the lead gift in the twilight. What fell was relaxed,

Owl-downy, soft feminine feathers; but what

Soared: the fierce rush: the night-herons by the flooded river cried fear at its rising

Before it was quite unsheathed from reality.[[211]](#footnote-211)

Arthur B. Coffin suggests that the ‘burden’ of this and similar Jeffers poems ‘is that Western civilization is moving toward decay, that Pauline Christianity aids and abets the process by fostering weakness in men, and that only superior men who have achieved self-mastery can hope to survive the collapse of society to build still another.’[[212]](#footnote-212) Jeffers’s debt to Nietzsche for such a burden is obvious, as Coffin acknowledges. But I quote the passage particularly to note the intense dualism of its closing lines: it is not the hawk’s body that rises and soars, but something immaterial, a ‘fierce rush’ which departs from the crumple of bones and feathers, and even this spirit is quickly vanished and no longer real. Perhaps this brief vision of a rising spirit may be credited to a muted Christian sensibility (though it could as easily be sourced from Native American spirituality), but in any case the poem refuses to engage in anything like the Pauline consolations of grace and salvation. By comparison, the raptor of Hughes’s ‘The Risen’ is simultaneously body and spirit, possessing a physical ‘shape’ which is also a theological calling card, foregrounding divine interaction. Whereas the death of Jeffers’s hawk results in only a brief out-rushing of energy of uncertain significance, the trials of Hughes’s raptor represents concrete progress toward self-actualisation, rendered in blatantly physical metaphor:

On his lens

Each atom engraves with a diamond.

In the wind-fondled crucible of his splendour

The dirt becomes God. (*CP* 440)

Note too how the creature pulls the world with it toward perfection, as that world’s image lands on the lens of the protagonist’s eye. Like the wodwo, the newly risen, newly self-possessed raptor is the exact centre. This self-actualisation, this destiny or *telos*, implies closeness to and congruency with the source of freedom – that is, with God. Hence, the bird is a figure consumed by the light of ‘the Creator’. Jeffers takes his consolations in the hard-hearted and thoroughly Nietzschean testing of one’s manly self in a recently godless world, but Hughes proceeds differently. The freedom he seeks to articulate through his poetry requires the crucifixion as a figurative term.

This term appears with increasing clarity as Hughes’s career proceeds. From its intertextual shadow-presence in ‘The Hawk in the Rain’, a reader moves through an array of early poems of the nonhuman world in which self-actualisation and freedom exhibits as self-centred suffering. We read of the bullfrog ‘Disgorging your gouts of darkness like a wounded god’ (*CP* 83), the ‘perfect / Pike in all parts […] stunned by their own grandeur’ (*CP* 84), the snowdrop ‘pursu[ing] her ends, / Brutal’ as a season of death, ‘Her pale head heavy as metal’ (*CP* 86), to arrive at *Wodwo*’s ‘Gnat Psalm’ (*CP* 181-2), a key transitional poem in which biblical and spiritual referents precipitate out of the solution maintained in the earlier pieces. The slow appearance of these grains of reference, drifting down as it were out of the air and into the speaker’s up-thrust hands, suggests an organic revelation, a transcendental access to the world of numinous truth. The frailty and ephemerality of the tiny gnats makes them an endearing medium for what Roberts calls the poem’s ‘humorous but completely unironic quality of religious affirmation’.[[213]](#footnote-213) Theirs is a joyous revelation, though at first a scrabbled one, the gnats ‘Scribbling on the air […] Scrambling their crazy lexicon, / Shuffling their dumb Cabala’, and the isolation of the gnats’ ‘Singing’ and ‘Dancing’ into one-word lines emphasises the speaker’s rapt attention and seeming preference for the form over the content of the gnats’ message. When the speaker does begin to translate the revelation of the dancing of the gnats it is not the vision of untroubled unity with creation we might expect of such simple creatures. In the fifth stanza they assert themselves in opposition to the physical chaos around them: ‘the cycles of the universe are no matter’ to the gnats, who are ‘not afraid of the sun’ and remain ‘At large in the nothing’. On first glance the gnats appear to have succumbed to the pitfall of purchasing transcendence at the price of accepting dualistic estrangement, for it can never be true of physical creatures that the cycles of the universe are ‘no matter’ – whether this means ‘of no importance’ or ‘literally immaterial’. But Scigaj offers a non-dualistic reading of ‘Gnat Psalm’, explaining the poem’s invocation of ‘the nothing’ as the ‘tendency of Zen to express the transcendence of dualistic thinking through expressions of negations’[[214]](#footnote-214). Scigaj argues that the gnats’ ‘brimming over’ makes possible a ‘unitive experience’:

The monism behind this overspill of the subjective onto the objective is what negates the objective universe into “no matter” and creates a sea of “nothing.” […] According to Suzuki, what is accomplished by such negating is a transcendent, godly affirmation of life, for whereas temporality is always becoming, changing or negating itself moment by moment, “The eternal must be an absolute affirmation which our limited understanding defines in negative terms.”

Scigaj’s Eastern commentary invites us to view this quality of nothingness as a positive, a fullness so full that language balks at the attempt to define or describe it – ‘Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is’, as Stevens has it in one of his most famous lines.[[215]](#footnote-215) We can then trace this fullness back through the human projection implicit in the presentation of the poem, so Hughes’s speaker partakes of this ‘godly affirmation’.

Whether we view the affirmations of the fifth stanza as dualistically or monistically geared, we are left with a sense of materiality and temporality transcended, an echo of the rained-upon hawk’s stillness and poise. Hughes allowed the hawk’s poise as an emblem of self-possession on the threshold of death, but here he forces the issue: the crucifixion is invoked, and the results observed. It is, to be sure, as cheerful a vision of the crucifixion as we are ever likely to find outside a Monty Python film, as the gnats sing ‘That they are the nails / In the dancing hands and feet of the gnat-god’. This leads pointedly to a sympathetic awareness of the ‘suffering’ of creation, both living and non-living, and on to scenes of startling physical decay: ‘The wind’s dance, the death-dance […] And the cow dung villages huddling to dust.’ Yet the gnats, in the wake of their gnat-god crucifixion, believe they have ‘outleaped’ such despair, letting them hang ‘a little above the claws of the grass’.

The poem’s improvisatory manner may try to demur from close reading, but we can at least see how the incorporation of the crucifixion acts to check the initial existentialism, which borders on a kind of species-level solipsism, a parody of human exceptionalism. The revelation of the crucifixion of the gnat-god, in which the gnats themselves are complicit, awakens an awareness of suffering which reaches beyond the gnats’ own existence, and which excites their human observer to a final frenzy of self-deprecating spiritual affirmation. Yet Hughes approaches the crucifixion hesitantly, with a thread of humour like a get-out clause. The tiny scale of these minims of life brings a slight irony, a ridiculousness that such itty-bitty creatures should strike such bold theological poses. The crucifixion reference marks a clear shift in the poem’s trajectory, yet it has the air of a whim, as though the cross were just one more figure caught up in the indiscriminate sweep of the poet’s net. This humour and irony seemingly make the topic palatable for Hughes, whose aversion to cultural Christianity might otherwise struggle to commit to the metaphysical ideas on offer under the glare of such explicit reference. In this way, ‘Gnat Psalm’ anticipates the irony and eclecticism of the *Crow* project.

## 4.3: Crow and the cross

The treatments of the cross in ‘Hawk in the Rain’ and ‘Gnat Psalm’, in spite of the boldness of the latter’s confrontation, remain roses, incorporations of the crucifixion into the consolations of culture. ‘Gnat Psalm’ is a particularly intoxicating poem, but all that singing and dancing around the crucified gnat-god raises questions about the poem’s honesty. The cross symbolises the bottom-line estrangement and distress of the human condition, our alienation from the divine within us; in different Hughesian terms, it represents the transgressive state of the evolved modern human. To disguise this estrangement and transgression under a layer of consolation is to add another rose to the cross. Yeats confronts this dilemma in his poem ‘To the Rose Upon the Rood of Time’, the italicised, epigrammatic opening poem of *The Rose*. The rood or cross of time refers to our mortality, our situatedness within time, our utter contingency. The rose, as Yeats’s published notes indicate, has both Celtic and Christian connections,[[216]](#footnote-216) and the speaker asks repeatedly for the rose to return. That is, he wants to believe a little longer in the comforting stories with which we dress our existential plight:

*Come near, come near, come near—Ah, leave me still*

*A little space for the rose-breath to fill!*

*Lest I no more hear common things that crave;*

*The weak worm hiding down in its small cave,*

*The field-mouse running by me in the grass,*

*And heavy mortal hopes that toil and pass*[[217]](#footnote-217)

Bereft of the imaginative consolations the rose makes possible, Yeats’s speaker foresees the necessity to ‘*seek alone to hear the strange things said / By God to the bright hearts of those long dead, / And learn to chaunt a tongue men do not know.*’ The speech of such a roseless tongue would be by definition the opposite of beautiful, the opposite of nostalgic.

So we arrive upon the *Crow* project, Hughes’s earliest designs for which are radically opposed to both beauty and cultural attachment:

The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of a style […] 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[.] [[218]](#footnote-218)

[M]y main concern was to produce something with the minimum cultural accretions of the museum sort—something autochthonous & complete in itself, as it might be invented after the holocaust & demolition of all libraries, where essential things spring again—if at all—only from their seeds in nature[.] (*LTH* 339)

Hughes’s challenge to himself in *Crow* is to dispense with the rose so long pinned to the rood, and still to hear the worm, the running mice and human hope. Yet at the same time Crow does seek alone, and he hears strange things.

The significance of crows to Native American mythology and Trickster literature, and Hughes’s reliance upon and transformation of these sources, has been explored by other critics, especially Hirschberg. But it is worth noting that Hughes here and there makes a point of associating crows with Christian culture in a manner subversive though not purely destructive.

The Crow lifts a claw –

A crucifix

Of burnt matchsticks. (*CPC* 27)

The Crow declares himself ‘the Priest’, and his feathers are ‘like a burnt bible’. This is the poem ‘Crow’ from *The Cat and the Cuckoo* (1987) – a children’s book. Also written for children, or at least ‘within hearing’ of children, are the following lines from ‘Leaves’, from *Season Songs* (1975):

Who’ll be their parson?

Me, says the Crow, for it is well-known

I study the bible right down to the bone. (*CPC* 221)

The delicious wit of these lines leaves us spinning through a range of possible interpretations. Is the bible merely a dead thing, to be discarded? Is it part of a natural system? Does it provide food? Cleaning something to its bones is an apt figure for shedding cultural accretions, and calls to mind Eliot’s uncovering of the cross. In both of these poems Hughes suggests that his crows have in a sense digested the heart of Christianity – they have absorbed it, become it, and are ready now to speak on its behalf – speaking, of course, as crows speak.

The *Crow* project partakes of a unifying narative arc, only loosely implied in the poems though usefully reconstructed by Sagar in *The Laughter of Foxes,* in which God’s nightmare mocks him for the failure of creation, humanity in particular.*[[219]](#footnote-219)* God finally challenges the nightmare voice to do better, at which the voice dives to earth and begets Crow. The central Faber collection takes its time in getting to the crucifixion, but a polemical engagement with the Bible sounds in the opening lines of the opening poem, ‘Two Legends’: ‘Black was the without eye / Black the within tongue’ (*CP* 217). That is, black was what had not yet been seen; black was what had not yet been said. The poem presents an existentially inflected creation story, in which the universe will come into being only with the birth of a subjective agent, something with an eye and a tongue. Compare Genesis 1:2: ‘And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters’. The biblical text appears to establish the objective reality of the universe prior to the arrival of anything like a subjectivising mind – that is, humanity. We can, however, suggest that God acts as subject, creating through apprehension, moving on the face of the dark water very much like Crow first looking upon ‘the without eye’. Crow’s emergence in this subtly intertextual moment reframes the opening of Genesis as just another subjective story among an infinity of possibilities. This subjective autonomy is underscored again as the poem closes with an image of the hatchling Crow as ‘a black rainbow / Bent in emptiness / over emptiness // But flying’. The familiar symbol from Genesis 9:13 – ‘I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a token of a covenant between me and the earth’ – is likewise redrawn as a crowish emblem of existential freedom. Crow has no covenant, no connection, with God, only with his own self. As discussed above, this sort of freedom is a troubling place in which to reside, and is here a point of departure, not conclusion; Crow, too, is born in a state of estrangement. His need for a radically religious, re-connecting education is felt in the ‘But’ of ‘But flying’, which sets Crow’s status of black rainbow in a vacant world in opposition to the optimism and energy of ‘flying’.

‘Lineage’, the second of the main sequence *Crow* poems, mocks the biblical form while making a few important points along the way. ‘In the beginning was Scream / Who begat Blood’ (*CP* 218). Remember this: the centre of Crow’s cosmology is a *scream*. We can also note how far down the lineage we find God, right near the bottom, begotten by Mary and begetting in turn only Never and Crow. This is the God of ecclesiastical history, the ‘corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion’, a Muppet of projected psychological content. The repeated ‘Never’s demonstrate a vehement rejection of this false cultural God, a rejection which breaks the pattern of the lineage and brings the stanza to a close. Only then, in a new beginning, is Crow begat, the repetitious form suddenly giving way to ‘a beautifully concise evocation of an actual nestling’,[[220]](#footnote-220) as Roberts says. But it is worth noting that the nestling is introduced ‘Screaming for Blood’, repeating the earliest generations of his lineage. That is, his physical demands reflect his metaphysical constitution. ‘Two Legends’ and ‘Lineage’ both present Crow as a character whose subjectivity gestures toward a larger cosmological situation, suggesting occult lines of communication between creature and creator.

Tales of Crow’s birth continue with ‘Examination at the Womb-door’, the third poem of the Faber sequence, in which Crow passes the examination by finally declaring himself stronger than death. He is not stronger than death merely by dint of being alive: ‘Who is stronger than life?’ asks the examiner, and the answer comes: ‘*Death*’ (*CP* 219). This much would seem an accepted Hughesian truth – recall Sagar’s reference to the ‘doomed battle of vitality against death’, a phrase adapted from one of Hughes’s own remarks.[[221]](#footnote-221) ‘Vitality’ provides an apt metonym for the union of ‘hope’, ‘the will’, ‘love’ and ‘life’, all of which Crow admits as weaker than death as the poem’s repeating structure nears its Crow-affirming climax. Every aspect of Crow, from his ‘scrawny little feet’ to his very hope, is owned and mastered by death. Wherefore then this final assertion of Crow’s strength over death? We might locate it in the ‘unkillable, biological optimism’ (*WP* 239) which Hughes relates to Trickster literature – the determination to make a good show of life in spite of the inevitability of death, demonstrating Trickster’s ‘refusal to be daunted by the opposition’. This is easily translated into a Christian idiom, by way of Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians:

O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:55-57)

Translating verse 56 into Hughes’s lapsarian reading of the human condition, ‘the law’ is a creature’s blissful fulfilment of its natural self-actualisation, and ‘sin’ is our outcast status relative to this law, our transgressive evolution as modern humans. We feel the sting of being lapsed creatures because we are aware of the absent bliss of perfect self-actualisation and divine congruence. Paul’s solution to our lapsarian dilemma is Christ, of course, and the extent to which the Christological template forms a part of Crow’s or Hughes’s solution is already becoming aparent.

First, let’s deepen our sense of Hughes’s purpose for ‘Examination at the Womb-door’ by taking a look at a poem it invokes, Eliot’s ‘Marina’. Whereas ‘Examination’ is a poem of birth, ‘Marina’ is a poem of death, or of a movement toward death, the poem of an old man sorting the fragments of his memory. The implied speaker is Pericles, the eponymous hero of Shakespeare’s late play. In the play, Pericles believes that his wife Thaisa dies in childbirth and that their daughter Marina, whom he gives over to adoption, also later dies. He is mistaken on both counts, and the drama ends with jubilant reunion. The play supplies Eliot’s poem with only a loose emotional context, and even read in complete ignorance of the source material, ‘Marina’ is a beautiful and affecting piece of writing. Eliot’s second stanza uses a repeating pattern echoed in ‘Examination at the Womb-door’.

Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning

Death

Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird, meaning

Death[[222]](#footnote-222)

I follow Denis Donoghue in identifying these and two further figures as ‘the living death of four of the deadly sins’[[223]](#footnote-223). They are not Wittgenstein’s death-not-in-life, nor death as a doorway, but reminders of the strength of death even within the living world, as Eliot’s very material figures of speech suggest. These various deaths and those who die them are all ‘become unsubstantial, reduced by a wind, / A breath of pine, and the woodsong fog / By this grace dissolved in place’, as the speaker drifts from life. The intertextual link between Eliot’s and Hughes’s poem is made fast as the speaker concentrates on a certain apparition, perhaps Marina’s: ‘What is this face, less clear and clearer / The pulse in the arm, less strong and stronger – / Given or lent?’ Hughes’s poem mimics this, wittily enough, with ‘Given, taken, or held pending trial? *Held*’. Both lines imply uncertainty in the status of a physical body; Eliot’s Pericles wonders about the reality and temporality of the face he sees, while Crow admits to the dispossession of even his own body. Both poems, in their different ways, show life ceded, piece by piece, to the strength of death. Yet hope remains: in ‘The Poetic Self’ Hughes names ‘Marina’ as one of the poems attending the ‘harrowing rebirth’ of ‘the Christ soul’ dramatised across Eliot’s verse (*WP* 289).

Turning to Hughes’s commentary on *Pericles* in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, the legalistic joke about Crow being ‘held pending trial’ finds a more substantial context in Hughes’s account of Pericles’s suffering.

The basic accidents that befall him are […] suggestive (on stage immensely suggestive) of inscrutable divine laws in operation, a justice of ordeals, trials and eventual rewards, before which his baffled innocence is helpless, and to which at each point he merely submits. (*SGCB* 348)

Notwithstanding this baffled innocence, Pericles is at the same time ‘on a deeper level […] of course truly guilty’. *Pericles* is the story ‘of a man being mythically punished, transformed and redeemed, on account of a crime and a guilt that (like Oedipus’s) never enters his awareness’. Such guilt is existential rather than moral, the consequence of ‘inscrutable divine laws’ rather than culpable intention, by which I mean to suggest that it has the quality of original sin, a given of the human lot more than a transgression over which we as individuals have any choice. Hughes summarises:

Having rejected the Goddess, and therefore incurred the guilt, Pericles is the cause of the apparent death of his beloved (his wife and new-born daughter: alias his own soul). And that is the mythic crime for which he will be punished in real terms, and from which his wife and daughter, as if resurrected, will redeem him in reunited love.

Pericles’s reunion with Marina is a reunion *with his own soul*. Eliot’s speaker likewise pleads on behalf of his daughter in terms which suggest a transaction, with his death contributing somehow to the continuation of her life: ‘let me / Resign my life for this life, my speech for that unspoken, / The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the new ships’. Death is claiming the man, yet losing its final authority. In threading the story of Crow’s emergence from the womb-door via Eliot’s catalysing poem to Shakespeare’s gruelling but finally redemptive tale, Hughes posits an optimistic outcome for Crow’s trial, pending which death continues to hold sway. The terms of this equation reduce to a familiar formula: our lapsarian condition can only be overcome by reconciliation with the estranged or suppressed divine content within ourselves.

One wonders what Eliot would have made of all this, especially his poem’s intertextual kidnapping by such a character as Crow. (Eliot passed away in 1965; *Crow* was published in 1970.) Of course, mockery from Crow can be read as real esteem, and in prose Hughes is explicit in his admiration for the ‘near uniqueness’ of certain qualities of Eliot’s verse:

Contingent struggle, expedient means, exuberant freedom from all sacred control, the fluidity of extempore solutions, for almost all poets these are the stuff of invention. Eliot eschews them utterly. His near-uniqueness in this particular appears even more sharply in the relationship between his poetry and certain passages of the King James Bible. […] The sacred inevitability, that radiant, incantatory wholeness and finality, which is the glory of the King James translation, is a language inspired by profound unbroken mythical/religious feeling, untainted by literary motive or secular fantasy, and presented as an offering to God, if within hearing of man. (*WP* 287)

It is always difficult to read Hughes’s commentary on the writers he most admires without seeking insight into his own poetic method. In this case, ‘inevitability’, ‘wholeness’ and ‘finality’ are words with a strong teleological bent: qualities which promote language from mere literary tools free of ‘sacred control’ into purposeful pointers to a prelapsarian reality, reflecting a rightness, a teleological *ought*ness. Weighing up Wallace Stevens against John Crowe Ransom in a 1957 letter to Daniel Huws, Hughes offers the southern agrarian similar compliments, here with a key suggestion of the as-if-physical nature of Crowe-Ransom’s language:

Obviously, I think, people like Wallace Stevens house their demon where the eye-nerve enters – so that everything is arbitrary & colourful & partial & questionable. Whereas Wyatt & Crowe-Ransome [sic] house theirs where the ear enters – so that in them everything is inevitable & final & bottomless & unquestionable as the response of glands or the harmony of moving muscles. (*LTH* 96-7)

Again we see the anti-modernist streak in Hughes, the disdain for ‘literary motive’ and ‘secular fantasy’, the crediting of ‘final’, ‘inevitable’ truth, truth as an object in the world. The materiality of language is further emphasised in his comments on *Orghast*,his experimental theatrical work of the early 1970s:

The deeper into language one goes, the less visual/conceptual its imagery, and the more audial/visceral/muscular its system of tensions . . . the deeper into language one goes, the more dominated it becomes by purely musical modes, and the more dramatic it becomes – the more unified with total states of being and with the expressiveness of physical action.[[224]](#footnote-224)

Gifford and Roberts, pursuing a parallel insight that in Hughes’s work ‘the world of spirits and the material world are the same[,] that the reality “beyond” our life whose beckoning prompts religious devotion and theology is that of material objects and processes’, go on to quote Mircea Eliade on the revelatory quality of matter: ‘The hardness, ruggedness and permanence of matter was in itself a hierophany in the religious consciousness of the primitive’.[[225]](#footnote-225) Just as communication may approach a material state, materiality may approach a communicative state. A comment by Hughes in ‘Myth and Education’ brings this unity-seeking discourse to a striking point. ‘The story of Christ’, he writes, ‘like any other genuine story, [is] irreducible, a lump of the world, like the body of a new-born child’ (*WP* 141-2). In all of this, Hughes places the highest possible value on sincerity and authenticity. The revelatory power of Eliot’s and Crowe Ransom’s verse, the King James Bible and the story of Christ is not, for Hughes, a matter of artfulness and guile, not of fantasy and colour, not of literariness and arbitrariness. They speak with a natural, physical authority, the unquestionable licence of glands and muscles. From the early letter to his friend, written when Hughes was twenty-six, to the Eliot tribute, written when fifty-eight, this value system appears unchanged.

And yet *Crow*’s shout-out to Eliot remains blatantly and confrontationally irreverent. The whole *Crow* project is anything but ‘final’ and ‘unquestionable’. In one sense, *Crow* is not final because it was never properly finished, but abandoned following the deaths of Assia and Shura Wevill (*LTH* 304). Sagar has consistently argued that an awareness of the unwritten, uplifting final third of the *Crow* saga is essential to a full appreciation of the published book,[[226]](#footnote-226) while Roberts has counter-argued that this perspective misses the point: the book’s riotous energy is functionally opposed to and ultimately diminished by any kind of narrative shoehorning.[[227]](#footnote-227) However it came about, the fragmentary presentation of the *Crow* project effectively writes off the values of wholeness and finality, and this fractured and fractious form reflects an equally fractious style. Crow’s songs revel in their ‘exuberant freedom from all sacred control’. This sacrilegious exuberance has led critics to read *Crow*, always weakly, I feel, as anti-Christian – most prominently Moulin, who argues that in *Crow* Hughes’s poetic voice ‘is now pitting all its poetic power against the Christian God.’ ‘“Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mathew 6.24)’ writes Moulin. ‘Neither can you serve Christ and the Goddess.’[[228]](#footnote-228) Moulin’s position here is understandable but, I believe, mistaken. The entire burden of this chapter is that Christ, like the Goddess, is a unitive figure invoked by Hughes to bring his readers to a more complete understanding of the estranged human condition. The irreverence of *Crow* allows Hughes to write *against* his authorial context, the Western world in which the death of God is old news and the Cold War perpetually threatens a very secular armageddon – and to write against it *from within*. Hence the all-consuming irony of the style, its tendency to affirm through insult and delineate through the use of negative space.

Great believers are always reckoned infidels, impracticable, fantastic, atheistic, and really men of no account. The spiritualist finds himself driven to express his faith by a series of skepticisms.[[229]](#footnote-229)

Emerson published these lines in 1850. How much less welcome were belief and spirituality a hundred years later in the world of Western letters! *Crow* is not ‘an offering to God, if within hearing of man’, but an offering to an audience of postmodern sceptics – though one, as we have already seen, within hearing of the King James Bible and Eliot’s verse, both sacred vessels of ‘that radiant, incantatory wholeness’ Hughes rated so highly.

One of the most striking examples of *Crow*’s ironic rewritings (though not repurposings) of sacred material is the next poem in the Faber sequence, ‘Crow and Mama’ (*CP* 219-20). Scigaj reads the poem as satirising ‘the history of technological progress in the West, from the birth of the automobile to the moon landings, as an elaborate flight from nature’, revealing ‘Crow’s inability to accommodate himself to the pain involved in natural processes of growth’ such as exist in an ‘organic whole’.[[230]](#footnote-230) This reading, agreeable as far as it goes, feels to me constrained by preconceptions of what a Hughes poem ought to be about. Three of Crow’s four initial interactions with his mother are emotional, reflecting inner states: he ‘crie[s]’, ‘laugh[s]’ and ‘burst[s] out in a rage’; he also tries a few childlike steps. Only half of these, crying and bursting with rage, suggest a response to the ‘pain’ of living and growing. And in any case the distress caused by all of these childlike activities is felt by the mother, not Crow, so I am unconvinced that the poem depicts Crow’s inability to accommodate creaturely pain. I read this poem as Crow’s first serious discussion of God itself – not God so-called, the buffoon deity who makes frequent appearances in the book, but God as the divine ground of being – for of course the parental nickname ‘Mama’ is no more or less fitting a tag for the divine than the Christian ‘Father’. As an experiment, read the opening stanzas substituting ‘God’ wherever you see ‘his mother’ or a female pronoun. You end up with a vivid statement of the troubled relationship between humanity and the Christian God, right down to the events on Golgotha: ‘When he burst out in a rage / [God] fell back with an awful gash and a fearful cry.’

The poem itself invites such an experiment, for it clearly echoes Psalm 139:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?

If I ascend into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there.

If I take the wings of morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;

Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. (Psalm 139:7-10)

These lines provide a template for the remainder of ‘Crow and Mama’, in which Crow’s cartoonish attempts to escape his creator only reinforce the impossibility of such escape. Tillich takes this psalm as his text for a sermon titled ‘The escape from God’, picking up on exactly the technological distractions which delude Crow into his fantasies of autonomy, and which Scigaj reads as the target of the poem’s satire.

To fly to the ends of the earth would not be to escape from God. Our technical civilization attempts just that, in order to be liberated from the knowledge that it lacks a centre of life and meaning. The modern way to flee from God is to rush ahead and ahead, as quickly as the beams before sunrise, to conquer more and more space in every direction, in every humanly possible way.[[231]](#footnote-231)

But ‘Crow and Mama’ is not only a satire on our faith in technological conquest. After the first four stanzas of transgression, and before Crow’s attempted escape gets underway, a curious crisis point is reached: ‘When he stopped she closed on him like a book / On a bookmark, he had to get going.’ Not like a book on a leaf, or a book on a bug, but a book on a bookmark. Of course, the purpose of a bookmark is fulfilled in a book. A bookmark by itself may be free to do certain things, but only inside a book is it free to *be* a bookmark in any meaningful way. If Hughes had wanted an image of genuinely stifled existence, he could have done much better than this. So what did Hughes mean in presenting Crow’s flight as triggered by the feeling of a bookmark in a book? Why should Crow seek escape from fulfilment? It must have something to do with the earlier lines, when Crow’s emotional outbursts, his cries and laughter and rage, cause such distress to his creator. These are not malicious transgressions nor creaturely trials, but the unguarded emotional outpourings of a child. They are tantrums – tantrums of joy, tantrums of need. They are embarrassing. To be as fulfilled within his creator as a bookmark within a book would involve an acknowledgement of his status as creature, his tantrums and weaknesses and the embarrassment of first steps, and such naked self-revelation is difficult to bear.

Crow’s flight from his mother repeats the protest theme of ‘Logos’, except now, in the *Crow* poem, we see how mistaken this protest is. As Tillich observes, ‘A god whom we can easily bear, a god from whom we do not have to hide, a god whom we do not hate in moments, a god whose destruction we never desire, is not God at all, and has no reality’.[[232]](#footnote-232) The protest against a god whose presence feels like a limitation on the self (‘Logos’) and an unbearable self-revelation for which that god appears to suffer (‘Crow and Mama’) is taken up by Stevens in section III of ‘Esthétique du Mal’, with rather more maturity than the metaphysically naïve voice dramatised in ‘Logos’, though still an unwillingness to admit the impossibility of escape, an impossibility ‘Crow and Mama’ emphatically illustrates. ‘The fault’, says Stevens, meaning our inability to bear suffering,

lies with an over-human god,

Who by sympathy has made himself a man

And is not to be distinguished, when we cry

Because we suffer, our oldest parent […]

If only he would not pity us so much,

Weaken our fate, relieve us of woe both great

And small, a constant fellow of destiny,

A too, too human god, self-pity’s kin

And uncourageous genesis . . . [[233]](#footnote-233)

The speaker wishes to be free of the constant fellowship of God yet keep hold of his destiny, rather like a bookmark fleeing a book yet somehow remaining a bookmark. Stevens’ rhetoric makes a courageous show of the desire, but the passage does not finally convince, dependent as it is on six speculative ‘as if’s. ‘Esthétique du Mal’ echoes the words of the Ugliest Man in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*: ‘His pity knew no shame: he crept into my dirtiest corners. This most curious, most over-importunate, over-compassionate god had to die.’[[234]](#footnote-234) The Ugliest Man objects to God not on rational or even theological grounds, but because of the discomfort of being seen as he is: ‘He always saw *me*: I desired to take revenge on such a witness – or cease to live myself.’ Looking past the deicidal hyperbole, we see just the same sentiment in the opening lines of Psalm 139:

O Lord, thou hast searched me, and known me.

Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off.

Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways.

For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether. (Psalm 139:1-4)

The God who compasses a creature as profoundly as a book compasses a bookmark, who in pity and sympathy has joined herself to her creature so that his cries scorch her ear – the God of Christianity whose involvement is epitomised in the self-sacrificing figure of the crucified Christ – is a natural object of derision and rejection precisely because of the difficulty and pain of self-revelation and self-actualisation. ‘The Ugliest Man’, says Tillich, ‘is a symbol of the ugliness in each one of us, and the symbol of our will to hide at least something from God and from ourselves.’[[235]](#footnote-235) Crow’s flight from his mother is a flight from self-actualisation, a flight from centredness and teleological fulfilment. Crow can no more flee his creator than flee himself, but the attempt to escape teaches a valuable lesson, for ‘it is safe to say that a man who has never tried to flee God has never experienced the God who is really God’[[236]](#footnote-236) – as opposed to the God so-called with whom Crow has no objection to passing the time. ‘Crow and Mama’, however cartoonish and flippant in its manner, establishes, in that very crowy way, the eternity of God.

Summarising the difficulty in admitting this eternity and simultaneously squaring to the dark content of one’s innermost self, Tillich writes,

We are known in a depth of darkness through which we ourselves do not even dare to look. And at the same time, we are seen in a height of a fullness which surpasses our highest vision. That infinite tension is the atmosphere in which religion lives. In that tension Luther conquered his hatred for God, when he discovered in Christ the Crucified the perfect symbol for our human situation.[[237]](#footnote-237)

This leads us to ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’ (*CP* 244), a poem which begins in an atmosphere of infinite tension, with God and man turning from each other in disgust, and ends with the same Christological solution Tillich attributes to Luther. If Hughes’s earliest poems keep the crucifixion submerged in a creaturely world of hawks and hills, and ‘Gnat Psalm’ marks its tentative appearance as overt referent, ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’ dashes headlong into the theological arena, where the cross looms large, literal and supremely ugly. Crow nails Heaven to earth, and they ‘creaked at the joint / Which became gangrenous and stank’. Such language plays easily into the caricature of Hughes as an anti-Christian poet, with this one of his fiercest tracts. In his essay ‘Ted Hughes’s Anti-mythic Method’, Moulin portrays it as an ‘anti-crucifixion poem’ in which ‘the sacrifice of the Son of Man on the Cross is depicted as a stupid prank of Crow’s and a gangrenous, stinking blind-alley’[[238]](#footnote-238). Charles V. Fernandez is scarcely less negative when noting that ‘according to the *Crow* myth, there is no “Redemption,” as Christianity conceives of it, and it is a failure of Christianity to believe in one’.[[239]](#footnote-239) Other critical positions on the poem may be less extreme, but Robert’s mention of the ‘disastrous consequences’ of Crow’s actions,[[240]](#footnote-240) Scigaj’s comment on Crow’s ‘Tricksterish waywardness and indomitability’[[241]](#footnote-241) and Bishop’s suggestion that the poem finds Crow ‘condemned to his most primitive, animal value’[[242]](#footnote-242) all uphold the judgement that Crow’s impromptu crucifixion is either a showing-up or a regrettable repetition of Christian error. Certainly the poem revels in its unorthodox manner. But I say emphatically that it is not an anti-crucifixion poem: it is a crucifixion poem *par excellence*, in which Hughes’s utterly unsentimental regard for what the crucifixion represents, channelled through the ugliness of Crow’s voice, provides the leverage necessary to prise the crucifixion from its cultural setting. In ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’ Hughes recovers the cross for himself, scours it of every last rose, every attempt ‘to translate it into something more manageable’, and argues – in the ironic, offhand style of *Crow* – for its essential value.

The unmanageability of the cross is the final triumph of this poem, and the triumphant note is sounded as early as the title. It would be easy to gloss this as ‘Crow at his most anarchic’ or ‘Crow never more the Trickster’, as critical commentary suggests. But there is more going on here than irreverence. Two poems earlier in the 1972 sequence, in ‘Crowcolour’, Crow’s blackness is woven into images of enormity and depth: Crow is so black ‘He had stars’, and ‘like the sun [he was] Blacker / Than any blindness’ (*CP* 243). Looking back to ‘Two Legends’, we see blackness linked foremost with the earliest buddings of ontological potential, and the earliest sweepings of perception across the universe. In the second legend blackness represents an at-homeness in matter, a receptivity to experience, before modulating, through the physical and metaphysical powers which beset the earth, into the ‘black rainbow’ of existential freedom. ‘Crow the Just’ (from one of the contemporaneous fine-press gatherings of Crow poems) likewise relates Crow’s blackness to the degree of his autonomy and self-knowledge. Crow jeers at, spits at, tricks and so on ‘only his own death’, which ‘is how he kept his conscious so pure / He was black’ (*CP* 272). The sum of these figurations of blackness tells us that Crow’s crowcolour is an emblem of the reach of his apprehension, the depth of his resource and his commitment to experience – especially the experience of suffering. Returning to ‘Crow Blacker than Ever’, then, we must understand that Crow is not merely running amok with Christian myth. He is exercising his prerogative as a searching intelligence in direct, uncultured, unmediated contact with the cosmos. In other words, Crow is trying with all that he is to understand.

Witnessing the growing estrangement between God and man, which is to say the hardening of metaphysical dualism and the loss of contact with the ground of our being and the divine content within us, Crow improvises the crucifixion. The dualism is broken: man cries with God’s voice and God bleeds with man’s blood, until finally ‘Man could not be man nor God God.’ This image touches the core of Christian theology, restating a line of catechism derived from St. Athanasius: ‘For the Son of God became man so that we might become God.’[[243]](#footnote-243) Hughes’s negative restatement merely makes show of regretting the Christological blending of creature and creator, the God ‘Who by sympathy has made himself a man’, and this apparent regret is ironised into a characteristically crowy affirmation, with God’s disgust standing ironically for the same sympathy which offends Stevens. In other words, this poem embraces the central Christian belief that Christ unites God and humanity.

Of course, we cannot overlook the gangrene and stink, the ‘horror beyond redemption’ emanating from the wound of the cross. I read these as Hughes’s brutally ironic figure for the ‘Cult of the Cross’, the ‘roses of tradition’. And just as Moltmann observes that Christians who do not wish to flee the cross have not truly understood it, Crow observes that the crucifixion has done nothing to alleviate the ‘agony’ of the ‘infinite tension’ of the human condition. ‘This is my creation’ cries the grinning Crow as he makes himself the banner of his own metaphysical achievement, his victory, agonising though it is, over the lie of dualism and the false consolations of cultic Christianity. Moltmann, too, rejects these consolations, the too-easy reaching for redemption and atonement:

In the crucified Jesus on Golgotha there remains something which still resists its sublimation into the concept of atonement. Only a new creation which is based upon the crucified Christ can sublimate the scandal of the cross into a pure hymn of praise.[[244]](#footnote-244)

The radical thrust of Moltmann’s argument here is at one with Hughes’s, and we should not be surprised that Crow’s ‘pure hymn of praise’ is of the purest ugliness. Nor should we be surprised that Hughes appoints a Trickster character, the product of God’s nightmare, to reveal the crucifixion in the agony of its full significance, for ‘it is the godless, forced out by the church, who recognize the inner distinction between the reality of the cross on Golgotha and its cultic representation within the church’.[[245]](#footnote-245) It takes a crow to see the gangrene and stink of the church for what it really is. We might say that Hughes himself is this godless outsider, reminding the church of the impact of its own central image, reprimanding it for its facile consolations. Yet in all of this the crucifixion remains intact and essential, and Crow, having seen this, is blacker than ever – more full of stars, more at one with the without eye.[[246]](#footnote-246)

This victory of is corroborated three poems later in ‘Crow’s Song of Himself’ (*CP* 247), in which Crow endures hammering, roasting, crushing, tearing and more until the accumulated suffering purchases a truer redemption than the dualistic consolation rejected in ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’. The repeating mechanics of the poem makes explicit the Christ-like mutuality of suffering and divinity, and Hughes’s own gloss in a 1975 letter upon Crow’s transformation into diamond in lines 3 and 4 is eloquent of the uplifting (in spite of it all) strain of the entire *Crow* project: ‘the most precious thing [is] arrived at only through the most extreme punishment’ (*LTH*  369). This idea echoes elsewhere in Hughes’s prose, in contexts where the ugliness and irony of *Crow* give way to positive sentiment. In his essay ‘Crow on the Beach’ (1985), discussing Trickster literature, Hughes refers to ‘the vital compression beneath the [nihilistic] affliction: ‘the renewing, sacred spirit, searching its depths for new resources and directives, exploring towards new emergence and growth. And this is how the worst moment comes closest to the best opportunity’ (*WP* 240). The following year, in a long and thoughtful letter to his son Nicholas, he writes,

That’s the paradox: the only time most people feel alive is when they’re suffering, when something overwhelms their ordinary, careful armour, and the naked child is flung out onto the world. That’s why the things that are worst to undergo are best to remember. (*LTH* 514)

The kinship here to Hughes’s ideas about Trickster, coupled to Crow’s enthusiasm for the crucifixion in ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’, encourages us toward a previous formulation: teleological freedom, which is to say creative, self-actualising congruency with the divine, is crucifying. By ‘crucifying’ I mean that we suffer; we feel trapped within ourselves, our limitations, our own bodies; we arrive at a point from which retreat is impossible and onward development a terrifying unknown. Hughes writes to his son about our true inner selves ‘buried away under their adaptive and protective shells’,

So when you realise you’ve gone a few weeks and haven’t felt that awful struggle of your childish self—struggling to lift itself out of its inadequacy and incompetence—you’ll know you’ve gone some weeks without meeting new challenge, and without growing, and that you’ve gone some weeks toward losing touch with yourself.

Suffering certifies our progression as humans. ‘The depth of suffering’, writes Tillich, ‘is the door, the only door, to the depth of truth.’[[247]](#footnote-247)

## 4.4: The ur-cry

‘Truth’ is not a word comfortably absorbed into a discussion of mid-twentieth century poetry. It is a pre-postmodern word, a theologian’s word, with its intimations of finality and authority. But Hughes invokes it in the introduction to his 1976 selection of Pilinszky’s poetry, in a passage which perfectly encapsulates the theological, and especially the Christological, undercurrent of *Crow*:

The poems are nothing if not part of an appeal to God, but it is a God who seems not to exist. Or who exists, if at all, only as he exists for the stones. Not Godlessness, but the immanence of a God altogether different from what dogmatic Christianity has ever imagined. A God of absences and negative attributes, quite comfortless. A God in whose creation the camps and modern physics are equally at home. But this God has the one Almightiness that matters: He is the Truth.

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. (*WP* 232-3)

*Crow* is a body of work much indebted to eastern European poets, including Pilinszky, whom Hughes was reading and translating at the time. But whether or not one accepts this passage as a fair gloss upon *Crow*, it is at the least yet another restatement of the comingling of suffering and divinity. The Pilinszky essay refers specifically to the crucifixion: ‘In each poem, we find the same diamond centre: a post-apocalyptic silence, where the nail remains in the hand, and the wound cannot speak’ (*WP* 233). The silence of the wound, as of the wounded, would-be speaker, is a feature of Pilinszky’s verse; I cannot say it is a feature of *Crow*, which is deliberately a chatty and raucous spectacle. Hughes says of Pilinszky, ‘His silence is the silence of that moment on the cross, after the cry’ (*WP* 232). But Hughes’s poetry, in *Crow* and elsewhere, is not a poetry of silence. It is a poetry of voices crying.

Discussing Leonard Baskin’s prints, particularly the figure of the Hanged Man, a ‘hanged, flayed god-man’ (*WP* 97) which Hughes explicitly relates to the ‘crucified Jesus’ (*WP* 91), he writes, ‘The impact of the Hanged Man, on his own wavelength, is like a sacred shout […] a stunning, end-of-all-things cry at the death of the god – which is also the cry of incredulity, the ecstatic outcry at his simultaneous resurrection’ (*WP* 99). Hughes’s understanding of the unified and unifying nature of the Christ symbol is fully apparent, and this passage clearly accords with the comments by Barth, Tillich and Moltmann quoted earlier on the need for ‘an integral consideration’ of Christ. If such a consideration was invisible in ‘Hawk in the Rain’ because of the hawk’s pre-eminent function as a symbol of dignified self-possession, by the time he writes *Crow* we can be sure that Hughes understands this crucial point of intersection between ontology and theology: that the expression of utmost anguish and suffering is somehow also the soul-shout of divine homecoming.

Moltmann gives this account of Jesus’ death-cry:

Jesus clearly died in a different way [than other righteous martyrs]. His death was not a ‘fine death’. The synoptic gospels agree that he was ‘greatly distressed and troubled’ (Mark 14.33 par.) and that his soul was sorrowful even to death. He died ‘with loud cries and tears’, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews (5.7). According to Mark 15.37 he died with a loud, incoherent cry.[[248]](#footnote-248)

The significance of this cry for Christian theology is difficult to overstate. Moltmann argues either against or beyond the various theological, psychological and political interpretations which have attached to the cry since its historical utterance, emphasising that Jesus’ cry of abandonment ‘took place between God and God’,[[249]](#footnote-249) and therefore *within* God. The cry refutes any claims to the impassibility of God, and involves God in the trials of historical time. The ability of theology to speak meaningfully to the contemporary world, says Moltmann,

depends less upon the openness of theologians and their theories to the world and more upon whether they have honestly and without reserve come to terms with the death-cry of Jesus for God. By the standards of the crying of the dying Jesus for God, theological systems collapse at once in their inadequacy.[[250]](#footnote-250)

In this way, the willingness of Hughes’s poetry to explore the death-cry of Jesus offers a tentative sense of its adequacy as Christian theology. Indeed, loud, incoherent cries and screams of anguish make frequent appearances in Hughes’s poetry, often as cosmological motifs, including, particularly, the first poems of Crow’s origins. The first of the ‘Two Legends’ concludes with a ‘cry that, swelling, could not / Pronounce its sun’ (CP 217). Recall, too, the mock Bible-speak of ‘Lineage’, which commences, ‘In the beginning was Scream’ (*CP* 218). ‘A Kill’ (the fourth poem in the expanded 1972 edition) has Crow’s birth accompanied by a ‘bowel-emptying cry’ (*CP* 212), which ‘rip[s] through him’ before he slams into the earth. The more of these cries we encounter, the more we realise that Crow has his origins in the content of Christ’s death-cry: total agony, total abandonment, complete godforsakenness. I hear a compelling resonance between Moltmann’s assertion that Jesus’ cry takes place ‘within God himself’[[251]](#footnote-251) and Sagar’s account of Crow’s origins in God’s ‘terrible nightmare’ of an attacking hand and accusing voice[[252]](#footnote-252). Moltmann refers to the ‘“enmity” between God and God’ as divulged by the ‘abandonment on the cross which separates the Son from the Father’;[[253]](#footnote-253) Crow personifies this enmity. He is that cry, and in the glee of the final gesture of ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’ we see Trickster’s ‘unkillable, biological optimism’ (*WP* 239) effectively joined to the iconoclastic potency of the crucifixion. Of course, for Moltmann this iconoclasm is optimistic, not nihilistic, clearing the way for a truer understanding of Christian life, just as Hughes differentiates Trickster literature from the superficially similar genre of Black Comedy specifically on the grounds of its productivity and optimism (*WP* 239). In his very being, and specifically in the crucifixional self-revelation of ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’, Crow issues an invitation to found hope on suffering.

Hughes hears this cry in more than human (and corvine) throats. If his 1990 letter to Merchant is honest, Christ serves as a nearly lifelong template for figuring and interpreting the natural world. We can hear this cry in ‘The Howling of Wolves’, in which a wolf howls you cannot say whether out of agony or joy’ (*CP* 180). We hear it reported in the closing exchange of the *Moortown Diary* poem ‘Ravens’:

But you have eyes now

Only for the tattered bundle of throwaway lamb.

‘Did it cry?’ you keep asking, in a three-year-old field-wide

Piercing persistence. ‘Oh yes’, I say ‘It cried.’ (*CP* 518)

And we hear it, through the gift of the poet’s attention, in the forsaken silence of the dying cranefly who ‘cannot be helped in any way’ (*CP* 332).

We hear it too in ‘Skylarks’ whose second and third sections particularly grapple with the idea that the lark’s song expresses both an unsinkable affection for the world and the agony of simply being alive. Perhaps this is why the lark is ‘Crueller than owl or eagle’ (*CP* 173): it is not a bringer of individual deaths, but of a continuous knowledge of the entanglement of life and death. Or perhaps its cruelty comes in its song, the roseate beautification of its crucified state, a state evident in the poem’s relation of the perfectly lark-like climbing and singing to a kind of death-in-life. The crucifixion, and the freedom-destiny polarity it figures, is unnamed as such but still evident in Gifford and Roberts’ gloss on the same section: ‘The lark is crueller than owl or eagle because it must act out its “wounding” with an obedience paralleled only by the obedience of dead things to death.’[[254]](#footnote-254) This last phrase refers to the section’s final line, ‘Obedient as to death a dead thing’, and the allusion here is not merely to dead things generally, but Christ specifically, for the line echoes Philippians 2:8, ‘he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross’. Even more emphatically in this teleological vein, discussing a later section, Gifford and Roberts observe that ‘the larks are not merely acted upon, but actively fulfil a mission through their suffering’.[[255]](#footnote-255) In his figuration of the skylark Hughes shows us a creature simultaneously dying and rising: the Christ pattern could not be clearer. At the conclusion of section VII (last in the poem’s original version) the lark, its ordeal completed, is ‘Paid-up’ (*CP* 176), suggesting the redemptive purchasing power of Jesus’ death, and ‘Conscience perfect’, an appealing phrase which captures both a sense of completed inner unity and fulfilment of its *telos*. The lark is both what it wants to be and what it ought to be.[[256]](#footnote-256)

Life as a Hughesian Christ-lark seems tolerable enough. But recall that small bird in ‘Us He Devours’ (*CP* 774-5) searching so desperately for food. The poem’s title comes from Eliot’s 1920 poem ‘Gerontion’, in which ‘He’ is explicitly ‘Christ the tiger’ who ‘springs in the new year’ – the clever play of ‘spring’ as both season and predation making perfect sense from a man for whom April is the cruellest month.[[257]](#footnote-257) Eliot’s Christ-predator, the bringer of suffering, contrasts with Hughes’s Christ-bird, who simply suffers, searching ‘With such anguish, such foregone despair’ – or the Christ-fish, who issues the ‘peculiar cry’, the ‘near-fatal cry’ of ‘Eloi Eloi’, or the Christ-mollusc, ‘cruciform, / Sculpted, as are all God’s creatures, by hunger’. Both the general pathos of this language and certain words in particular draw us to a passage in Helen Waddell’s 1933 book *Peter Abelard*, concerning the twelfth-century monk of that name – a passage Hughes’s friend Martin Palmer, author of the *Living Christianity* book endorsed by Hughes, reports as one dear to both Hughes and himself.[[258]](#footnote-258) Abelard and his friend Thibault are talking indoors when a sudden sound stops them short:

‘My God’, said Thibault, ‘what’s that?’

From somewhere near them in the woods a cry had risen, a thin cry, of such intolerable anguish that Abelard turned dizzy on his feet, and caught at the wall.

They realise the cry is a rabbit in a trap, and hurry to find the creature.

The rabbit stopped shrieking when they stooped over it, either from exhaustion, or in some last extremity of fear. Thibault held the teeth of the trap apart, and Abelard gathered up the little creature in his hands. It lay for a moment breathing quickly, then in some blind recognition of the kindness that had met it at the last, the small head thrust and nestled against his arm, and it died.

It was that last confiding thrust that broke Abelard’s heart. He looked down at the little draggled body, his mouth shaking. ‘Thibault’, he said, ‘do you think there is a God at all? Whatever has come to me, I earned it. But what did this one do?’

Thibault nodded.

‘I know’, he said. ‘Only – I think God is in it too.’

Abelard looked up sharply.

‘In it? Do you mean that it makes Him suffer, the way it does us?’

Abelard asks Thibault about the crucifixion.

Thibault shook his head. ‘That was only a piece of it – the piece that we saw – in time. Like that.’ He pointed to the fallen tree beside them, sawn through the middle. ‘That dark ring there, it goes up and down the whole length of the tree. But you only see it where it is cut across. That is what Christ’s life was; the bit of God that we saw. And we think God is like that because Christ was like that, kind, and forgiving sins and healing people. We think God is like that for ever, because it happened once, with Christ. But not the pain. Not the agony at the last. We think that stopped.’

Abelard looked down at him . . . He could have knelt before him.

‘Then, Thibault’, he said slowly, ‘you think that all this’, he looked down at the little quiet body in his arms, ‘all the pain of the world, was Christ’s cross?’

‘God’s cross,’ said Thibault. ‘And it goes on.’[[259]](#footnote-259)

The rabbit’s suffering is not a metaphor for Christ’s suffering: it is, of itself, a part of that suffering, and Hughes’s poem draws remarkably close to the same vision of a thoroughly Christological nature, the vision begun in his childhood in which ‘animal life […] became identified with Christ’. Indeed, Hughes’s Eliotic title is if anything a reprimand to the self-centredness of Eliot’s speaker, who grasps the universality of the Christ-symbol but can only respond to his own suffering. Not for the first time, Hughes makes Eliot’s poetry the site of his own Christological theorising.

We must think through an inconsistency at this point. Is fallenness for Hughes not a uniquely human misery? If all of the rest of creation is ‘at rest in the law’, those creatures have no need to cry out in godforsakenness. Lacking the tragedy of self-regard, they live in ignorance and innocence of their crucified state, which is to say of the spontaneity-law polarity which provides the terms of their existence. We touch here a larger question concerning the otherness of Hughes’s creatures. Gifford and Roberts state one side of the issue:

Hughes’s animals are unmistakably ‘other’ in that they present a shock and a challenge to the poet. But Hughes would not say, with Lawrence, ‘I did not know his God’ (‘Fish’). On the contrary, Hughes’s poems are inspired by the conviction that he *does* know the God of the hawk, jaguar or pike. ‘Know’, that is, not in the sense of being able to define, but of being intimately acquainted with. For him the animal is not merely an analogue or emblem of the inner self but a part, with that self, of an indivisible whole.[[260]](#footnote-260)

In an important sense, however, the whole *has* been divided: within and among human subjectivity. This may not be a real division, insofar as it doesn’t bother the birds or stop us from running through the grass. But the reception of all ecological awareness through a thoroughly self-conscious and fallen human subjectivity does mean that every individual person’s world is populated by images which, failing as true reportage of the divine Real, are pre-eminently emblems and analogues of that person’s inner self. ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ is as fine an example as any of a poem which tells us much more about the speaker’s inner state, his mortal anxieties and expectations of nature, than about a real hawk. Roberts later approaches this position when he writes that ‘the fox, hawk, wind and jaguar are objective correlatives’ of ‘a power that is represented as greater and ultimately more real’ than ‘the world that the rational intellect has constructed’.[[261]](#footnote-261) We need only conceptualise the source or conduit of this power as internal to understand how its attack upon the rational intellect is a revelation of the inner self (a reassertion of the aborted Neanderthal) experienced through natural, external objects. This is in no way a denial of the final reality of the natural object independent of the knowing subject, nor a denial of the vital indivisibility of the natural whole to which Gifford and Roberts refer, but a necessary acknowledgement of the difficulty, perhaps the impossibility, of extricating the self’s projections from objective reality and seeing the whole for what it is – precisely the dilemma of the wodwo, crouched in its negotiations between ‘the exact centre’ of its subjectivity and the teeming physical reality of ‘all this’. Again, we see how lapsarian anxieties dominate Hughes’s poetry.

At stake for the present discussion is the applicability of the crucifixion symbol, and especially the death-cry, beyond modern, evolved, fallen humanity. In overlaying (at whatever age) the story of Christ on the whole of the animal and vegetable world, has Hughes seen to it that the natural world will now endlessly repeat versions of a human story back to him? This may well be the case. In the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas, Jesus tells his followers:

I am the light that is over all. I am the All. The All came forth out of me. And to me the All has come.

Split a piece of wood—I am there.

Lift the stone, and you will find me there.[[262]](#footnote-262)

Look at a lark, we might say, look at a gnat, and you will find me there. As Adam in *Adam and the Sacred Nine* struggles to animate himself he utters a cry which appears as much a part of creation as of the man uttering it. His cry is ‘random atoms’ and ‘sun-grief’ (*CP* 444). The very particles of the universe participate in the pain of this man accepting the terms of his existence, in figures which are less metaphors than metaphysical equivalences. And in all four equivalences, the cry expresses something of the human sense of isolation, abandonment and regret at existence – a desire that God take life back. This tells us much about Hughes’s take on humanity, but it also suggests universal, univocal distress, a profound suffering beyond the bounds of humanity. Adam’s cry gives voice to this distress but does not originate it. His cry is the equivalent of something extrasensory and omnipresent, a metaphysical note continually intoned. Nothing in the poem points up this cry as a projection by Adam; indeed, it has ‘nothing at all to do with him’. It is native to creation, something in which he simply participates – seemingly. If the cry *is* a projection it has utterly fooled its subject. Not having accepted the cry as his own, he languishes in existential freedom until the nine birds bring their messages, which include repeated suggestions of the necessity of suffering. ‘Imminent death only makes the wren more Wren-like’ (*CP* 448); ‘the Owl // Screams, again ripping the bandages off / Because of the shape of its throat, as if it were a torture’ (*CP* 448); ‘The dove came […] She was knocked down […] She was knocked down […] She was knocked down’ (*CP* 449). Are these genuine revelations from the natural world, or Adam’s attempt to hear the core of his own inaccessible soul? Does it matter? As in ‘Wodwo’, the convergence of interior and exterior knowledge, of subjectivity and ecology, is the sequence’s underlying thesis, directed here toward communicating the need for each individual to accept the ur-cry, that life-certifying pain of teleologically productive freedom. Adam’s final gratitude to the rock and commitment to the earth may be a rejection of fantasies of transcendence, but it is also a commitment to the self-revelatory torture of having one’s bandages ripped off. It is an acceptance of the self-perfecting immanence of death. And as for the human self, so for the rest of creation. Lift up a stone, look at the sun, listen to the lark in a Hughes poem, and you will witness the sacrificed god, the pain of existing and becoming. And the pain is not lessened by teleological fulfilment: that is the point of the crucifixion symbol. The difference between humanity and the rest of creation is the existential freedom incited by our self-regard, which allows us to turn from the *telos* of divine law and seek escape.

We hear this lesson particularly, in Hughes, at the ocean shore. In part III of ‘Skylarks’ the bird’s song of painful ecstatic distress (‘Joy! Help! Joy! Help!’) is ‘like a breaker of ocean milling the shingle’ (*CP* 174). This casts a line to both ‘Logos’ with its ‘cry within the sea’ (*CP* 156), and ‘Pibroch’, also from *Wodwo*, in which ‘The sea cries with its meaningless voice’ (*CP* 179). Indeed, Hughes was impressing children with the dreadful cry of the sea as late as 1993, in the poem ‘Shell’ from *The Mermaid’s Purse*, which begins, ‘The sea fills my ear / With sand and with fear’ (*CPC* 11). Feelings of humility and threat before the sea are a poetic commonplace, but in Hughes’s poetry the shore becomes the site of a metaphysically charged confrontation between the estranged individual and the parental creator. Insofar as the ocean is a vast source of life full of strange wonders and unfathomable depths, it makes a ready symbol for God. Nietzsche certainly thought so when he made it the first figure picked by the Madman eager to announce the death of God: ‘“*We have killed him,*—you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea?”’[[263]](#footnote-263) In ‘Crow on the Beach’ we find our anti-hero straining to comprehend ‘the sea’s ogreish outcry and convulsion’ (*CP* 229). He witnesses the gnashing and warring of matter upon itself, of which the living and dying of creatures is merely an instance. He hears the sea’s cry, but decides that he is ‘the wrong listener’ and ‘unwanted’. In this he is profoundly mistaken, and his denial of a relationship with the sea echoes his earlier attempted flight from his mother-creator. The self-conscious simplicity of the poem’s closing line, ‘What could be hurting so much?’, sets it up as a foil for ‘Crow and the Sea’ (*CP* 252) much further on in the collection, in which Crow makes more direct enquiries of the sea, and suffers various pains and rebuffs for his efforts. The sea does not cry in this poem, though it cries so consistently elsewhere that Hughes need hardly repeat himself to remind us that the sea is forever speaking something of the pain of being in the world. God mocked Job by asking, ‘Has thou entered into the spring of the sea? or hast thou walked in the search of the depth?’ (Job 38:16), and in similar fashion Crow, despite his earnest attempts to form a relationship with the sea, smacks repeatedly against the limits of his ability to understand. This is enough to make anyone feel ‘like a scrutty dry rabbit-dropping’, but the characteristic irony of *Crow* fills the protagonist’s seemingly paltry gestures at communion with the sea with urgent purpose. Like Hughes, Crow is all for opening negotiations.

The last three lines of the poem are formed as three separate stanzas, indicating a ratchetting-up of significance:

Finally

He turned his back and he marched away from the sea

As a crucified man cannot move.

Gifford and Roberts offer a curiously weak reading of these lines when they suggest that Crow ‘is being “crucified” by the realization of his relative insignificance.’[[264]](#footnote-264) The figurative connection between insignificance and crucifixion is cloudy at best: insofar as the symbol of crucifixion is inseparable from the person of Jesus Christ, it is a sign of being ‘anointed’ or ‘chosen’, a singular distinction. I am particularly unconvinced that Crow’s inability to march away from the sea comes down to the fact that,

Inevitably, this is also a movement towards another sea, so that, in relation to the sea, Crow ‘cannot move’, and Hughes characteristically introduces death (in this case, crucifixion) as the type of the inescapable.[[265]](#footnote-265)

It is of course true that, the earth being a globe, wherever one walks one is walking toward a sea, but this reading produces a rather fussy, literalistic image which sits uncomfortably amid so much other vibrant metaphor, and it remains unclear whether Crow’s immobility is due to an awareness of his own insignificance or the preponderance of salt water on earth. In any case, crucifixion is far too freighted a term to be chosen as just another means of being stopped short. Say the word ‘crucifixion’ to anyone and they will almost certainly call to mind the same image, the same historical figure, the same moment. Whatever one feels about Christianity, this is the opposite of insignificance. The critics’ insistence on a purely materialist reading of these final lines quite deadens their significance.

I read them as an exploration of the idea of freedom, freedom in its crucifying, teleological form, freedom linked to destiny. Crow is, as I have argued, the nightmare content of Jesus’ death-cry, an explosive admission of suffering from within the godhead. On another level he is simply a person, whose adventures provide colourful analogies for all of the psychological, spiritual and emotional negotiations of the human being moving through her life. Both levels are active here. A story in which Crow ‘turned his back’ and ‘marched away from the sea // As a crucified man cannot move’ (which Bishop usefully rephrases as ‘turned his back and marched away from the sea to the same extent that a crucified man is capable of performing the same action’[[266]](#footnote-266)) tells us something about the struggle of the individual to come to terms with life, and with God and the universe and the depths of possibility within the self – we may use whatever terms we wish. Crow’s attempt at relating to the sea may appear ‘absurd’, as Gifford and Roberts suggest, but he can no more stop making these attempts than choose to live in a separate world from the sea – no more, indeed, than a crucified man is able to flee his predicament.

Bishop quotes Simone Weil in his discussion of ‘Crow and the Sea’, suggesting that

[i]f the reader is able to uphold the Crucifixion-image at the end of the poem as a desirable conclusion, he must be able to do so in terms similar to those proposed by Weil:

There is only one cross; it is the whole of that necessity by which the infinity of space and time is filled and which, in given circumstances, can be concentrated upon the atom that any one of us is, and totally pulverize it. To bear one’s cross is to bear the knowledge that one is entirely subject to this blind necessity in every part of one’s being, except for one point in the soul which is so secret that it is inaccessible to consciousness.[[267]](#footnote-267)

This is fascinating, but I disagree with Bishop’s insistence that the crucifixion may only be interpreted positively under such terms. Weil depicts the precarious contingency of all creatures, a contingency expressed as ‘affliction’, which she elsewhere defines as (again following Bishop’s quotation), ‘essentially a destruction of personality, a lapse into anonymity’.[[268]](#footnote-268) This sounds rather like Gifford and Roberts’ ‘insignificance’. Bishop is confident that ‘Weil defines the sea’s effects on Crow in the term “Affliction”’. But contingency, and the suffering which attends it, do not bring ‘a destruction of personality’ or ‘lapse into anonymity’ in the value system of Hughes’s art. Much the opposite, in promoting individuation and sharpening self-knowledge the trials of contingency *create* mature, self-possessed personality: ‘When God roasted Crow in the sun / He made diamond’ (*CP* 247). Crow is not insignificant or anonymous: he is estranged. The first five stanzas of ‘Crow and the Sea’ illustrate the estrangement, and the final three lines offer the Christological solution.

The figurative setup of being crucified by the sea is not new to *Crow*; it repeats the figurative setup of ‘The Hawk in the Rain’. In that early poem the hawk’s perfect poise illustrates its perfectly spontaneous submission to the law, its *telos*, for which it ‘suffers’ unto a death ‘in its own time’. This submission leaves it free to be a hawk. In ‘Crow and the Sea’, Crow hangs in the midst of his own storm, the humiliating power and unfathomableness of the sea, only Crow, foolish little man-bird that he is, still tries to escape the sea, which is to say his creator, his Mama. Tillich (echoing a line of theologians) tells us that ‘God is nearer to us than we ourselves. We cannot find a place outside of Him; but we can *try* to find such a place. [...] [W]e can be in the condition of continuous flight from God.’[[269]](#footnote-269) Crow crucified by the sea yet trying to walk away from it is in precisely this state of ‘continuous flight’ from a God who is ‘nearer to us than we ourselves’. Tillich goes on to note, ‘We can imagine one way of escape after another; we can replace God by the products of our imagination; and we do.’ It is interesting to see how similarly Weil writes when discussing evasions of affliction:

Thought can never really be constrained; evasion by falsehood is always open to it. When thought finds itself, through the force of circumstance, brought face to face with affliction, it takes immediate refuge in lies, like an animal dashing for cover.[[270]](#footnote-270)

The difference in tone between these passages brings us to religious faith, the question of whether suffering is construed as a teleological necessity which reunites us with the ground of our being, or whether is it is purely ‘a destruction of personality’. Weil’s retention of that secret ‘point in the soul’ suggests a nostalgia for spiritual affirmation in the face of physical trial. In commenting on the aptness of the crucifixion as a symbol for the human condition, Tillich concludes, ‘To endure it is more horrible and more difficult than anything else in the world. And yet, to endure it is the only way by which we can attain to the ultimate meaning, joy, and freedom in our lives. Each of us is called to endure.’[[271]](#footnote-271)

With these lines in mind we turn to ‘The Contender’ (*CP* 267-8), the last of the crucifixion poems to be discussed in this chapter. ‘The Contender’ first appeared in the small press edition *Crow Wakes*, and is the only one of the dozen *Crow Wakes* poems later incorporated into the main Faber sequence. Other *Crow Wakes* poems found their way into different collections for adults and children, and none of them actually features Crow as a character, at least not by name, save in that first title. The poems gesture intriguingly beyond what we might have thought of as the boundaries of the *Crow* project. There are poems about owls, wolves and bears exhibiting nothing of *Crow*’s caustic irony. There are folktale-poems which appear to continue the mode of main sequence poems such as ‘A Bedtime Story’ (*CP* 245) and ‘Crow Paints Himself Into a Chinese Mural’ (*CP* 251), but which are more clearly affirmative, more committed to material existence. They presuppose ecological entanglement, whereas the main sequence poems seek to establish it. The *Crow Wakes* piece ‘Snow Song’, for instance, dramatizes an acceptance of the need to hunt for food, coupled with an ethical awareness that this means death for other creatures. The protagonist catches a salmon: ‘He caught it / Ate its heart. But spared its eggs’ (*CP* 266). The progress over the dilemma of ‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’ is obvious. These are the poems of a more fully achieved humanity.

This complicates a reading of ‘The Contender’. Should I turn off the de-ironiser I’ve left running through the rest of my discussion of *Crow*? But ‘The Contender’ was slotted into the main sequence: twenty-fifth out of sixty-six, hardly a bulletin from the far side of wisdom. The entire poem walks a line between contradictory interpretations. The contender of the title is either Christ or someone with a Christ-like commitment to ordeal. The title is a kind of joke, though not an insult. As in many other *Crow* poems, a spiritual or psychological problem is transposed to a purely physical arena. The man approaches the ordeal of the human condition, a condition differing from that of other creatures primarily in the non-physical realm of higher consciousness, as an athlete, perhaps a boxer, preparing for a match. He crucifies himself to the earth ‘with nails of nothing’, an image suggesting both teleological rightness (there must be something more profound than physical nails keeping him there) and free will (presumably nails of nothing wouldn’t stop him from leaving if he wanted). Others try to deter him, but the contender is undeflected. His endurance deepens. His clothing rots, his body strains and rots, he grins ‘Into the ringing nothing’, until the last line refers to the whole ordeal as ‘his senseless trial of strength’.

I think we can take Hughes’s selection of ‘The Contender’ as the only *Crow Wakes* poem to include in the main *Crow* sequence, and its placement so early in that sequence, as evidence of its provisional and ironic tone. That is, the masochism and egocentricity of the self-crucifying contender is not a straight-up portrait of Christ, but a portrait of pathological identification with Christ. Hirschberg acknowledges this when noting that ‘Hughes alters aspects of the Christian redemption myth so that instead of a self-sacrificing Christ we have a self-assertive, obstinate and self-centred protagonist’,[[272]](#footnote-272) and he goes on to provide an excellent tour of the many ways the protagonist falls short of the Christian saviour.

This poem instead presents Christ as an adamant, self-contained entity who ignores the very people who considered him their saviour. […] Rather than comforting those women who […] came to salve his wounds as he lay on the cross, this Christ offers no solace to them or himself […] Unlike the Biblical story where Christ leaves the imprint of his visage on Veronica’s cloth, Hughes’s figure merely ‘abandoned his grin to them’ – the rictus of concentrated self-involvement. […] All these futile efforts further emphasize the fact that his coming had nothing to do with man’s redemption but rather with his own ego.[[273]](#footnote-273)

The contender is an emblem of failure because he does not understand the terms of the contest. He ‘refuses to die’,[[274]](#footnote-274) and in doing so pridefully asserts his existential freedom at the expense of teleological fulfilment. In embracing suffering he mistakes the means for the ends, so that crucifixion without death becomes the seal of his estrangement. He makes no attempt to transcend his own self or situation. Hirschberg repeats the differentiation of the contender and Christ in noting that the former ‘suffer[s] out of self-centred and not magnanimous and self-sacrificing, endurance.’[[275]](#footnote-275) The contender has discovered subjectivity but not ecology: he does not look *through* the self, merely *at* the self, and his attempt to be Christlike results in ontological stasis. Unlike the Christ-exemplifying hawk, he refuses to meet death in his own time.

Like the rest of Hughes’s crucifixion poems, ‘The Contender’ offers little in the way of religious enticement. Hughes does not ask his readers to join in any cross, religious or secular. But he shows us the cross everywhere, in all sorts of contexts, cleansed of the accretions of the past, so that for this reader at least, immersed in the worlds Hughes builds, it becomes impossible to conceive of the human condition in any other terms.

# Chapter 5: Puritanism and the Goddess

He had studied the nostalgias. In these

He sought the most grossly maternal, the creature

Who most fecundly assuaged him, the softest

Woman with a vague moustache and not the mauve

*Maman*.

– Wallace Stevens, ‘Esthétique du Mal’

A reader may agree that Hughes makes extensive use of both the fall and crucifixion in his poetry, and that these uses, though idiosyncratic, are not attacks on the essentials of the Christian faith, but creative adaptations of these symbols to new contexts. A reader may agree with this, and yet still feel that a certain anti-Christian tenor in Hughes’s work is beyond dispute. Moulin is not wrong to say that Hughes has ‘an axe to grind’ against Christianity,[[276]](#footnote-276) though I don’t agree that Hughes’s intended target is Christianity in a categorical sense. Identifying the target of Hughes’s axe-blow, and the cleavage he means to effect, is the main work of this chapter.

## 5.1: Tracing the Goddess

Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess*, which Hughes received at the age of seventeen as a gift from his high school English teacher, John Fisher, left a deep and indelible impression on the young poet’s mind (*LTH* 679). Graves’s central thesis is that the major religious traditions of the West, identified as Hebrew, Greek and Celtic/British, preserve aspects of a yet more ancient religion centred on a ‘Moon-goddess’,[[277]](#footnote-277) and that the (male) poet’s response to this White Goddess provides the basis for all true poetry. Certainly this thesis is present as a broad foundational element in Hughes’s writing. His most direct and sustained discussion of the Goddess is of course *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992), whose opening chapter is full of characteristic references to

the ‘myth’ behind this ‘madness’ [of Shakespeare’s heroes] […which] is the myth behind the Calvinist attitude to sexuality, which is the myth behind the conflict of Jehovah and the Great Goddess of seventh-century BC Jerusalem as it was enshrined in the Holy Bible. (*SGCB* 15)

We can see Hughes’s confidence in this connection when he writes, ‘The documentation of the pervasive, formative influence of these Goddess religions on early Christianity is a vast literature’, referring readers to the ‘extensive account of local survivals of earlier Goddess cults into the cult of Mary’ in Marina Warner’s *Alone of All Her Sex: the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary* (*SGCB* 9). Warner’s book takes an exhaustive look at the different ways Jesus’s mother has been worshipped and understood down the centuries, exposing a general Christian obsession with controlling and containing female sexuality, an effort complementary to the emergence of an explicitly masculine God.

Under the Augustinian (arguably Pauline) doctrine of original sin, sexual intercourse is the shameful vector of our pathological fallenness, and so special consideration was necessary to prepare the way for the Son of God. Mary is made a fit vessel for Jesus though the doctrines of the virgin birth, by which Jesus was conceived without injury to Mary’s maidenhead,[[278]](#footnote-278) and the immaculate conception, by which Mary herself, though conceived by her parents in the usual way, received God’s sanctifying grace immediately upon her conception in her mother’s womb by virtue of God’s always-intended plan for the world’s redemption, thus sparing her the mark of original sin.[[279]](#footnote-279) This pathologising of sex, Warner argues, obscures Mary’s connection to various pagan goddesses, connections which Warner begins to assemble with particular reference to Isis:

When Lucius, at the end of the *Golden Ass* of Apuleius, is initiated into the mysteries of Isis, he sees the goddess in a vision, which might equally describe the appearance of the Virgin Mary in Murillo’s *Aranjuez Conception* or in the revelations of Catherine Labouré, who saw her in 1830 as the Immaculate Conception. For Isis, in Hellenistic Egypt, was an astral divinity:

Her hair, long and hanging in tapered ringlets, fell luxuriantly on her divine neck; a crown of varied form encircled the summit of her head, with a diversity of flowers, and in the middle of it, just over her forehead, there was a flat circlet, which resembled a mirror or rather emitted a white refulgent light, thus indicating that she was the moon. Vipers rising from furrows of the earth, supported this on the right hand and on the left, while ears of corn projected on either side. […] Glittering stars were dispersed along the embroidered extremities of [her] robe, and over its whole surface; and in the middle of them a moon of two weeks old breathed forth its flaming fires. . . . Thus was the appearance of the mighty goddess.

By the second century […] Isis had acquired characteristics that associated her with Diana and other classical sky goddesses, whose particular business was the gift and sustenance of life, by rendering women fertile, and easing their pain in childbirth, [and] by bringing plenty to the earth[.] [[280]](#footnote-280)

Warner explores the familial connections between Mary and other goddess figures at great length, emphasising especially her connection to the moon. ‘The Virgin Mary’, she writes,

was associated not only with the moon’s fertility, but also with two other lunar properties: its constancy, which makes it nature’s own most accurate timepiece, and its hegemony over the tides. […] In this pattern of symbolism, Mary – like classical goddesses before her – emerged the eternal mistress of the waters, the protective deity of life, and especially the patroness of women in childbirth.[[281]](#footnote-281)

Mary, as Warner repeats, is also a sky goddess: ‘Mary’s colour is blue.’[[282]](#footnote-282) But it is her persistent association with the moon which most clearly relates Mary with Graves’s *White Goddess*, and thereby with Hughes’s imaginative matrix.

Warner notes ‘one further relationship’ as she concludes her discussion of Mary’s lunar associations, already hinted by the vipers flanking Lucius’s vision of Isis:

[T]he association of the snake and the moon has proved one of the most ancient and enduring mysteries. It is impossible to describe here the myriad snake cults and legends, but, in brief, a snake appears to be reborn each time it sloughs its skin, and thus it became for many peoples in different places in the world an analogue of the moon, which is also reborn each month. By principle of association, both the snake and the moon become symbols of immortal life. In the ancient epic of Gilgamesh, for instance, as well as in Chinese myth, it is the serpent who steals the fruit of immortality for itself. The same significance lies deeply buried in the biblical story of the Fall […]

In Christianity, the serpent has lost its primary character as a source of wisdom and eternity. It is above all the principal Christian symbol of evil, and when it sprawls under the Virgin’s foot, it is not her direct attribute, representing her knowledge and power […] but illustrates her victory over evil.[[283]](#footnote-283)

If there is a conflict between a Puritan Jehovah and the Great Goddess enshrined in the Bible, as Hughes suggests, we might therefore look for it in efforts of the biblical authors to insist upon division between woman and serpent, as in the serpent’s comeuppance in Genesis: ‘And I will put enmity between thee and the woman; and between thy seed and her seed’ (Genesis 3:15). At the other end of the Bible, in Revelation, we find an eschatological vision of Mary’s final triumph over the serpent:

And there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars:

And she being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.

And there appeared another wonder in heaven; and behold a great red dragon, having seven heads and ten horns, and seven crowns upon his heads.

And his tail drew the third part of the stars of heaven, and did cast them to the earth: and the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born.

And she brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and *to* his throne. (Revelation 12:1-5)

This dragon is explicitly the deceiving serpent of Genesis: ‘And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world’ (12:9). I have written much about humanity’s lapsarian self-division, of the loss or estrangement of our divine portion, and though I have tried to keep the discussion ungendered, in Hughes’s poems and stories the focus of such anecdote is consistently male. Symbolically, the female equivalent of this division within the male subject is the enmity between woman and snake: estranged from her own divinity, she is at war with herself.

This conflict may be seen in the *Crow* poem ‘Apple Tragedy’(*CP* 250), in which the introduction of the ‘interloper’ culture-God’s cider (representing, as discussed in Section 3.2, a superfluous moral code) leads to a confused and corrupt sexuality in which Eve fornicates with the serpent, then accuses it of rape. The poem seems a riff on Cassio’s declaration in *Othello*, ‘O thou invisible spirit of wine, if thou hast no name to be known by, let us call thee devil’,[[284]](#footnote-284) and we can turn to Hughes’s commentary for further insight. Cassio’s drunkenness is the fault of Iago’s treacherous manipulations, and Hughes duly calls Iago ‘the inhuman aspect of the Puritan intelligence’ (*SGCB* 230); the innocent Desdemona, meanwhile, begins the play as ‘pre-Puritan Venus’ (*SGCB* 228) until Iago succeeds in painting ‘the physicality of Desdemona’s sex’ as ‘treacherous and diabolical – the reptilian face of the Great Goddess’ (*SGCB* 230). That is, Iago uses Desdemona’s divine sexuality as the means to discredit her. Hughes’s gloss on ‘A Horrible Religious Error’, suggesting that Crow’s error is his failure to recognise his creator and would-be bride in the serpent, likewise upholds the unity of serpent and Goddess; and the poem simultaneously illustrates the degree of woman’s estrangement from herself in her feeble response to the serpent – as feeble, indeed, as man’s. Pre-Christian associations of both the serpent and the manifold Goddess, once so richly entwined, are sundered in Christian expectations of woman. The serpent, ‘the dynamics of nature in and around man’, is remodelled as a deceiving devil, cursed for encouraging the fall and at last ‘cast out’ of the world; the woman meanwhile is held to the unnatural standards of the immaculate virgin mother. Hughes’s reference to the ‘puritan-like activity in some Catholicism’ (*LTH* 570) suggests the Catholic attempt to venerate Mary as the mother of God while keeping her free of the tarnish of actual sex.

It is worth taking a moment to clarify the term ‘Puritan’. If Graves’s notion of the Goddess stands at one pole of religious sentiment, representing a mystical, trans-religious feminine principle, then the other pole is represented, for Hughes, by Puritanism. Historically, Puritanism arose as a sixteenth century English reform movement which felt that the Anglican Church had been insufficiently purged of Roman Catholic elements, and so sought ‘to purify the Church of England of heretical clergy, unwarranted ceremony, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy of bishops.’[[285]](#footnote-285) Martin Luther’s great slogans – ‘*sola fide, sola gratia, sola scripture*; faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone’ – were touchstones of Puritan values, encouraging a purity and austerity of religious practice at odds with Anglicanism’s lingering popery.[[286]](#footnote-286) The aim of purity in worship expanded into an ideal of propriety in every sphere of life, especially the domestic. As Karen E. Smith writes,

The Puritan ideal for family life was shaped by their belief that all of life had been ordered and planned by God; men, women, children, servants, masters – indeed, all who were part of society – had their proper place and a role which had been plainly described in scripture.[[287]](#footnote-287)

There was a margin, wide at times, of disagreement over what exactly scripture required of the Christian home, but the earnest Puritan strove at least toward an idea of religiously ordered life. The folklore of Puritanism takes this godly arrangement of the domestic to entail a suspicion or suppression of sex, and Hughes himself refers to ‘Puritan fear of female sexuality’ (*SGCB* 10). Scholars have challenged this received notion, arguing that ‘Puritanism promoted passionate, sexually fulfilling marital partnerships’[[288]](#footnote-288) – though ‘marital’ is of course an important word here. In any case, Hughes’s references to Puritanism are never strictly historical; he uses the word as shorthand for a rigid and at times militant Christian conformity which constructs its idea of God along strictly patriarchal lines. A case in point is his reference to ‘the fanatic Puritanism of those early Christians [which] accommodated itself, gradually, to the inevitable, as the Goddess reasserted herself in her own religion’ (*SGCB* 10). He applies the term ‘Puritanism’ anachronistically, though from his perspective correctly, to indicate how the new Christian religion sought to defend itself against pagan influence. Indeed, the conflict of Puritanism and Goddess worship we see here is a central theme of Hughes’s religious polemic, and a pattern he traces far beyond the bounds of historical Puritanism. Writing to Merchant on 2 July 1990, Hughes refers to a ‘generalised puritanism of the human mind’ which finds expression in a range of misogynistic activity (*LTH* 582). ‘Puritanism’ for Hughes encompasses any systematic rejection of the Goddess, whether by a church or some other cultural organ.

This Puritanical effort has, so it appears to Hughes and his sources, never been wholly successful. Early in his Shakespeare book he defines the ‘Great Goddess’ straightforwardly enough as ‘female sexuality as a symbol of the Mother of Creation’ (*SGCB* 4), and Warner offers many examples of her successful reassertion within Christianity, with Mary and the serpent continuing to share symbolic association. Warner summarises that

at an immediate level, the serpent has lost its connotations of knowledge and power and simply become a loathsome emblem of wickedness that the Virgin’s purity and wisdom have overcome; but at another level it has retained its ancient meaning, for it represents a kind of heterodox knowledge and sexuality that Christianity has spurned. Furthermore, although its presence in images of the Immaculate Conception is negative, it continues to form with the moon and the stars and the waters an elaborate code of the mysteries of life, growth, and birth over which the woman – the Virgin Mary – is believed to hold sway.

A pivotal contradiction therefore exists at the centre of the figure of the immaculately conceived Virgin because, assembling about her the symbols wielded by Isis in Apuleius’ remarkable vision, she is, at the very moment of her most complete triumph over carnality, a goddess of vegetable and animal and human fertility.[[289]](#footnote-289)

This contradiction is no less pivotal for Hughes. In the symbolic divergence of woman into the Virgin and nature into the serpent, where there had previously been a unity of divine carnality, Hughes finds a measure of Christianity’s failure to address human sexuality, and more broadly human embeddedness in the natural world, adequately and honestly.

As our discussion proceeds, we must keep in mind an increasing set of symbolic equivalences. In the context of Hughes’s discussion of Shakespeare’s plays and poems, laden as they are with male leads, it is unsurprising that the divine world from which we are separated should be defined as specifically female, so that sexual relations become a metaphor for relations with the divine. But the Goddess is one metaphor among many for the Edenic reality our rational minds have lost. The serpent is another, slandered by the Bible as the Satan, the deceiver, but for Hughes a representative of the natural world from which we emerged, the agent of our double-edged achievement of self-regard. Another is the boar of Shakespeare’s ‘Venus and Adonis’, who emerges to kill the young Adonis after he rejects Venus’s advances. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Hughes relates the boar to a particular aspect of the Goddess cult, the ‘god-king’ whose fate it is ‘to be sacrificed and reborn’:

This ritual murder of the Goddess’s consort, the god-king, by his successor, eventually produced the sacrificial substitute and other refinements, but also modified by myth with the extra figure of the god’s murderous double, who emerged, somehow at the behest of the Goddess, to usurp the reigning consort. (*SGCB* 8)

The boar is both the Goddess herself and ‘Adonis’s usurping double, a murderous martial warrior in enraged animal form’. The term ‘usurping double’ alerts us to an intersection of Hughes’s notion of Shakespeare’s Tragic Equation and his ideas about the biological fall. In describing the second of two forms by which the Tragic Equation plays out in Shakespeare’s plays, Hughes explains that ‘the Boar is incarnated in the “irrational”, inferior one of two “rival brothers”. He usurps his “rational” brother, either by dispossessing or killing him. Both forms of the Equation, Hughes tells us, ‘clearly are dramatizations of the same event: the overthrow of the rational by the irrational’. That is to say, the reassertion of the Neanderthal döppelganger over the modern human as threatens to occur in ‘Gulkana’, the vengeful decapitation visited upon the murderous brother in ‘The Head’, or the abduction of the real Reverend Lumb and his replacement by the libidinous changeling. The pattern is perhaps best summarised in a sentence from Hughes’s 1971 introduction of *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*: ‘The boar that demolished Adonis was, in other words, his own repressed sexuality – crazed and bestialized by being separated from his intelligence and denied’ (*WP* 114) – especially if we understand ‘sexuality’ as standing more broadly for the natural world and its myriad procreative goings-on.

It is interesting to note that although Hughes’s oeuvre is replete with successful or semi-successful usurpations of the rational by the irrational brother, as far as the Bible is concerned Esau’s defeat is complete. Notwithstanding the brothers’ weeping embrace of reconciliation (Genesis 33:4), Jacob remains the dominant brother and Esau is banished to the monstrous wilds of which he is a piece.

*Was* not Esau Jacob’s brother? saith the LORD: yet I loved Jacob,

And I hated Esau, and laid his mountains and his heritage waste for the dragons of the wilderness. (Malachi 1:2-3)

But I have made Esau bare, I have uncovered his secret places, and he shall not be able to hide himself: his seed is spoiled, and his brethren, and his neighbours, and he is not. (Jeremiah 49:10)

Indeed, the house of Esau becomes a resource for Jacob’s all-consuming glory:

And the house of Jacob shall be a fire, and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them, and devour them; and there shall not be *any* remaining of the house of Esau; for the Lord hath spoken *it*. (Obadiah 18)

The Old Testament’s insistence on the prophecy delivered to Rebekah that ‘two manner of people shall be separated from thy bowels; and *the one* people shall be stronger than *the other* people; and the elder shall serve the younger’ (Genesis 25:23) – in short, the finality of Esau’s subjugation to Jacob – reads, in the light of Hughes’s work, as an obsessive defence of the rational brain against the irrational, and an ignorant forfeiture of the divine.

Taking stock of the equivalences, we can say that the boar is the Goddess who is Mary who is the serpent. The boar is also the irrational, daemonic double, who is Esau, who is our suppressed Neanderthal doppelgänger angling for release. I am relying on Hughes’s prose to establish many of these links, but even in his poetry there are places where the syncretic cross-stitching is plain to see – for instance in poem 20 of *Prometheus on His Crag*, when Prometheus wonders whether the vulture is actually ‘His unborn half-self, some hyena / Afterbirth, some lump of his mother’ (*CP* 295). The *Cave Birds* poem ‘A Riddle’ (*CP* 432-3) teases the reader with the Goddess’s (only) apparently contradictory forms and meanings, and does so with an obvious Marian resonance:

Now, as you abandon yourself to death

I hold your life

Just as surely as you are my father

I shall deliver you

My firstborn

Into a changed, unchangeable world

The poem’s Marian signposting is heightened if we turn to a passage of Dante’s *Paradiso* in whose riddling contradictions we can recognise an original for Hughes’s language:

Virgin mother, daughter of thy Son, humble and exalted more than any other creature, fixed goal of the eternal counsel, thou art she who didst so enoble human nature that its Maker did not disdain to become its creature.[[290]](#footnote-290)

Mary is also visible in the ‘nameless female deity’ of *Gaudete*: a draft of theEpilogue poem ‘She rides the earth’ substitutes ‘Mary’ for each ‘She’ of the generic Goddess-lover, creating such statements as ‘Mary is an apple’. Even if Hughes walked back from such explicitness in the finished version, the pattern of his thinking is clear.[[291]](#footnote-291)

Hughes is unequivocal on the connection between Mary and the serpent, explaining in his introduction to *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse* that ‘the Celtic pre-Christian goddess […] has been naturalized into the old Catholicism as Mother Mary and Satan’ (*WP* 109). To say that Mary equals the serpent is of course both offensive and nonsensical to Christian orthodoxy, but this illustrates the heart of Hughes’s criticism of Christianity generally, and Puritan Protestantism in particular. If one accepts Warner’s identification of a range of fertility-goddess-serpent associations in her excavation of Marian symbolism, as Hughes doubtless did, one begins to appreciate how Mary’s coronation as the immaculately conceived virgin mother is not merely oxymoronic but theologically poisonous. Hughes’s mythic structures, from single poems to book-length sequences, attempt, in one way or another, a restoration of the individual human to the divinely figured natural world. The figures he uses to represent that world are many, but all depend on the availability of some kind of biological relationship: sexuality, predation, husbandry, ecological citizenship. But in sundering Mary from the serpent, insisting on a particular hostility there, and in denuding Mary of her human sexuality and the serpent of its creaturely dignity, Christianity makes impossible the sort of myths Hughes prescribes. By opposing the vessel (Mary) of human salvation (Christ) to the biological, evolutionary reality of human estrangement (the serpent), the Church encourages a particularly desolate view of the human condition, a desolation which Warner relates to the fall. Christians, she writes,

demonstrate their intimacy with the divine through their belief that God became one of them, but establish the virgin birth as a unique occurrence, a special propitiation, because they also believe that they are participants in the continuing tragedy of the Fall, which alienates man from God through man’s corrupted nature.[[292]](#footnote-292)

The estrangement she describes is profound: Jesus the divine human is not a humanly achievable type, but a unique historical event, a one-off antidote to original sin whose existence demonstrates that salvation is not accessible through natural channels. The familiar image of Mary with her foot on the serpent’s head declares the dualistic victory of God-as-spirit, acting through an immaculately conceived virgin, over a corrupt material nature. The equivalence between Mary and the serpent in Hughes’s work and commentary stands completely at odds with Christian iconography.

Warner’s own commentary on the Christian conception of Mary, and the virgin birth in particular, is full of such phrases as ‘highly paradoxical’[[293]](#footnote-293) and ‘muddled but profound’.[[294]](#footnote-294) In a short ‘Afterthoughts’ section added thirteen years after the first publication of *Alone of All Her Sex*, she writes that

the paradox remains that the cult of the Virgin, while communicating a multi-layered concept of ideal womanhood, in which centuries of male wishful thinking have left their deposit, also remains an extraordinary and fertile site of the feminine, constantly available for questioning and reshaping.[[295]](#footnote-295)

Hughes is far from exempt from accusations of wishful thinking about an ideal of womanhood, and it would be fair in this context to quote the critic John Carey in his review of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*:

In a long footnote on page 11 he describes a huge matriarchal sow, gross, whiskery, many-breasted, a riot of carnality, with a terrible lolling mouth ‘like a Brueghelesque nightmare vagina, baggy with overproduction’. Although smuggled in as a hermaphroditic version of the mythic boar, this sow has absolutely nothing to do with Shakespeare, and everything to do with Hughes’s violently divided feelings about women.[[296]](#footnote-296)

For justification of Carey’s claim we might turn to the ‘naked slender body’ of the ‘girl’ bride who appears at the end of ‘The Head’ (*DB* 158-9), or the ‘beautiful, lithe, naked maiden’ Crow chases at the projected end of his quest,[[297]](#footnote-297) both later echoed in Hughes’s description of Plath on their first night together, ‘You were slim and lithe and smooth as a fish’ (*CP* 1058), and at their wedding, ‘You were transfigured. / So slender and new and naked’ (*CP* 1065). Memories of Plath may of course be the source of the other brides; nonetheless, these figures present an ideal of femininity as young, nubile and untroubled by the effects of motherhood on the female body, and they all in turn echo Graves’s description of the White Goddess as ‘a lovely, slender woman’.[[298]](#footnote-298) Hughes’s radio play ‘The Wound’ likewise contrasts the ‘girl’ (*DB* 108) who becomes the hero’s saviour and bride to the violent and carnal ‘women’ (*DB* 97) who dismember and devour his soldiers. Natalie Anderson refers to ‘the appearance of women as double-edged emblems in Hughes’s work’,[[299]](#footnote-299) a doubleness which pivots on their sexuality: ‘sex as salvation, sex as deception’.[[300]](#footnote-300) Early poems such as ‘Macaw and Little Miss’ (*CP* 20) and ‘Secretary’ (*CP* 25) portray females tormented or threatened by the sexual implications of their own bodies. The poems may implicitly criticise the society responsible for the girls’ sexual miseducation, but the speaker’s condescension toward the females (especially in ‘The Secretary’, with its clear male perspective) creates an uncomfortable sense that their sexuality has been somehow weaponised against them. The female addressees of poems such as ‘Song’ (*CP* 24-5) and the *Gaudete* Epilogue, meanwhile, are even further removed from the creaturely world, any particular female carnality dispersed by a range of natural metaphor which remains squarely metaphor, with the heavily spiritualised addressee part of an explicitly different order:

Slowly I filled up with the whole world.

Only one thing stayed outside me, in the glare.

You beckoned. (*CP* 359)

A later pair of poems from the ‘Earth-Numb’ portion of *Moortown* (1979) continues the theme, without much resolution. The girl of ‘That girl’ saves her money to buy an eye-catching coat, the better to attract a mate and achieve happiness – this being my reading of the vague but suggestive lines, ‘hurry her / Down that lane’ (*CP* 542). If she achieves this and enters into sexual maturity she will have resigned herself to ‘the bottom-most weave of life / No better than a bacterium’, while being also ‘joyful’, ‘coddled and supplied / By grateful nature’. Does Hughes mean to suggest that sexuality is degrading? The poem progresses through these lines with no clear shift of voice or tone into and out of irony, and the girl does indeed seem to *fall* into the post-coital state. The poem suggests an opposition between human worth and potential on the one hand and natural, creaturely sexuality on the other, and the phrase ‘the bottom-most weave of life’ leaves it far from clear whether this opposition is socially constructed. Matters are not helped by turning a few pages to ‘Nefertiti’, in which a provocatively sexual woman sits at a bar.

She hunches, to deepen

Her giddy cleavage and hang properly

The surrealist shocking masterpiece

Of her make-up. (*CP* 546)

Although ‘gorgeous’, her beauty is ‘machined to the millionth’, connected to ‘the abattoir’ and ‘the office’, as removed from natural beauty as a slaughterhouse from natural predation. The poem’s title suggests how cheaply this woman’s sexual self is being marketed, such a far cry from the queen of Egypt whose name translates as ‘a beautiful woman has come’. Hughes portrays female sexual authority sublimated into the procedures of modern civilisation, reduced now to using its ‘weird power’ to attract free drinks at a pub, and the poem walks an uneasy line between admiration and condescension, the speaker himself made uneasy by the attractive yet repellent woman. This attitude survives even in the *Birthday Letters* poem ‘Dreamers’, in which Assia Wevill is described as ‘Slightly filthy with erotic mystery’ (*CP* 1146). Hughes’s work, at least in part, upholds a lapsarian view of human sexuality, for which women suffer particular judgement.

It would seem significant that most of the poems I have quoted here are held in no particular critical esteem, and that two of the ‘lithe’ maidens are found in fairly obscure sources. ‘That girl’ and ‘Nefertiti’ especially have a feel of quick sketches partaking of few of the deep resonances expected of Hughes’s best work, suggesting a gut-level honesty and defencelessness on the topic of women and sex which Hughes managed to interrogate or obscure in his longer, more intently developed poems and sequences. If there is any justice to Carey’s assertion of Hughes’s ‘violently divided attitude toward women’, and I think there is, then we must acknowledge that Hughes defaults at times to a distinctly puritanical cast of mind, in which the Goddess is an object of ‘male wishful thinking’, sexuality is linked to human transgression, and self-regard brings shame. In short, the ‘Puritan fear of female sexuality’ he identifies elsewhere is partly his own.

## 5.2: Saint George and the dragon

Bearing again in mind the figurative equivalences which surround the Goddess, fear of sexuality, especially female sexuality, frequently translates into fear of the natural world generally, a fear which leads us to the story of St George and the dragon. Hughes seems to have reserved a special contempt for this story. In a much-quoted passage from the 1970 ‘Myth and Education’ article (entirely different from the later *Winter Pollen* version) he calls it ‘a suspect story’, ‘a forbidden story’:

[I]t sets up as an ideal pattern for any dealing with unpleasant or irrational experience, the complete suppression of the terror. In other words it is the symbolic story of creating a neurosis, and as it's the key symbolic story of Christianity, it's the key to the neurotic-making dynamics of Christianity.[[301]](#footnote-301)

The key symbolic story of Christianity? I suspect this would strike most Christians as an odd thing to say. One can sit through a full liturgical calendar worth of scriptural readings and homilies (I sat through a childhood’s worth of them) and never hear a word about this saint or his dracocidal exploits. But to Hughes’s syncretic imagination the story dramatises a final and infinitely regrettable victory of the rational over the irrational, of modern humanity over both external nature and our own divine content. As such it is a story which resonates far beyond the Christian tradition.

The dragon episode is a later addition to the legend of St George. The knight’s main claim to sainthood, apart from miracles associated with his intercession after his death, is his superhuman endurance when subjected to deadly tortures for refusing to recant his Christian faith and worship pagan gods. Jacobus de Voragine’s 1275 account of George’s martyrdom sounds like a forerunner to the list of self-improving punishments in ‘Crow’s Song of Himself’. George’s persecutor

did do raise him on a gibbet […] beat him with great staves and broches of iron, that his body was all tobroken in pieces […] did do take brands of iron and join them to his sides, and his bowels which then appeared he did do frot with salt […] he did take strong venom and meddled it with wine, and made invocation of the names of his false gods, and gave it to S. George to drink, and it grieved him nothing […] he made S. George to be set between two wheels, which were full of swords, sharp and cutting on both sides, but anon the wheels were broken and S. George escaped without hurt.

Finally the pagans ‘put him in a caldron full of molten lead’, but ‘by the virtue of our Lord it seemed that he was in a bath well at ease.’[[302]](#footnote-302) Good stuff.

The oldest surviving written account of the dragon episode dates from the eleventh century. To punish a ‘godless emperor’, God sends a dragon to devour the inhabitants of the emperor’s city. Lots are drawn for the sacrifice of children to the dragon, and the emperor promises to include his only daughter when the time comes.

When the emperor’s turn came, he dressed his daughter in the imperial purple, and, having decked her as for a wedding, with tears of weeping he brought her along. The emperor offered the people gold and silver and his empire in compensation if he could keep his only daughter, but the people were inexorable. They all met to look at the emperor’s daughter.[[303]](#footnote-303)

George, heading home from his military duties, stops to water his horse at the lake where the dragon lives. He sees the princess weeping, and she explains her plight. He asks what god the city worshipped. ‘She replied: Hercules, Apollo, Scamander and the great goddess Artemis.’[[304]](#footnote-304) George prays.

And a voice replied: ‘Do what you wish; I am with you.’

And at that moment the dragon appeared. George hastened towards it, made the sign of the cross and asked the Lord to change the wild beast into an animal which would be docile with him. As George said this, the dragon fell at his feet. The saint tied it with the girl’s girdle, handed it to her and told her to go to the city nearby. The people, seeing this, were terrified and prepared to flee. George calmed them and required them to become Christian. After that, all acknowledged their faith in Christ. Then George took out his sword and killed the dragon.[[305]](#footnote-305)

The detail of the princess’s wedding regalia is especially interesting, as it sharpens the contrast between brutal nature and virginal maidenhood while suggesting the sacrifice as a marriage-like union and consummation. If the Mary figure of Revelation with the dragon beneath her foot is, from a Hughesian perspective, a symbol of the Goddess divided against herself, then the story of Saint George and the dragon is arguably an even worse symbolic arrangement: both the woman and the dragon, already at odds, must defer to the militant male hero. There is, of course, that equally interesting detail of the soldier-saint subduing the dragon not by the sword but with a woman’s girdle – a vestige, perhaps, of female agency. The feminine girdle may subdue but in the end the masculine sword kills, and if we accept that the dragon retains its serpentine significance as a figure for the natural world, including the potential for each of us to access an unfallen interior, we can see the tragedy of the saint’s actions. When the dragon is at last slain to settle the agreement for the conversion of the city, the symbolic point is made that the natural has no place in God’s kingdom. For Hughes, the story prescribes a complete amputation of everything that is wild and irrational, an illness-inducing attempt to suppress the dragon who lives, as it were, within us – our Neanderthal, our Esau, our wild self projected onto the world around us, where it can be targeted by the rational self in its ceaseless efforts to comprehend and control.

The desire to comprehend and control, and the escalation into violence this encourages, fuels Hughes’s most obvious adaptation of the dragon legend, ‘Crow’s Account of St George’ (*CP* 225-6). The opening lines show us a hyperactive and obsessive rationality: ‘He sees everything in the Universe / Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer’. The singlemindedness of his pursuit evacuates any natural richness from the universe, so it becomes ‘a silence’ and ‘an emptiness’. The rational mind, metonymically present in those numbers, succeeds merely in finding its own self-projection, so that rationality is both the searching tool – ‘tweezers of numbers’ – and the reality discovered – ‘He melts cephalopods and sorts raw numbers / Out of their dregs.’ But this is not a healthy way to be. Demons begin appearing at doors and windows, and fearfully George fights back, beating the increasingly monstrous demons with chairs and then a sword. These demons symbolise his own irrational self as much as external nature, and the violence of ‘Crow’s Account of St George’ is of a piece with the violent rivalries discussed in Chapter 2: Cro-Magnon vs Neanderthal, hunter vs ape, Lumb vs the changeling. The poem’s provocative ending, in which George ‘Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the house / Where his wife and children lie in their blood’, brings home the consequences of the false categorical thinking illustrated by the dragon legend. More than a poignant shorthand for emotional attachment, family is the delta-like intersection of the individual self and a wider ecology. Family is the proof of our involvement in the world, the stake of our investment. It is not only the isolated individual, the poem tells us, who pays the price for his inability to accept the entire truth of himself. The irrational, the animalistic, the demonic and angelic must be accepted, or the ensuing murderous deprivation exacts its toll from those we love most.

In saying this, we reach the heart of Hughes’s most serious and consistent religious criticism:

Christianity in suppressing the devil, in fact suppresses imagination and suppresses vital natural life. Not so much in Roman Catholicism where he's got a place. But in the Protestant Church the devil is so suppressed that he's hardly recognized at all finally. He's been completely extinguished . . . and, of course, he leaks out in every direction as a very evil, wicked and uncontrolled and unsuspected presence.[[306]](#footnote-306)e.

This is an absurdly misleading argument. In fact, many Protestant churches, especially those leaning toward Puritanical extremes, enthusiastically invoke imagery of hellfire and devilry (not least the Primitive Methodist church Hughes attended for the first eight years of his life, discussed later in this chapter). Indeed, perhaps the best known Puritan writer in English literature is Milton, whose *Paradise Lost* features Satan himself in the starring role! *Pilgrim’s Progress*, by the Puritan preacher John Bunyan, is another popular Protestant epic with a prominent role for the devil.

Hughes speaks similarly, and somewhat more defensibly, when he comments in an interview, ‘When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature . . . and Nature became the devil.’[[307]](#footnote-307) By ‘kicked the devil out of Job’, I take Hughes to be referring to Christianity’s suggested abandonment of the theology of the Book of Job, in which Satan has a place in God’s court and God takes full credit for natural evil and the destructive power of non-human nature, a theology which was then replaced with an anthropocentric perspective by which the world’s passing is mere backdrop for the human drama of salvation. In the story of St George the dragon must die for the souls of the city to be saved, and when we think of the significance Hughes would have attached to the dragon, his dismay is understandable.

But is it fair? In calling the dragon story the ‘key symbolic story of Christianity’, Hughes makes a bold claim for a story which appears nowhere in the Bible and contributes nothing to the fundamental tenets of Christian faith. As already noted, Christianity had existed for a millennium or more before the dragon tale enters the historical record, and speculation over its origins takes us to patterns in pagan myth, as explained in a study of a manuscript of the legend.

The underlying story of hero, maiden, and monster […] may well have its origins deep in the pre-Christian combat myths of Egypt and Greece: for example, in the myth of the Golden Fleece, where the magician Medea helps Jason by using drugs to subdue the dragon guarding the Fleece in its shrine at Colchis; in the myth of Horus, the Egyptian god of good and light, who battles Seth-Typhon, god of evil and darkness (represented in one fifth-century Egyptian bas-relief as a crocodile); and in the myth of Perseus, son of Zeus and destroyer of Medusa, who saves King Cepheus’ daughter Andromeda from the jaws of a sea monster to which she has been offered as a sacrifice in order to stop his ravaging of Ethiopia. But when or by whom Horus/Perseus was transformed into George, or Medea “displaced” into the helpless princess, is obscure.[[308]](#footnote-308)

Christopher Walter, in his illuminating study *The Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art and Tradition* (2003) refers to these associations as ‘naïve assimilations’, and adds several more, including Mithra, Tammuz, Adonis, Pales and the Lithuanian deity Pergrubius.[[309]](#footnote-309) His measured conclusion on this topic, however, leaves more than enough licence for the mythological pattern-seeker:

However, while one may demur at the identification of St George with pre-Christian divinities or the presentation of him as a reincarnation of any of them, one can readily accept osmosis, which led ultimately to him replacing them in folklore and popular devotion.[[310]](#footnote-310)

Pagan myth is replete with tales of slain beasts. All of this complicates Hughes’s criticism of the dragon legend and his statement that ‘Christian fables’ are harmful to children because, as he says, ‘so many of them were created and shaped as a corrective or as a defence against pagan imagination and pagan influences in Christian society.’[[311]](#footnote-311) Elsewhere in his essay, seeking ‘an ordinary monster story’ for comparison to one of his own, he revealingly reaches for Hercules, another character of pagan, not Christian, fame.[[312]](#footnote-312) Hughes’s anti-Christian polemic is seldom louder or more insistent than in the 1970 ‘Myth and Education’ essay, but the ice he skates is never thinner.

So the dragon legend is a late addition to the Christian storybook with roots in the pre-Christian world: a poor candidate for the key symbolic story of Christianity, but an excellent place to begin a critique of Western cultural patterns more generally. Discussing ‘Crow’s Account of St George’ in a letter to Sagar, Hughes hits a more syncretic and, I think, a more accurate note:

I tried to dissolve in a raw psychic event, a history of religion & ideology rooted in early Babylonian Creation myth, descending through Middle Eastern religions, collision of Judaism & its neighbours, the mannichees [sic] & the early Christians & the Roman Empire, the reformation & its peculiar development & ramifications in Englishness, down to linguistic philosophy & the failure of the English intelligence in the modern world—failure in comprehensiveness, depth, flexibility, & emotional charge. (*LTH* 339-40)

This failure of flexibility and emotional charge provides the nub of Hughes’s cultural criticism, and it is not a criticism of Christian theology or cosmology, but of a certain style of thought, an attitude of rational detachment as lampooned in ‘Crow’s Account of St George’, an attitude which supposes that we can stand apart from the world, uninvolved, the better to observe it in a proper and truthful way. Indeed, the 1970 ‘Myth and Education’ is nearly as critical of science as it is of Christianity.

Our school syllabus of course is one outcome of three hundred years of rational enlightenment, which had begun by questioning superstitions and ended by prohibiting imagination itself as a reliable mental faculty, branding it more or less as a criminal in a scientific society, reducing the Bible to a bundle of old woman's tales, finally murdering God. And what this has ended in is a completely passive attitude of apathy in face of material facts. The scientific attitude, which is the crystallization of the rational attitude, has to be passive in face of the facts if it is to record the facts accurately. […] The result is something resembling mental paralysis.[[313]](#footnote-313)

Hughes’s message here is a little hard to grasp. Is it possible to decry Christian stories yet regret the marginalisation of the Bible? The reference to God’s murder compels us to reach for Nietzsche, who displays the same ambivalence in declaring that ‘Absolute, honest atheism’ is ‘an awe-inspiring *catastrophe*, the outcome of a two-thousand-year training in truthfulness, which finally forbids itself the *lie of belief in God*.’[[314]](#footnote-314) Like Hughes, Nietzsche sees the rise of rational scientific enquiry and the refinement of Christianity away from superstition as two aspects of the same cultural operation:

What, strictly speaking really *defeated* the Christian God? [… The answer is] Christian morality itself, the increasing seriousness with which the concept of truthfulness was taken, the refinement of the Christian conscience in confession, translated and sublimated into the scientific conscience, into intellectual hygiene at all costs. To view nature as if it were proof of the goodness and protection of a God; to interpret history to the honour of a divine reason, as continual witness to a moral world-order and its ultimate moral intentions; […] that time is *past*[.][[315]](#footnote-315)

Nietzsche goes further than Hughes in blaming (or crediting) Christianity for the cultivation of its own demise, but both identify the origins of this scientific ethos with the evolution of the Christian religion. Hughes names Protestantism as the guilty party, while for Nietzsche , raised in Germany and writing in Switzerland, both early strongholds of the Reformation, this is implied or assumed.

The pastness of a time of religious faith may have appeared complete, or nearly so, to Nietzsche, but Hughes’s career is dedicated to nothing if not the proposition that negotiations can always be reopened. The 1970 ‘Myth and Education’ essay from which I have been quoting is part of a discussion of *The Iron Man* (1968), a safe bet for his most popular and successful children’s book, and certainly the title most frequently recalled when I mention Hughes to people who don’t read poetry. In the story a boy named Hogarth finds a mysterious giant made of iron who devours metal, including farmers’ machinery. The farmers trap and bury him, but he escapes and carries on eating up their metal until Hogarth suggests letting him live in a scrap yard. In the second half of the story, as Roberts says, ‘the theme of the first half is repeated on a global scale.’[[316]](#footnote-316) A space-bat-angel-dragon arrives from a distant star, covers Australia with its monstrous body, and demands to be fed. All the world’s militaries are powerless against the creature, but Hogarth summons the Iron Man, who challenges the space-bat-angel-dragon to a trial of endurance. The Iron Man is repeatedly heated on an enormous grill over burning fuel-oil, and the space-bat-angel-dragon, to match him, must roast himself on the only heat source large enough: the sun. On the third round the monster relents, and is made to fly around the earth, singing ‘the music of the spheres’:

So his fearful shape, slowly swimming through the night sky, didn’t frighten people, because it was dark and he couldn’t be seen. But the whole world could hear him, a strange soft music that seemed to fill the whole of space, a deep weird singing, like millions of voices singing together. […] Suddenly the world became wonderfully peaceful. The singing got inside everybody and made them as peaceful as starry space, and blissfully above all their earlier little squabbles. (*IM* 61-2)

Interestingly, though the effect of the space dragon’s singing appears social or political, in his discussion of the story Hughes’s intentions primarily concern the health and integrity of the individual human mind. Imagining himself a poet of a bygone age, when stories enjoyed a higher status as a kind of lived magic, he suggests that *The Iron Man*

would, first of all, connect you back to your struggle with ordinary existence and society and outer life, and that beyond that, it would connect you with the deepest and most alien seeming powers in your own mind, which are the correspondents of the outermost demon powers of space.[[317]](#footnote-317)

Hughes refines this in very modern, psychological terms, saying that his story

would cure schizophrenia – you read my story and you'll be cured, temporarily. Or, if you knew my story very well, I could claim, supposing I were this kind of early poet, that you then have a ground plan and a sort of blueprint for automatically knowing how to deal with any neurosis that began to develop in you[.][[318]](#footnote-318)

His inner-world commentary upon his outer-world narrative implies much about Hughes as a social and religious thinker: that a community is first a gathering of individuals, with social evils ultimately traceable to pathologies of the private minds, and that the significant negotiations of any person’s life take place with an energy residing simultaneously in the innermost recesses of the psyche, and, mysteriously, the outermost nooks of non-human creation.

This point is worth stressing: the world of Hughes’s poetry is a world of impoverished human interactions, especially when viewed through the lens of his own commentary. *The Iron Man*, Hughes tells us, is an allegory of how the individual can deal with troublesome psychological content, a blueprint for mustering internal resource – not a story about groupthink or tribalism or consumerism or the threat of nuclear war, all themes which suggest themselves. Any such social themes would be symptoms of the disordered individuals who compose society, not problems arising on the social level. In a similar way he describes ‘The Head’, which could easily be cast as a parable about the evils of trophy hunting or colonialism, as full of ‘real truths of the everymanskinhisownskunk sort’ (*LTH* 449). The proverb ‘every man skin his own skunk’ is a Hughes favourite, which he elsewhere relates to ‘facing in ourselves what we do not want to face’ (*LTH* 566). From the muddy walker of ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ to the wodwo to the raptor of ‘Hawk Roosting’, Hughes’s most popular and most resonant protagonists exist in isolation from other minds. Where multiple characters do exist, these often serve as projections of an unintegrated mind. In Hughes, all problems ultimately defer to the individual’s struggle to confront his or her own true and complete self.

This individualistic emphasis accounts in large part, I believe, for the perceived hostility of Hughes’s work toward religion. Temperamentally and philosophically, ‘orthodox communal worship’, as he calls it in draft replies to Bishop Hook,[[319]](#footnote-319) was anathema to Hughes. In other correspondence, discussing *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, he relates the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism to a conflict between ‘the demonic nature of sexual life’ and ‘the laws of communal and civilised life’.[[320]](#footnote-320) The justice of such a statement may be doubtful (the Catholic Church, with its long history of Vatican authority and missionary adventure, has certainly been involved in the projects of community and civilisation), but Hughes’s valuation remains at least consistent: Protestantism, as a further historical step beyond Catholicism, is a further step into the self-divisive and self-suppressive folly of modern Western civilisation. The leaking-out of the suppressed devil which Hughes describes in ‘Myth and Education’ is of course another rephrased reference to ‘our own baser nature shoved down into the id’,[[321]](#footnote-321) the irrational, animal content of our subconscious minds which we would experience as divine if only we could bring our inner lives into sufficient order. The possibility of this positive reordering and re-integration is the consistent hope of Hughes’s work, a hope given particular voice in his writing for children. Hughes, so critical of religion as communal and cultural institution, betrays, by that very career-spanning criticism, a hope that the reconnective purpose of religion, at some time and in some form, should succeed. Succeed, that is, in restoring us to wholeness, each with our own space-bat-angel-dragon circling our private world, revealing to us the music of the spheres.

Hughes’s hope is audible in this music, which (like the dragon story itself) brings the Christian and pre-Christian worlds together. Discussing the opening of Psalm 19, Tillich writes that the psalm

points to an old belief held by the ancient world and expressed by poets and philosophers: that the heavenly bodies, the sun and the moon and the stars, produce by their movement a harmony of tones, sounding day and night from one end of the world to the other. These voices of the universe are not heard by human ears; they do not speak in human language. But they exist, and we can perceive them through the organs of our spirit.[[322]](#footnote-322)

The psalm itself describes the universal, transcendent nature of the music:

Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge.

*There is no* speech nor language, *where* their voice is not heard.

Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them hath he [God] set a tabernacle for the sun,

Which *is* as a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, *and* rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race.

His going forth is from the end of the heaven, and his circuit unto the ends of it: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof. (Psalm 19:2-6)

It is tempting to hear, in the references to the strong sun and the inescapable heat of God, a possible textual source of the star-born and sun-tested space-bat-angel-dragon of *The Iron Man*. Tillich also quotes a passage from *The Merchant of Venice* which Hughes, encyclopaedic reader of Shakespeare that he was, would certainly have known:

There’s not the smallest orb which thou behold’st,

But in his motion like an angel sings […]

Such harmony is in immortal souls;

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay

Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.[[323]](#footnote-323)

This music is a lapsarian symbol, a symbol of the beauty and divinity of the universe which we as humans cannot fully apprehend. It is not the sound of a distant or supernatural heaven; rather, it is the harmony of the real.

Despite the uplifting conclusion of *The Iron Man*, something of the continuing fallenness of the human condition reaches us in the sorry state of the space-bat-angel-dragon after its contest with the Iron Man:

And now he was a very changed monster. The fires of the sun had worked on him in a way that was awful to see. His wings were only rags of what they had been. His skin was crisped. And all his fatness had been changed by the fires of the sun into precious stones[.] (*IM* 59)

The monster, symbol for everything demonised and suppressed in our inner and outer worlds, flops back to earth diminished and monetised, but ‘the Iron Man could not allow himself to pity’ the creature. The monster weeps and wheezes, and finally surrenders at the prospect of a third roasting.

“You’ve won, yes, you’ve won, and I am your slave,” cried the space-bat-angel-dragon. “I’ll do anything you like, but not the sun again.”

And he plunged his chin in the Pacific, to cool it.

“Very well,” said the Iron Man. “From now on you are the slave of the earth. […]” (*IM* 60)

An adult reader may well feel misgiving over this arrangement. The Iron Man is not a natural creature. Built of metal, at home in our junk, and quite tolerant of a roasting with jet fuel, he functions symbolically as both a projection of technologically advanced humanity and a troublesome neurosis in Hogarth's psyche: the outer and inner aspects of our modernity. So how do we read the symbolic resolution of the story’s plot? Is nature destined to submit to the remorseless authority of human technology? Asked why he came to earth with his ‘greedy and cruel ideas’, the space-bat-angel-dragon replies, ‘It just came over me, listening to the battling shouts and the war-cries of the earth – I got excited, I wanted to join in’ (*IM* 60-1). The monster reflects our own corrupt behaviour. Just as we saw in Chapter 3, and in line with the prophet Isaiah, human moral failure produces natural outrage. Perhaps this is what Hughes meant when he observes that ‘Nature is no longer so simple’:[[324]](#footnote-324) there can be no perfect return to a former innocence, only ongoing negotiations in which our inner failures have outer-world consequences. The measured cheerfulness of *The Iron Man*, salted here and there with hints of dismay, gives it, as Roberts says, ‘a distinctly contemporary’ feel.[[325]](#footnote-325) Though Hughes goes further than Shakespeare or the psalmist in placing the music of the spheres within hearing of people, a modern and mature ambiguity rests over the story. At his first appearance the Iron Man lacks one ear, and by the story’s conclusion he finds his remaining ear is ‘slightly drooped where the last roasting had slightly melted it.’ Still, ‘he hummed in harmony to the singing of his tremendous slave in heaven’ (*IM* 61). But how many more mistakes, how much more conflict, before we lose entirely our ability to hear that ‘strange, wild, blissful music’? (*IM* 62)

## 5.3: Protestantism redux

If the history of Christianity for Hughes is the regrettable story of the rise of Puritanism, attended at every step by a worsening of estrangement, a growing deafness to the wild and blissful music of the spheres, the regret is doubled by Hughes’s awareness of another way, a native Christian religion now beyond recovery. ‘Celtic Christianity was his great interest’, says Martin Palmer, friend, collaborator in founding the Sacred Earth Drama Trust, Anglican and ‘lay preacher’[[326]](#footnote-326) who is himself an enthusiast of the Celtic Church. Hughes, he told me, ‘believed English Christianity took the wrong turn at the Synod of Whitby.’[[327]](#footnote-327) The Synod of Whitby in 664 essentially reconciled the native strain of Christianity to Rome and papal authority, and Hughes wrote approvingly to Moelwyn Merchant of Palmer’s idea that this historic mistake might be undone, creating a religion ‘more inclusive, more comprehensive, less divisive—more positive.’[[328]](#footnote-328) Where modern Anglicanism can appear emotionally staid, the Celtic Church ‘is marked by a kind of heroic devotion’.[[329]](#footnote-329) The origins of Celtic Christianity are obscure, and James P. Mackey summarises a limited historical record by noting that ‘The Celts seem to have taken quite quickly and early to Christianity’. Following the typical pattern of cultural transmission, the ‘christianizing of the Celt’ included ‘the *quid pro quo* of the Christian preservation of pre-Christian Celtic culture’,[[330]](#footnote-330) and the resultant elementalism and divinisation of creation gives Celtic Christianity its most appealing characteristic. As Palmer writes,

It is as if they saw the world through eyes which divined the godly within all and saw all as godly. […] Here was an expression of Christianity which had nothing of the Protestant guilt complex about enjoyment, nor the master/manager language of the Roman Catholic church with regard to nature.[[331]](#footnote-331)

One of the most famous surviving Celtic prayers is known as ‘the *Lorica Sancti Patritii*, the Deer’s Cry (*Faeth Fiada*), and *St Patrick’s Breastplate*’.[[332]](#footnote-332) The prayer in its earliest extant form dates to the eighth century, but, as N. D. O’Donoghue notes, this ‘leaves wide open the question as to whether the hymn, as we have it, may have come from an earlier form dating back to the fifth century or even to pre-Patrician times.’[[333]](#footnote-333) The *Lorica*’s fourth stanza exemplifies the appeal of the Celtic Christian tradition to a writer such as Hughes:

For my shield this day I call:

Heaven’s might,

Sun’s brightness,

Moon’s whiteness,

Fire’s glory,

Lightning’s swiftness,

Wind’s wildness,

Ocean’s depth,

Earth’s solidity,

Rock’s immobility.[[334]](#footnote-334)

These words, as O’Donoghue observes, ‘bring with them a kind of animism that seems pagan rather than Christian.’[[335]](#footnote-335) The *Lorica* ‘is the prayer of a man or woman, a wayfarer, setting forth across a landscape that is overlighted by the Lord God of Hosts and overshadowed by dark spirits.’[[336]](#footnote-336) Moralising distinctions aside, this seems a world very akin to that experienced by the Ouija-playing, ghost-summoning, premonition-suffering Hughes. Above all, Celtic Christianity provides a model of how the Christian cosmology may be blended with a visceral experience of nature, an earthiness to oppose the churchiness of Anglicanism and the anthropocentricity of Protestantism more generally.

Whether the Celtic option would have made a Christian out of Hughes, we’ll never know. (One imagines not.) But Protestant anthropocentricity seems to have secured his disdain for the church of the land as it stood. The Reformation, says Palmer,

elevated the Word to being the only conceivable instrument of truth. We [he and Hughes] both agreed that the Reformation denuded the natural world of the sacred, and in doing so we lost any sense that we were part of creation, and instead became apart from and observer of nature.[[337]](#footnote-337)

The restoration of such a sense ‘necessitates a narrative that is greater than just us.’[[338]](#footnote-338) This sentiment echoes what Hughes wrote to Merchant about his early identification of the ‘sacrificed God’ with ‘the whole animal & vegetable kingdom’ (*LTH* 580). As Palmer put it to me, ‘His passion narrative was creation, not humanity’.[[339]](#footnote-339) But in the same letter to Merchant, Hughes singles out the plight of the human subject as ‘separated’ from the ‘divine world’ and ‘internal identity with the divine self’ (*LTH* 581) by the human ego. Animals, he writes, ‘have never been detached from it,’ meaning from the world of divine ‘Creation’. Hughes’s repeated stressing of the fallen human condition places, of course, special demands on the human being. Every least animal and plant may be an aspect of the sacrificed God, but it is only to the human that this condition does not come automatically: we must accept it, joining, in Tillich’s terms, our freedom to our destiny. Referring to shamans able to access a ‘lost “divine” consciousness’, Hughes describes this act of access as ‘a spontaneous collapse of the cultural ego’. This break with received culture, culture which may have developed as an attempt to access the divine or as a substitute for it but which no longer does the trick, is central to Hughes’s attitude toward his own vocation as poet. It is also a very Protestant way of thinking. As Tom Paulin observes:

Hughes’s fierce identification with the momentous instant, the now of action and perception, belongs to a type of Protestant discourse that rejects all that is formal and institutional in favour of something Nietzsche and Hughes term the ‘elemental’.[[340]](#footnote-340)

Hughes’s distaste for cultural religion may be the gift of the culture of his family’s religion – not in the sense of putting him off, but of positively encouraging a distrust of institutions.

When Martin Luther nailed his *95 Theses* to the church door in 1517 he took a stand against the ‘cultural ego’ of the increasingly worldly Catholic Church.

[U]nder the political protection of the German prince of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, Luther was able to defy the authority of both the pope and the emperor. Between 1520 and 1525, he published a series of influential books on faith, the sacraments, and the church. While attacking the papal authority and the sacramental system as symptoms of ‘the pagan captivity of the church’, Luther developed the implications of his ‘evangelical discovery’.[[341]](#footnote-341)

Luther had discovered that grace is freely given. The institution of the Church need not mediate between us and the divine. Tillich lays out the larger meaning of this discovery:

The Protestant principle […] contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by a Protestant church. The Protestant principle is the judge of every religious and cultural reality, including the religion and culture which calls itself “Protestant.”[[342]](#footnote-342)

As Tillich continues to plumb the implications of the Protestant line of thought, he touches on the blinkered nature of fallen human perception. The Protestant principle, he writes,

is the theological expression of the true relation between the unconditional and the conditioned or, religiously speaking, between God and man. As such, it is concerned with what theology calls “faith,” namely, the state of mind in which we are grasped by the power of something unconditional which manifests itself as the ground and judge of our existence. The power grasping us in the state of faith is not a being beside others, not even the highest; it is not an object among objects, not even the greatest; but it is a quality of all beings and objects, the quality of pointing beyond themselves and their finite existence to the infinite, inexhaustible, and unapproachable depth of their being and meaning. The Protestant principle is the expression of this relationship. It is the guardian against the attempts of the finite and conditioned to usurp the place of the unconditional in thinking and acting. It is the prophetic judgement against religious pride, ecclesiastical arrogance, and secular self-sufficiency and their destructive consequences.[[343]](#footnote-343)

We must remember that Tillich interprets the fall much more broadly than Hughes, as the quality of existence contrasted with essence, so that every fish and every stone has fallen into its actualised existence from a transcendent potential; our original sin is no more than our emergence into creation. For Hughes, the fall refers to the specifically human plight of ego-consciousness. So Tillich’s suggestion of a transcendent order of the ‘the infinite, inexhaustible, and unapproachable’ correlates to Hughes’s ‘divine world’ and ‘internal identity with the divine self’, even though this divine world exists entirely within what Tillich terms ‘the conditional’, that is, the actualised and therefore fallen universe. My point is to suggest that the lapsarian cast of Hughes’s mind manifests in just the sort of counter-cultural judgement which Tillich claims as the Protestant principle, as Hughes looks toward an unconditional divine nature forever threatened by the conditioned world of human culture. In this formulation we see both Hughes’s relentless scepticism, hostility or plain disinterest toward religious institutions, and his equally relentless searching-out of the divine, the unfallen, as a defence against the destructive consequences of failed or neglected negotiations.

Thus, we can say that Hughes sympathises both with the Catholic/pagan sacralisation of matter and Protestant refusal to credit any such belief absolutely. This brings us to the heart of the Protestant Reformation as it took form in Europe. ‘Catholicism’, writes Tillich, ‘claims to offer a secure way of overcoming the separation of man from his divine ground through sacramental graces and ascetic exercises, the efficacy of which is guaranteed by the hierarchy and its sacramental powers.’[[344]](#footnote-344) For Luther, however, such sacramentalism was a dangerous distraction. Nor does Tillich let Protestantism itself off the hook, referring to the justness of ‘the constant suspicion that Protestantism has itself become an ideology, the worship of a man-made God.’[[345]](#footnote-345) Hughes’s pithy corroboration of this Protestant distrust of ceremony and institution is the ‘Finale’ to *Cave Birds*, which I quote in its brief entirety: ‘At the end of the ritual / Up comes a goblin’ (*CP* 440). Yet recall his comment to Faas that ‘rituals, the machinery of religion’ are ‘the only’ method of controlling the violent ‘energy’ of life, the ‘elemental power circuit of the Universe’, and ‘turning it to good’.[[346]](#footnote-346) Ongoing negotiations and a constant improvisation of new ritual (including, of course, literary production) are our best strategies for managing this energy, turning it to imaginative, redemptive account: ‘As if we should deny an enemy’, scoffs Hughes, ‘rather than pin him down in everlasting negotiations.’[[347]](#footnote-347) Such unwillingness to engage in negotiations with the real, the unconditional, is, for Hughes, the hallmark of both Puritan Protestantism and the Enlightenment which followed it.

Among the new critical essays included in *Winter Pollen*, the longest is ‘The Snake in the Oak’, Hughes’s exploration of Coleridge’s visionary poems. The essay revisits all of the major themes of his writing on Shakespeare. Hughes begins his theorising on Shakespeare’s plays by noting that the best of his work ‘has its taproot in a sexual dilemma of a peculiarly black and ugly sort.’ The single pattern of Shakespeare’s work ‘is the plan Shakespeare made of his own nature, as he unearthed it’ – his own ‘deeply divided nature’ (*WP* 106) – which simultaneously ‘very closely fits the groundplan of the religious struggle which […] embroiled every fibre of Elizabethan life’ (*WP* 109). Just so, writing of Coleridge, Hughes tells us that

given his mind, his curiosity and his reading, it [the ‘myth of what destroyed him’] became the representative myth of a conflict between certain traditions – religious and intellectual – in which Coleridge was a casualty, and perhaps a martyr. (*WP* 375-6)

And just as Hughes’s Shakespeare encodes the counterpart myths of Catholicism and Puritanism, ‘two complexes of religious fanaticism’ (*SGCB* 5) in Elizabethan England, so Coleridge expresses in his best work the conflict between what Coleridge calls his ‘unleavened *Self*’ and his Christian self (*WP* 377). ‘He dutifully preached on Sundays, but every night of the weekday, according to the poems he was writing, he dreamed a very different life’ (*WP* 179), a vision dominated by a ‘pagan Great Goddess’ (*WP* 433).

Hughes writes with a particularly strong anti-Christian tenor in this essay, picking up on Coleridge’s own notes on his divided self, which, so far as Hughes quotes them, make no distinction between Protestant/Puritan and Catholic – merely his ‘unleavened’ self on the one hand, and ‘the Love of Christ in and thro’ Christ’s love of me’ on the other (*WP* 377). It is as if the conflict still raging in Shakespeare’s time had, to Hughes’s thinking, resolved by Coleridge’s time to Protestant victory, so that the Goddess, expelled from the Catholic Church, had been forced to retrench in a purer and scarcer paganism, and Christianity as a whole became the enemy. Discussing ‘Rime of the Ancient Mariner’ and its revelation of Coleridge’s inner turmoil, Hughes refers repeatedly to the Mariner’s ‘Christian vestige’ and Coleridge’s ‘Christian conscience’ and ‘Christian Self’, noting how the Mariner’s ship sinks with its ‘corpses of obsolete Christian automata’ (*WP* 432). Even the crucifix, elsewhere in Hughes a positive (though hardly an untroubling) symbol, is here turned against the Goddess: ‘As if the Albatross were still doing the work of a crucifix around his neck. As if its corpse were also the Christ-Crossbow with which he had killed what – when it was alive – was the emissary of the Female’ (*WP* 431). Finally, as Hughes tells us, Coleridge realises ‘that his Christian life, and the limited cognitive system that goes with it, is a lie’ (*WP* 433).

There are signs that Hughes is lifting this more inclusive than usual style from Coleridge, and that Hughes’s own core interest lies still with the fallout of the Reformation. He refers, for instance, to ‘Coleridge’s Protestant (sharpening to Puritan) goggles’ (*WP* 425), and toward the end of the essay he remarks that ‘[t]he pivotal event of ‘The Ancient Mariner’ is the Mariner’s transformation from the Protestant Christian who cannot pray in his world of loathsome death, to the (quasi-Catholic) Pagan spontaneously blessing the Creation in his world of radiant life’ (*WP* 456). A final qualification to the essay’s consistent negativity toward the idea of a ‘Christian self’ or ‘Christian conscience’ begins with Hughes’s mention of an Indian tradition that Christ spent time with yogic adepts in the Himalayas. An awareness of this story in the West, he suggests, might have made it easier for Coleridge ‘to set the radical, primitive, extra-Christian inclusiveness of his religious feeling in a positive context.’ This context encompasses ‘a greater holistic revelation, more truly like Christ’s own, more self-evidently that of a greater “god of love”’ (*WP* 463). We see here Hughes’s appreciation for the vagaries of the term ‘Christian’, and for the difference between a revelatory and liberating story and the burdensome cultural accretions to that story over time.

Hughes insisted upon an ‘extra-Christian inclusiveness’ in all of his engagements with religion and religious material, including ‘The Snake in the Oak’, which, though obviously guided by Coleridge’s poems, follows an overall familiar topography. He refers to the ‘precarious’ recreation of ‘the primal, unfallen bliss’ which Coleridge briefly enjoyed with William and Dorothy Wordsworth, an ‘acceptance of every recognised truth about himself right back to the womb’ (*WP* 383), suggesting both the darker, repressed content of the human psyche and the origins of human woe in the tragedy of our ‘untimely birth’. He incorporates the theme of the rival brothers, the ‘primal fratricidal combat’ (*WP* 416). He distinguishes between ‘the Jehovah of Job’ and ‘the later Jehovah of Mercy and Forgiveness’ who ‘took over the nature and attributes (in all but sex) of the Great Goddess’ (*WP* 386). Hughes relates Coleridge’s treatment of this Jehovah-Goddess to the mythological Hamadryad, defined in a footnote as ‘a wood-nymph fabled to live and die in the tree she inhabited’. Two more definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* are supplied in the same note: ‘a large, very venomous hooded serpent’ and ‘a large baboon’ (*WP* 386). Although Hughes makes no further comment, the definitions nudge us toward the accumulated symbols for the divine world: the serpent of Genesis and Revelation, and the maternal ancestor of pre-modern humans.

The inclusion of the ‘great tree’ in this context, by way of a notebook entry in which Coleridge selects ‘the Oak’ (*WP* 380) as a figure for his inner vitality and strength (or lack thereof), allows Hughes, and us, to expand our inventory of equivalences one crucial figure further. In a footnote on Coleridge’s symbolic use of the Oak, Hughes tells us about the universality of tree symbolism in ancient religions, noting particularly the that ‘Odin, the Norse Allfather, hangs on Yggdrasill [a cosmic ash tree] for nine nights, a spear through his side, in shamanic communication with the Giver of Spiritual Gifts […] which made Christ a familiar figure to the Norsemen.’ Hughes quotes a song attributed to Odin, which includes the Christological lines, ‘An offering to Odin / Myself to myself’ (*WP* 382). The cross-as-tree figuration ‘has a long, rich history’ within the Christian tradition, as Richard Harries notes regarding the very treelike cross in *The Amesbury Psalter*, a thirteenth-century illuminated gospel.[[348]](#footnote-348) Earlier yet, in the anonymous Old English poem ‘The Dream of the Rood’ (c. 750–1000 A.D.) a speaking tree tells the story of how it was cut down and transformed, first against its will but with growing enthusiasm for its salvific purpose, into the cross of Christ.[[349]](#footnote-349) The apocryphal Gospel of Nicodemus also makes the connection:

O prince Satan, holder of the keys of hell, those thy riches which thou hadst gained by the tree of transgression and the losing of paradise, thou hast lost by the tree of the cross, and all thy gladness hath perished. […]

And the Lord stretching forth his hand, said: Come unto me, all ye my saints which bear mine image and my likeness. Ye that by the tree and the devil and death were condemned, behold now the devil and death condemned by the tree.[[350]](#footnote-350)

The tree united in these various sources, the site of both Odin’s and Christ’s suffering, the tree of the sacrificed god, is the tree inhabited, according to Hughes, by the Goddess. Thus the Christian cross becomes a Goddess figure, united symbolically with Mary and the serpent – and the boar, and Esau, and all the rest, in Hughes’s endless refiguring of the repressed and resurgent divine.

As with the equivalence between Mary and the Serpent, the suggested equivalence between Mary and the Cross confounds Christian orthodoxy. We glimpsed the connection in Hughes’s discussion of the boar in Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, where he refers to the ‘sacrificed and reborn god-king’, for in a Christian context the instrument of this sacrifice is not the Goddess’s boar, but the cross. Elsewhere he writes explicitly about the connection. In ‘The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly’ he refers to Baskin’s hanged figure as

becom[ing], like crucified Jesus, a figure nailed to his mother, sucked empty by his mother, paralysed by the clasp of her extra-ordinary gravity, borne through timelessness in a trance of mother-possession, in death-like communion with the goddess of the source, a figure rooted in the womb, as if rooted in the earth or death. (*WP* 91)

An extraordinary sentence. I have written much about the cross as a symbol of teleological freedom, that is, the freedom *to* *be* enjoyed by a contingent creature when aligned toward its proper purpose or end. Such alignment with the divine is consistently figured as crucifixion, by Hughes and others. The divine, as we have seen, takes many symbolic forms in Hughes’s writing, most prominently a Goddess figure who persists as the Christian Mary, mother of God. Hughes merely forces the theological issue, insisting that the divine, maternal world from which we emerge as fallen progeny is indivisible from the pain we experience in coming into teleological terms with that world.

Elsewhere in the Coleridge essay, Hughes refers to the albatross ‘ceas[ing] to be a god pinned on a crucifix’ and returning to the Female ‘perhaps as a newly living child’ (*WP* 432). The belittling ‘pinned’ is characteristic of the Coleridge essay, but the image of a newly living Christ child in his mother’s arms is worth pursuing into other Hughes texts, where the tendency of prose to bring out the polemicist gives way to the greater subtleties of poetry.

## 5.4: *Gaudete*

So I turn to *Gaudete*, which I have already mentioned in the context of the motif of the warring brothers or divided self, with the original Revered Lumb standing for the modern, fallen human, and the changeling standing for our divine, irrational and dangerously suppressed shadow-self. As Sagar explains,

the whole story is a psychological analogue, as all the many stories in myth and folklore of doubles, changelings, tanists, twins, weirds and shadows are. There is only one Lumb. He is undergoing a spiritual/psychological crisis. His way of life as a modern civilized Englishman, as a member of a tight little village community, as a minister in a puritanical religion (he was apparently practicing voluntary celibacy), involves him in denying too much of himself[.][[351]](#footnote-351)

Critics have described the main narrative, in which the changeling Lumb has sex with an impressive number of female parishioners in an attempt to conceive the Messiah and restart Christianity, as ‘tragi-comic’, ‘burlesque’ and ‘farcical’.[[352]](#footnote-352) The comic or farcical aspect of the narrative emerges in similar fashion to the irony of *Crow*, as a way of writing seriously about religion while refusing to take religion completely seriously. A slightly parodic intent, indeed, appears present at even the private level: writing to Moelwyn Merchant in 1978 about *Gaudete*, Hughes quips, ‘I expect the baldness + the rest made you smile.’ Merchant was both bald and an Anglican priest.[[353]](#footnote-353) More generally, *Gaudete* offers a travesty on what Hughes sees as the puritanical fear of sex and deprecation of the material world. The war between the (pseudo-Catholic) pagan Goddess and the Puritan Jehovah on which Hughes reports in his Shakespeare book has been resoundingly won by the latter, and the England of *Gaudete* has spiritually atrophied as a result. ‘Why an Anglican priest?’ writes Hughes to Sagar, repeating the critic’s question back to him. ‘How could that adventure happen to a Catholic?’ (*P&C* 58). He doesn’t elaborate, but we can presume that a Catholic’s Marian devotion and cultic sacramentalism would preclude the need for such a nightmarish education as Lumb undergoes.

I find existing critical commentaries on *Gaudete* particularly satisfying. Scigaj gathers together far-flung mythic resonances while emphasising the Jungian implications of the double narrative: ‘The deformities of the changeling also reinforce Lumb’s Double’s status as a representative of Jung’s Shadow archetype—the epitome of the largely unconscious, negative character traits that therapeutic dreams mobilize for their reservoirs of libidinal energy.’[[354]](#footnote-354) The entire book, says Scigaj, exists in a ‘dreamworld narrative’, a ‘nearly silent dreamscape’ in which the parish world, the so-called real world (though in a Lacanian sense *real* is precisely what this world is not), begins to skew and distort as the energies introduced by the changeling work their slow havoc. Sagar’s 1975 discussion likewise provides an illuminating intertextual tour of the book’s sources and resonances, through which we are given to see how the ‘tragi-comic’ narrative results from the complete unreadiness of an English parish community to accommodate the divine. He offers an excellent take on the significance of the main narrative, beyond the entertaining incidents and sharp psychological portraits:

The moral of the main narrative of *Gaudete* is that modern, sophisticated secular society is not equipped to handle these forces, and if willy-nilly exposed to them, will respond with madness, murder, suicide, and a complete breakdown of humanistic civilized values. Yet cut off from them, it is sterile, and by denying them ensures that when they do erupt they will be the more debased, demonic and destructive. The rituals which formerly controlled them cannot now be reconstituted. They were grounded in a communal sense of the sacred which has completely gone.[[355]](#footnote-355)

Gifford and Roberts similarly note that

the lack of a tradition, the lapse in the continuity of ‘religious’ consciousness, debars Lumb from effectively practicing the public and social function of the mystagogue: with a few distorted Christian and pagan fragments he can disrupt but not enlighten the lives of his parishioners.[[356]](#footnote-356)

In *Gaudete*, we see plainly that central paradox of Hughes’s apparent religious disposition: although genuinely regretful at the diminished state of Western religious awareness, he was temperamentally resistant to any sort of formalised religion. A pagan fertility cult, formalised, becomes as ineffectual and dehumanising as the Christian service it replaces.

The pipe and drum music is a tight, shuddering, repetitive machine

Which seems bolted into the ground

And as if they were all its mechanical parts, the women are fastened into it […]

It is like the music of a slogging, deadening, repetitive labour.

They have left their faces hanging on the outside of the music as abandoned masks.

They no longer feel their bodies. (*G* 139)

Such physical self-alienation and anesthetisation cannot be, least of all in a Hughes poem, a good thing.

The anesthetisation of the women is paralleled by the motif of male voyeurism. As Sagar explains:

In the main narrative the first character we meet is Major Hagen, and the first word, with a line to itself, is ‘Binoculars’. Hagan, like so many of the men, is a voyeur. The world is looked at through lenses or glass – a window, a camera, the telescopic sights of a high-velocity rifle.[[357]](#footnote-357)

As for the men of Lumb’s parish so for all humanity, according to St Paul’s famous image in 1 Corinthians, a text obsessed with confronting our incompletion: ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known’ (13:12). The human characters of the main *Gaudete* narrative are estranged not only from Hughes’s ‘vivid portrayal of the manifest natural world’[[358]](#footnote-358) and the divinity implicit therein, but from each other, suffering in relationships impoverished by their own psychic ill-health and self-alienation. We must imagine that the original Lumb, prior to his abduction, had succumbed to the same condition – perhaps even fostered it through the arid ministrations of his religion.

Let’s now turn to the image which brought us to *Gaudete*, the image of a god ‘nailed to his mother’, and that same god in his mother’s arms. A key speech is given by the character of Old Smayle, grandfather of the eighteen year-old Felicity with whom Lumb plans to elope. Smayle sits drinking in the village pub, defending the Reverend while theorising boozily on the matriarchal heart of a superficially patriarchal religion:

It’s like a herd of deer, he says, why is it always led by a hind?

Christianity’s something about women.

His narrowed eye-puffs pierce right to the crux of it.

Christianity is Christ in his mammy’s arms –

Either a babe at the tit

With all the terrible things that are going to happen to him hovering round his head like a halo,

Or else a young fellow collapsed across her knees

With all the terrible things having happened. (*G* 65)

First, why is a herd of deer always led by a hind? Because a female deer occupies the same territory her whole life, in the company of other females, unless driven on by catastrophe or dire need. They know their land well. Males, on the other hand, roam widely in search of unclaimed territories where they can feed and mate without conflict with other competing males. This is why male deer, upon entering an unfamiliar land on their perennial search, will seek out and follow the matriarch of the local population: she knows the best sources of food and water, the thickest cover, the safest paths. Hinds have an autochthonous, native quality, while stags are wanderers, ejected from their own fathers’ territories when scarcely ready and nevermore, seemingly, at home.

Old Smayle’s rhetorical question about the hind points to a tendency, particularly strong in *Gaudete* though present in Hughes’s oeuvre generally, to essentialise gender in a way which suggests that women are fundamentally closer to the divine than men. The failure of Lumb’s Women’s Institute-centred cult offers only a partial rebuttal to this tendency. Scigaj observes that ‘[m]usic in *Gaudete* releases chthonic energies in the women of the parish’,[[359]](#footnote-359) and he directs us to the first appearance of the twenty-two year-old Jennifer, whose beauty and sexuality is ‘unmanageable and frightening’ to her father. Jennifer and her older sister Janet are ‘like leopard cubs suddenly full-grown, come into their adult power and burdened with it’; she is ‘oppressed / By the fulness [sic, a spelling used in the King James Bible] of her breasts, and weight of flame in her face’ as she sits at a piano playing a Beethoven sonata, a channel for its ‘dragonish’ energy, ‘charged with primaeval hungers and primaeval beauty’ (*G* 41-2). These images repeat in the plot’s climactic pagan ritual, where Felicity, drugged by mushrooms and disoriented by cultic theatrics, senses that ‘A tiger / Is trying to adjust its manic flame-barred strength to her body’; she feels the melting of a ‘sweetness’ within her which ‘is like the hot rough fur of the tiger as it bulges and bristles into presence’(*G* 140-1). Context would allow us to read Felicity’s experience as bogus, but what about Jennifer’s? With the ritual hours away, and innocent, at least for the morning, of any involvement with Lumb, the unmanageable energy ‘that pulses in her and swirls flaring round her’ as she plays the sonata would seem genuine – certainly more genuine a manifestation of natural forces than ‘the stuffed gulls’, ‘stuffed falcons’ and ‘stuffed great pike with obedient eyes’ with which her Naval officer father surrounds himself (*G* 42-3). There is no appreciable difference in narrative voice or style between the scene of Jennifer at the piano and Felicity victimised by the cult. Lumb’s elaborately orchestrated ritual fails to complete a summoning of force which Jennifer, alone in a room with a piano, cannot help but produce. Lumb and his religion are superfluous, it would seem, to the release of ‘chthonic energies’.

The men of the parish, including Lumb himself, are like stags who don’t know to follow hinds. Instead, they attempt to possess and control women, but the means of their attempts – binoculars and cameras, drugs and alcohol, guns, and demands for a well-ordered home – only reinforce their own spiritual rootlessness. Hughes symbolises this situation pointedly in the scene of Janet Estridge’s suicide, in the attic, among the birds her father keeps there: ‘Her father’s prisoners […] squalid and miserable’ (*G* 45). Her father has already fled the house to the solace of his telescope, unable to bear Jennifer’s piano playing, while Janet frees the birds and hangs herself. In a similar identification of woman and victimised animal, Dr Westlake later recalls Jennifer’s beauty as ‘all that loose, hot, tumbled softness, / Like freshly-killed game’ (*G* 72), the line-break allowing due surprise at the violent terms of the doctor’s infatuation. The neglect or abuse of female power in the village is reflected in the injured state of the goddess whom the other Lumb, in the other world, must heal, the ‘beautiful woman who seems to be alive and dead’ (*G* 15). The living death of this woman embodies the vital suppression of the lives of the women of Lumb’s parish, a suppression which leaves the men equally depraved. Like all such figures in Hughes, this goddess represents a source of divine life. As Hirschberg notes, ‘In a strange way, her deathly condition is similar to the state of the world Lumb has left. It is as though Hughes was saying that the condition of life itself in the world is quiescent, near extinction and in desperate need of being revived’.[[360]](#footnote-360)

Hirschberg truly hits my nail on the head when he suggests that ‘[t]he way she is described, “her face half-animal / And the half-closed animal eyes, clear-dark back to the first creature” suggests a mysterious continuity that returns us through her to Eve’.[[361]](#footnote-361) When this divine female appears in the main narrative she is described as having ‘A face as if sewn together from several faces. / A baboon beauty face’ (*G* 104). Jennifer is likewise described as having a ‘lemuroid’ profile (*G* 41) and ‘irises clear and nimble-delicate as a baboon’s’ (*G* 57). ‘Baboon’ functions here as elsewhere in Hughes as a positive, indicating a natural and unfallen mode of intelligence. Again we are in the familiar territory of the biological fall, with this baboon-goddess before us as a kind of prelapsarian Eve, our divine maternal source, poorly assembled and stitched together as Lumb stumbles toward enlightenment. In a 1972 letter to Peter Brook, Hughes suggests a modern-day satyr play to illustrate his Shakespearean argument in which ‘Venus would be a schizophrenic female gorilla’ (*LTH* 329). This is funny, but it is scarcely a joke. Of course, the fragmentation of the baboon woman (the schizophrenia of the Venus-gorilla) is really a reflection of our own spiritual injury, our incompletion, our refusal or inability to submit our rational intellects to a divine principle which Hughes routinely though not inevitably figures as female.

We must try to see beyond this essentialising of gender, and genderless figuration of the divine do exist in Hughes’s writing, as in his very last completed work, a translation of Euripides’ play *Alcestis*.

Prometheus: I have given man freedom. […]

God: You think you freed him? You separated him

From the illumination of heaven,

From the wisdom and certainty of heaven. […]

You freed him

To grope his way into the dark maze of the atom

With no more illumination than a hope.

Prometheus: I freed him to be human.

I broke the chains

That made him the slave of your laws.

God: You cut the nerves

That connected him to his own soul. […]

Man will be deaf to my corrections. (*A* 58)

This exchange, an interpolation by Hughes into the original, encapsulates the difference between existential freedom (offered by Prometheus) and teleological freedom, the opportunity to be fulfilled by a divine source offering corrections. The problematic gender politics of both Christianity and *Gaudete* obscure the fact, but the pathos of these lines from Hughes’s *Alcestis* is the essential theme of Old Smayle’s speech on Christianity: our need for comfort and repose within the terms of our human freedom, a reprieve from estrangement within the terms of that estrangement, and the ‘small hope’ that such reprieve may yet be found, even within the ‘dark maze’ of our condition. In focusing his squinting attention on the feminine within Christianity, and specifically on Mary in physical contact with Jesus, Smayle focuses on the material manifestations of our enfolding divine environment. In a Hughesian idiom Mary represents the creative world from which the self-regarding human ego has fallen; in a Christian idiom, as Warner says, ‘Mary was conceived in all purity in the mind of the creator, like the birth of an idea,’[[362]](#footnote-362) and so carries perfection with her into her materiality. In both idioms she is symbolically free of original sin, whether human evolution or prideful disobedience. Mary offers the hope of divine mother-presence at our birth and death alike. ‘Something about the womb’, as Smayle says, ‘foredoomed, protective instinct, / Instinct for loss and woe and lamentation’ (*G* 66). ###ADD FOOTNOTE ON SIMILARIY TO LANGUGAE ABOUTE PLATH

In his article ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’

Hughes had noted Plath’s ‘instinct for nursing’ and her fragility at the atomic

level of ontology, and related both to the recurrent delivery motif:

Maybe her singularity derives from a feminine bee-line instinct for the real

priority, for what truly matters – an instinct for nursing and repairing the

damaged and threatened nucleus of the self and for starving every other

aspect of her life in order to feed and strengthen that, and bring that to

a safe delivery.

Smayle comes close here to striking upon the unity of Mary and the cross. Speaking and thinking only within received Christian patterns leaves this connection difficult to make, though Hughes takes up the challenge in the poem ‘Take What You Want But Pay For It’ (*CP* 773-4), from the late-career miscellany *Wolfwatching* (1989). The riddling title, recycled Genesis characters and fabular setting suggest the poem as an echo of the *Crow* project, and one can observe a lingering crowy ugliness and irony dissolve as the poem proceeds. It is, as Moulin says, ‘both a crucifixion poem and a pieta’.[[363]](#footnote-363) Essentially a rejection of metaphysical dualism which uses the crucifixion, as in ‘Crow Blacker Than Ever’, to illustrate this rejection, ‘Take What You Want But Pay For It’ resounds with cries: first, the ‘cries’ of Adam’s soul suffering in his body; then an ‘unappeasable cry / Of the sounding bush’; then ‘a single / Cry braiding together all the uncried // Cries his body could no longer cry’ which accompanies the agonising collapse of the false dualism: Adam hears the death-cry of Christ omnipresent in nature, the constant revelation of the sacrificed god. An ‘inrush of renewal’ comes when ‘The nailed feet and the hands / Torn free of the nails’ collapse from the ‘stake’ or cross, and Adam falls back to the earth. In the poem’s final movement ‘an ectoplasm’ or ‘misty enfoldment’ emanates from ‘the black pits / Of each nail hole’, becoming ‘a musing woman, who lifted the body / As a child’s, effortless, and walked / Out of the prison with it, singing gently’. This Marian figure arrives through the injury of crucifixion, carrying the Christ-figure out of the prison of misguided dualism which seeks to deprecate matter and elevate spirit. The poem’s title, meaning something like Emerson’s ‘nothing is got for nothing’,[[364]](#footnote-364) offers a riposte to the reader who would reject the crucifixion metaphysic but hope to retain the comfort of the singing woman.

Similar imagery fills a draft poem found among the copious unfinished, still active *Crow* material acquired by the British Library, a poem whose title of ‘Pieta’ comes after cancellations of ‘Death of the God’ and ‘Mother Love in the Wild’. The manuscript draft offers a summary of Hughes’s thoughts on Mary: at the death of the everyman-God her weeping is ‘for all worldly purpose useless’ against ‘the law’ which strikes the protagonist dead. And yet

her touch […]

Lifts him up, as from the womb, fresh

Before the law has done striking

And even while the blood still flows.[[365]](#footnote-365)

Recall Hughes’s 1959 letter to his sister which compares ‘God as the devourer’ who is ‘the whole of evil’ to ‘Mary’ who represents ‘mother-love’ (*LTH* 148). Hughes, it appears, continued to seek a place in his work for an expression of the mother-love which opposes a divine law in which humans, not being hawks or pikes, will never be at rest. Quietly and determinedly, and guided by his own iconoclastic Protestant streak, he regathers the elements of a discarded Mariology.

## 5.5: The world of *Elmet*

In the next chapter I’ll return to *Gaudete* to discuss the Epilogue poems. Now I wish to follow the connection between Mary and the cross into a final book of Hughes’s middle period, *Remains of Elmet*. One of his most successful collaborations, *Remains of Elmet* interleaves Hughes’s poems with Fay Godwin’s atmospheric black and white photographs of the Calder Valley, creating a sombre and haunted meditation on the landscape – physical, familial and spiritual – of Hughes’s earliest childhood. The sequence was revised for its inclusion (without photographs) in *Three Books* (1993), and then further revised and expanded for its republication with photographs as *Elmet* (1994). This final expansion upped the amount of explicitly personal content, mixing the earlier ‘impersonal “mood pieces”’, as Hughes referred to them (*P&C* 286), with intimate portraits of members of his family. The text of *Remains of Elmet* and *Elmet* together present a matrix of private associations to a very specific locale, and in the company of Godwin’s often humanless photographs these associations becomes the disembodied voice of an apparently untenanted land.

Is it Hughes’s voice? Of course in the obvious stylistic sense it is, and Roberts even suggests ‘an air of self-mimicry, if not of self-parody’ about some of the original *Remains of Elmet* poems.[[366]](#footnote-366) But in a 1979 letter Hughes refers to the project as ‘childhood impressions filtered through my mother’s feelings for that landscape. She used to sit & cry, thinking about it’ (*LTH* 427). Diane Middlebrook writes that the poems are based on ‘the memory of his mother’s voice’, part of ‘the process of investigating his mother’s role in his vocation as a poet’.[[367]](#footnote-367) As late as October 1998 Hughes reflects that, ‘Best would have been to build the whole sequence around my father & mother, and let Fay’s pictures provide backdrop merely’ (*P&C* 287). This attitude is symptomatic of the bursting of Hughes’s autobiographical dam that occurred toward the end of his life with the decision to publish *Birthday Letters*, but both the poem-gathering process resulting in the final *Elmet* and his comments about the project suggest a consistent linking of the Pennine landscape with a parental, and specifically a maternal, voice and presence. This maternal presence provides, within the bounds of the *Elmet* project, a valuable check on Hughes’s tendency to cast his discussions of the divine (whether in poetry or prose) in sexual terms.

*Remains of Elmet* opens with ‘The Dark River’, which in turn opens with the arresting lines, ‘Six years into her posthumous life / My uncle raises my mother’s face’ (*CP* 455). Her ‘memory’ survives within her aging brother; even her hands survive as his, so that Hughes feels, through the medium of his uncle, the living presence of his mother. The accessibility of the past expands from family relations outward across the valley, ‘the womb that bore him’, a ‘happy hell’ full of ‘the arguing, immortal dead’ and ‘hymns rising past farms.’ The landscape which Hughes begins in this poem to conjure, a landscape of familial ghosts and religious dialogue with and among the moors, is to be conjured so that it is not lost. It is his ‘last inheritance’, in imminent danger that the dark river of time ‘will fold it away’. In a similar emotional key and engaged in the same sort of private curation, Stevens writes of a visit to a seat of his own maternal family line:

During this last September, I visited the old Zeller house in the Tulpehocken, in Pennsylvania. This family of religious refugees came to this country in 1709, lived for some fifteen or twenty years in the Scoharie region in New York, and then went down the Susquehanna to the valley in which the house was built. Over the door there is an architectural cartouche of the cross with palm-branches below, placed there, no doubt, to indicate that the house and those that lived in it were consecrated to the glory of God. From this doorway they faced the hills that were part of the frame of the valley, the familiar shelter in which they spent their laborious lives, happy in the faith and worship in which they rejoiced. Their reality consisted of both the visible and the invisible.[[368]](#footnote-368)

Hughes’s desire to keep the ‘strange depths’ of his mother ‘alive and attached’ to himself leads him to seek out both the visible and invisible parts of her reality. It was, as we can already hear in the rising hymns, a profoundly religious reality.

Elmet, as Hughes tells us in his introduction to the 1994 collection, ‘was the last independent Celtic kingdom in England and originally stretched out over the vale of York. I imagine it shrank back into the gorge of the upper Calder under historic pressures, before the Celtic survivors were politically absorbed into England’ (*CP* 1201). The word to note here, as Steve Ely tells us, is ‘imagine’, for the actual historical kingdom of Elmet may never have included the upper Calder Valley.[[369]](#footnote-369) Palmer suggests one reason Hughes may have had for identifying the landscape of his childhood, the landscape of his mother, with Elmet.

Elmet was the last remaining Christian kingdom before it fell to paganism, and therefore in British mythology it is where Christianity hung on long enough that glimpses of it could be preserved, and be a spark blown to life again with the coming of the Celtic Church down from Scotland.[[370]](#footnote-370)

The pagans Palmer refers to were Germanic Angles, and the historical evidence, patchy though it is, does support the Christianity of Elmet prior to this invasion. By associating his private version of Calderdale with Elmet, Hughes provides a precedent for a native, Celtic-influenced strain of Christianity.[[371]](#footnote-371)

Alongside this can be set the history of Hughes’s own maternal lineage. The Farrars traced their ancestry back five centuries, and counted as kin one Nicholas Ferrar, (1592-1637), the subject of the *Lupercal* poem ‘Nicholas Ferrer’.[[372]](#footnote-372) As Jonathan Bate reports, ‘The seventeenth-century Farrars eventually settled in the rundown village of Little Gidding, not far from Cambridge, where they established a community of faith and contemplation.’[[373]](#footnote-373) This is the Little Gidding of Eliot’s poem, a High-Church Anglican community publicly criticised by Puritans for their Catholic-like practices. A measure of Hughes’s pride in his Anglo-Catholic forebears can be taken from his and Plath’s decision to name their son Nicholas Farrar Hughes. The community at Little Gidding survived the original Nicholas’s death by twenty years, until the deaths of his siblings precipitated its dissolution: Hughes’s poem concludes, ‘And again the fire of God / Is under the shut heart, under the grave sod’ (*CP* 70). The image of divinity sealed simultaneously within an earth we cannot access and a self-estranged human heart is entirely characteristic of Hughes.

Before we return to *Remains of Elmet*, a question: have you ever listened to John Denver’s ‘Take Me Home, Country Roads’ and noticed how he sings the word ‘mama’ in the chorus?

Country roads, take me home

To the place I belong

West Virginia, mountain mama

Take me home, country roads[[374]](#footnote-374)

Denver’s usual clarion vibrato gives way to a slightly harsher delivery, the note flattening plaintively. The decision to deliver just this word in this way captures something of the pain the song associates with a return to the mother-land, the hill-womb toward which these once-and-again-familiar roads hasten the singer: a kind of birth wish and death wish combined. In ‘The Little Old Log Cabin’, Robert Service (a poet who influenced the young Hughes[[375]](#footnote-375)) sets a similar scene:

When the sun of life’s a-sinkin’ you can see it ’way above,

On the hill from out the shadder in a glory ’gin the sky

An’ your mother’s voice is callin’, an’ her arms are stretched in love,

An’ somehow you’re glad you’re goin’, an’ you ain’t a-scared to die[[376]](#footnote-376)

Song and poem both offer folk-pietas of a sort, the hill of Golgotha and mother Mary naturalised out of myth and into the speaker’s own familiar landscape. This is the emotional context of ‘The Dark River’, indeed of the whole of the *Elmet* project, in which Hughes is beset by the powerful draw of his dead yet present mother. If that poem leaves the connection between this mother-force and the land obscure, the next poem clarifies all.

‘Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dene’ (*CP* 455-6) is a small but remarkable poem which continues our series of pietas, of ‘Christ in his mammy’s arms.’ The idiom has changed entirely; the invisibles of Edith’s Farrar’s reality, her maternal instinct ‘for loss and woe and lamentation’, compose the scene. Abel Cross is actually a pair of large way-stones, each inscribed with a Roman cross, on a track along a side valley of the Calder called Crimsworth Dene. This valley is of special significance for Hughes, the setting of his autobiographical story ‘The Deadfall’ – a tale of camping with his beloved older brother, and of ghosts. Even more so than his famous burnt fox dream, ‘The Deadfall’ appears to reveal the source of Hughes’s sacred affinity with foxes. He tells us how his uncles, specifically his ‘mother’s brothers’, used to camp there (*DB* 6). Any poem set at Abel Cross, Crimsworth Dene, will hardly be an impersonal mood piece. The opening lines, ‘Where the Mothers / Gallop their souls’ brings a welter of impressions: the closeness of the spirit world, the suggestion of a host of specific mothers (*the* mothers) which evokes the greater poignancy of specific loss, and the further image of these mother-spirits moving with tearing energy, beyond contact or capture. A ‘happiness’ can be heard, or nearly heard, but it nestles ‘In its cradle-grave’, ‘broken’ profoundly, injured beyond fear of further injury. Here, at the margins of the valley, where the visible and the invisible can no longer be distinguished, Hughes shows us a pieta shorn of human image, a passion story transposed to rock. Existence here is happiness, but a happiness *in extremis*, the happiness which comes when ‘all the terrible things have happened’ and entities collapses to their source.

The autobiographical nature of the *Elmet* project allows us to consider a more specific source of religious influence: the religion to which Ted Hughes and his family actually belonged. In his notes to the *Collected Poems* Paul Keegan identifies Mount Zion – which is mentioned in the poem of that name as well as in ‘The Canal’s Drowning Black’ (*CP* 478) – as a Wesleyan Chapel (*CP* 1274). But it wasn’t. Mount Zion, the chapel on Midgely Road in Mytholmroyd attended by the Hughes family until their 1938 exodus to Mexborough, belonged to the Primitive Methodist Church. The Wesleyan chapel was across the river on Scout Road. And although the 1932 reunification of the Methodist branches officially brought an end to Primitive Methodism in Britain, in practice Mount Zion remained open and active alongside its Wesleyan counterpart until 1960, when the chapel was closed and its congregation absorbed into that of Scout Road.[[377]](#footnote-377) The building itself was demolished in 1970.[[378]](#footnote-378)

The Hughes family attended Mount Zion for the first eight years of Ted’s life, and his recollections and reconstructions of this experience are overwhelmingly negative: ‘Men in their prison-yard, at attention, / Exercising their cowed, shaven souls’ (*CP* 481). ‘They terrified me’, he writes, ‘but they terrified each other.’ Contrastingly, Claas Kazzer quotes Ted’s older sister Olwyn as recalling, ‘it was a great place, that chapel, looking back. […] there was a lovely atmosphere there. It was very, very nice.’[[379]](#footnote-379) Of course Ted’s poem is a performance, not strict autobiography, and Olwyn’s memories, at a distance of several decades, can only carry so much weight, so we needn’t try to determine which of these impressions is the more accurate. Ted’s depiction of violently enforced religious conformity is certainly understandable for such an unorthodox religious thinker, and the poem provides a strong piece of evidence for anyone seeking an anti-Christian attitude in Hughes’s work. ‘Mount Zion’ opens with an image of the church ‘blocking the moon’, a symbolic exclusion of the Goddess. The building’s dark bulk is a ‘gravestone slab’ and a ‘deadfall’ trap. The physical structure obsesses the speaker as a tool of extreme puritanical submission: earlier drafts refer to the men who built the church as ‘a furious kind of police’, and speak of ‘the Ten Hundred Commandments of that stonework.’[[380]](#footnote-380) The poem continues with images of his young self being led in like an animal for slaughter or sacrifice. The lines most likely to offend the pious refer to Christ as ‘only a naked bleeding worm / Who had given up the ghost.’ This is a fishing metaphor, with the crucifix a hook to catch worshippers, baited now with only a gruesome, sodden corpse. We might reflect a moment on the significance for Hughes of fishing as a means of contact with nature and natural spirits, and whether this leaves open the possibility, even in this poem, of the crucifix as a means of contact with the divine – if only a truer understanding of the cross could, as it were, freshen the bait. But honestly I don’t think there’s much in that, here: ‘Mount Zion’ is unremittingly negative about the religion practiced inside the church walls. The ‘bottomless cry’ of the human condition as formulated on the cross is ‘numb’, unable to penetrate ‘Wesley’s foundation stone.’ The appearance of the cricket toward the end of the poem throws the parishioners into disarray, underscoring the church’s complete inability to accommodate even this chirpy little spokes-creature for nature, let alone the elemental forces tearing across the moors above.

Martin Palmer recalls a long walk in the Calder Valley on which he and Hughes had a spirited discussion about Blake’s famous lines: ‘And was Jerusalem builded here, / Among these dark Satanic Mills?’[[381]](#footnote-381) Surrounded as they were by the remains of both the mills of the industrial revolution and the churches the millworkers filled every Sunday, the old question about whether Blake intended ‘Satanic mills’ to refer to actual mills or churches must have seemed somewhat beside the point – though they agreed he probably meant the churches, and we recall Crag Jack’s lament, ‘The churches, lord, all the dark churches’ (CP 84). ‘They were part of the trap for containing the millworker,’ says Palmer, part of ‘capitalist Christian obedience’.[[382]](#footnote-382) Hughes’s preface to *Elmet* states pointedly, ‘The men who built the chapels were the same who were building the mills’, and refers to ‘the local regimes (and combined operation) of Industry and Religion’ (*CP* 1202). Perhaps we can only answer Blake’s question affirmatively by stressing that ‘among’ does not mean ‘within’. The preceding couplet, however, encourages a more positive response, especially in the context of thinking over *Remains of Elmet*: ‘And did the Countenance Divine, / Shine forth upon our clouded hills?’[[383]](#footnote-383) Beyond the dark satanic mill of Mount Zion, the clouded hills of the *Elmet* Pennines teem with religious energy and imagery, and when we take a closer look at the Primitive Methodist Church, we realise that Hughes’s Blakean abandonment of the chapel for the hill is hardly a refutation of his religion. In fact, Ted Hughes’s reconstructed rebellion against the Primitive Methodist Church repeats the tensions and upholds the values upon which that church was founded a century earlier.

Primitive Methodism developed in the early years of the nineteenth century as a practical response to mainstream Wesleyan Methodism’s neglect of poor, rural communities, particularly in the industrial and mining regions of the north of England. At the root of this neglect were pressures on the Wesleyan purse. When John Wesley’s followers broke with the Church of England, slowly and indecisively, but by 1795 irrevocably, the new denomination was faced with the prospect of building its own chapels and paying its own preachers. With scattered rural hamlets able to contribute much less than the relatively well-heeled towns, Wesleyan preachers of necessity went where the money was. Unpaid lay preachers, very much of the people, rose to fill this void, using outdoor venues and private homes for want of chapels. The practice of daylong outdoor services – camp meetings, as they were called – was crucial to the coagulation of the new movement.[[384]](#footnote-384) John Ritson’s 1906 book *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* describes the site of the first camp meeting as:

Mow Cop, the rugged mountain which was afterwards to be inseparably associated with the origin of Primitive Methodism. […] It was a rugged, bleak country, with only a few grey, roughly built cottages dotted here and there. [[385]](#footnote-385)

The meeting was organised by the carpenter and lay preacher Hugh Bourne, of whom Ritson remarks:

To find the origin of Primitive Methodism we must go to the moorland. The man who was to shape a great religious movement was himself moulded amid the silence and seclusion of the uplands. Bleak, desolate, lonely, with no road, public or private, not even a foot-road to it or anywhere near it, Fordhays Farm, in the parish of Stoke-upon-Trent, Staffordshire, must be regarded as the source whence this wonderful river takes its rise.[[386]](#footnote-386)

Ritson’s account is of course sycophantic and rather purple, but it provides a measure of Primitive Methodist self-identity three decades before Hughes’s birth. It was Wesleyan intolerance of camp meetings, which they saw as occasions for mischief, that caused Hugh Bourne’s ejection from the church, encouraging him and his associates to form their own denomination, and this willingness to preach on a hillside, in a field or in a forest is a clear point of pride among early Primitive Methodists. That is, indeed, where the term came from: a reference to John Wesley’s own early, ‘primitive’ practice of open-air preaching, outside the walls of the institutional Church of England.

In all of Hughes’s depictions of the church of his early youth, there is foremost a tension between the indoor world of the chapel and the outdoor world of the moors. The autobiographical story ‘Sunday’ contrasts the torture of a boy’s physical confinement in chapel with the mental release he finds in imagining a wolf galloping through ‘a land empty of everything but trees and snow’ (*DB* 53). Finally the doors are opened, ‘letting light stream in’, and the parishioners ‘stumble’ out. Hughes restates this conflict between the physical and emotional confinement of churchgoing and the authentic freedom of unroofed nature in that same, key letter to Merchant:

[I]t began to dawn on me why from early days I had always dreaded Sunday as a day of psychological torment, and why the whole business of Sunday in the Calder Valley (Fanatic blend of Methodism and Chartism) had always seemed to me a performance at the expense of the real thing. (*LTH* 579)

Many *Elmet* poems approach this tension from the other side, drawing the language of Christian service into the moorland setting:

This water of light and darkness

Which hardly savours Creation

(‘Standbury Moor’, *CP* 458)

The mad singing in the hills

The prophetic mouth of the rain […]

Stretches away, out of Revelations

(‘The Trance of Light’ *CP* 459)

Among its pious offspring […]

Among a solemn kin

Who visit each other in heaven and earth.

(‘The Big Animal of Rock’, *CP* 466)

Crowding congregation of skies.

Tense congregation of hills.

(‘Bridestones’, *CP* 473)

In the chapel of cloud

And the walled, horizon-woven choir

(‘In April’, *CP* 489)

The Messiah

Of opened rock.

(‘The Word that Space Breathes’, *CP* 490)

Simply noting that Hughes uses the word ‘heaven’ eight times in *Remains of Elmet* gives a sense of his determination to decant religious language from church to moor. The whole world of the Calder Valley seems only to exist on Sunday, as poem after poem is either set on a Sunday, or invokes an atmosphere of Sabbath gloom. Women are ‘bleak as Sunday rose-gardens’ (*CP* 481); the ancient Briton lay under ‘the polished leaves of Sunday’, and the boys dig after him ‘Sunday after Sunday’, ‘Labouring in the prison / of our eyes, our sun, our Sunday bells’ (*CP* 481-2); widows are ‘shrined in Sunday’ (*CP* 482); mourners eat mutton in ‘Slump Sundays’ (*CP* 749) – and so on. Many critics have commented on the themes of decay and regrowth of the *Elmet* poems, and everything implied by ‘Sunday’ – all the social, psychological and spiritual energy bound up in that word – is no less a part of that process.

‘Tree’ is one of the key poems of *Remains of Elmet* in which this indoor/outdoor religious tension works itself out, with Hughes using the raw spectacle of his hilltop paradise to refute the nightmare of chapel-going. The tree of the title, and of Godwin’s striking photograph, begins as ‘A priest from a different land’ who ‘Fulminated / Against heather, black stones, blown water’ (*CP* 466). Primitive Methodists were known as Ranters for their tireless open-air preaching, and Bate refers to the ‘Protestant brimstone sermons’[[387]](#footnote-387) which Hughes would have experienced at Mount Zion. There is something of that here in the tree’s fulmination, directed unsurprisingly against the natural world, which the priest finds as intolerable as the parishioners found the cricket. At a momentary pause for breath, however, the priest has a vision of ‘Heaven and earth moving’, and suffers, for the rest of the poem, an evacuation of his former strength and confidence. Like Luther he ‘Tried to confess all’ but it’s no good; he plants into the earth, ‘cruciform’, finally speechless, and ‘Lets what happen to him simply happen.’ The version of the poem first published in *Remains of Elmet* ends not with silence but a gasped ‘cry’, creating an even closer identification with Christ, though in the *Elmet* revision Hughes opts for the suggestion of submission to a natural *telos*, and perhaps a sharper rebuttal of those noisy Sunday ranters. The passive note of the poem’s conclusion – reinforced by its formation as one longish line set off as its own stanza, as though poetry were finished and this the plainest possible statement – gestures at an acceptance of suffering, of our cruciform condition, and a surrendering of existential freedom to teleological freedom. In ‘Tree’, Hughes depicts, again, the Puritan war against the natural, material world as an evasion of the real. In the tree-priest’s crucifying moment, ‘God left him’ – as surely as Christ felt forsaken at just the same moment – but he is rooted now in the earth, and open to divine correction.

In all of these poems we see the language of formal religion naturalised to an outdoor setting, and the irony we might expect to result is greatly diminished when we consider them in a Primitive Methodist context. Hughes may occasionally inveigh against Calvin, but Paulin offers a quotation from Calvin’s *Institutes* perfectly apt to Hughes’s own religious politics.

One thing I advise you – beware of Antichrist, for you have an improper attachment to walls; your veneration for the Church of God is misplaced on houses and buildings; you wrongly introduce under them the name of peace. Is there any doubt that they will be seats of Antichrist? I think mountains, woods, and lakes, prisons, and whirlpools less dangerous; for these were the scenes of retirement or banishment in which the prophets prophesied.[[388]](#footnote-388)

Hughes’s intolerance of religion as something to be kept between chapel walls has an ecclesiastical precedent, and also a personal one. I say personal because Hughes’s mother, Edith, cuts a distinctly Primitive Methodist figure. While noting that ‘[a]s a child Ted went with his mother to a Methodist chapel’, Moulin describes how

Ted inherited from Edith an altogether different style of spirituality, for Edith was a psychic – she was a seer and had premonitory visions of tragic events; she also had a regular relationship with the ghost of her sister, who had died at the age of eighteen. Ted Hughes was convinced that he had inherited her gift and that he was a seer too.[[389]](#footnote-389)

These stories are most vividly retold in ‘The Deadfall’, in which the speaker’s mother has visions of the sky ‘throbbing with flashing crosses’, foretelling news of the landing at Normandy (*DB* 1). Other experiences foretell the deaths of family members, and Ted claims to have known it the moment Edith herself died.

But do such experiences represent ‘an altogether different style of spirituality’? Well, yes and no. True, by the 1930s most traces of mysticism and visionary experience would have been eradicated from Primitive Methodist society, but such experiences are a significant feature of the religion’s short history. Along with Hugh Bourne and fellow preacher William Clowes, one of its founding zealots was one James Crawfoot (whose name, in a wonderfully Hughesian turn, is often given as Crowfoot). As Ritson tells the story:

While in Cheshire Clowes heard of an eccentric but powerful local preacher, James Crawfoot by name, who dwelt in retirement amid the glades of Delamere Forest. The singular effects produced by this man’s preaching were by some ascribed to the possession of miraculous power; by others, to the exercise of the black arts. […] Crawfoot was a mystic and wonderfully versed in the ‘mysteries of faith.’ His knowledge and insight into the councils of the Eternal, and his vivid realisation of the spiritual world, invested his prayers with an intimacy with the Almighty which gave the impression to those listening to his wonderful voice as he prayed that he actually saw the Lord with bodily eyes. Hugh Bourne and William Clowes both sat at the feet of this man and owned him master in the deep things of God.[[390]](#footnote-390)

Crawfoot and his followers called themselves the Forest Methodists; their detractors dubbed them the Magic Methodists, and they were ‘a group noted for signs, wonders and miracles’.[[391]](#footnote-391) Most of the visionaries were young women, and during an early visit Bourne recalled seeing

a woman struggling, as if in distress, and wondered why they did not pray for her. But two women placed her in a chair, and she appeared to have fainted away. I then thought, this is their trance work … at length the woman clasped her hands, and praised the Lord, and went on speaking occasionally without opening her eyes. She spoke of a fine green meadow, and said, ‘Let me lie down’. She then spoke of a fine river …’[[392]](#footnote-392)

As John W B Tomlison reports, ‘Crawfoot was active in other supernatural expressions of the “power”, such as faith healing and exorcisms’. Tomlinson concludes that ‘[t]he supernatural conflict between good and evil, as experienced through visions, dreams, faith healings and exorcisms had become, at least for a short time, an article of faith for the early Primitive Methodists.’[[393]](#footnote-393) Bourne records in his journal that it was through one of the forest visionaries that he was called to preach, and Crawfoot became, for a short but intense period of a few years, his spiritual guide and mentor. The spirituality espoused by James Crawfoot and his Forest Methodists stressed intense individual experience, full of quasi-mystical elements, focused on the religious transport of spiritually attuned individuals, mostly young women. So when Edith Hughes has visions of a sky full of crosses, and raises her son to be credulous of such experience, she is keeping him very much in touch with the not too distant origins of their faith.

Tomlinson emphasises the importance of public visionary experience in kick-starting religious enthusiasm, and in narrating the aftermath of Crawfoot’s departure he concludes, ‘The divine power so crucial in the early years was now to be expressed in the organizational and institutional life of the Church’. The official erasure of visionary experience from Primitive Methodist life, and the removal of ‘divine power’ from the individual to the institution, resonate with the misgivings Hughes expresses in his much-redrafted letter to Bishop Hook, in which he asserts that poets who becomes religious will ‘find in their religion the real consolation for which their poetry had been only a temporary substitute, and in which their poetic talent evaporates as something no longer necessary’ (LTH 459). The raw spirituality of the Delamere Forest mystics was no longer necessary to the maturing institution of Primitive Methodism. In one of the Bishop Hook letter drafts Hughes suggests that poetry ‘lives on the decay of formal religion’ (LTH 460). It’s a wonderful metaphor: when something decays its fundamental components become available again, free to participate in new growth. In this way, in his persistent relocation of spiritual energy from its doomed chapel to the surrounding moorland, Ted Hughes returns the religion of his early childhood to its own origins, encouraging new growth from its final decay.

To this end, there is an additional note struck in the religious language of *Remains of Elmet*, a quieter note which makes it clear that the moorland does not depend on an importation of Christian significance to have value as a venue for the divine:

The wild gentle god of everywhereness

(‘The Weasels We Smoked out of the Bank’, *CP* 472)

the wild god of now

(‘The Long Tunnel Ceiling’, *CP* 479)

This god-of-what-nobody-wants

(‘The Sluttiest Sheep in England’, *CP* 487)

It feels in such moments as if Hughes allows himself to believe that Puritanical militancy, which arrived from a distance of centuries to his own chapel at Mount Zion, has finally been disarmed. Puritan elevation of spirit at the expense of material nature has been replaced with a vision of the hills of his childhood crowded with spiritual energy; Puritan obsession with social control has been replaced with the relish of indifference to culture; Puritan sexual anxiety has been replaced with a sense that this hilltop world is simply and properly free of the libido’s neurotic projections. The inversion of values plays out in the unobtrusive presentation of these ‘gods’. The politics of Goddess-talk, the appropriation of Christian language, all of it falls away, if only briefly, and we are left with these superlative understatements, ungendered, uncapitalised, of the inherent divinity of creation.

# Chapter 6: Sacrament and Transcendence in *River*

With all your science can you tell me how it is, and whence it is, that light comes into the soul?

– Henry David Thoreau, journal entry for July 16, 1851

The ‘wild gentle god of everywhereness’ who flickers briefly here and there among the remains of Hughes’s childhood is a rare spirit. A reader is far more likely to encounter divinity personified as a woman surrounded by the knick-knacks of various religious traditions, perhaps involved in a pseudo-pagan, pseudo-Catholic ceremony. The transference of religious language from church to countryside discussed in the last chapter is not limited to *Remains of Elmet*; it occurs across nearly all of his publications from the mid-70s and early 80s. The one stand-out exception to this pattern is the farming diary poems of *Moortown*, the writing of which Hughes tells us ‘exclud[ed] the poetic process’ (*CP* 1205). Hughes’s mid-career poetic process, then, encompassing such collections as *Gaudete* (1977), *Orts* (1978), *Remains of Elmet* (1979), *Under the North Star* (1981), *River* (1983) and *Flowers and Insects* (1986), prominently includes the technique of injecting overtly religious language into descriptions of natural processes.

We can admit at the outset that this technique does not always lead to Hughes’s strongest writing. Tropes can become ruts; conceits can become shortcuts. Poem 8 from *Orts* describes the busy environs of an apple tree in a series of churchy images: ‘congregation of airs’, ‘incense’, ‘offerings’ (*CP* 396). The tree itself is a ‘naked, slender […] girl tree’ – return of the sex-afeared idealisation of maidenhood – and finally ‘A god’s / Vertical altar’. The poem’s irony is playful but indecisive; the imagery feels like the rote application of an idea. *Orts* is a fine-press gathering of off-cuts from the *Gaudete* epilogue poems, and this religious language is an even stronger (and more successful) presence in the poems chosen for *Gaudete*. Again we encounter ‘congregations at their rapture’ (*G* 176); we witness the ‘Annunciation / Of clay, water and the sunlight’ (*G* 199); the roots of an oak tree ‘Lift arms that are a supplication / Crippled with stigmata’ (*G* 184). As in *Remains of Elmet*, these images translate as attempts to redirect religious sensitivity from the lost cause of official Christian service to the proper venue of the divine, the outdoors. Just as this tack makes autobiographical sense in *Remains of Elmet*, it makes narrative sense in the *Gaudete* Epilogue, as the reappeared Reverend Lumb reconciles his learned religious vocabulary with the broader horizons of his newfound devotion to the Goddess. Redirection need not mean refutation, and the essentials of the fall and crucifixion are still at work in Lumb’s poetry. The poem ‘She rides the earth’, for instance, presents us very succinctly with the key Christian symbolic equivalences for the divine creative principle or power. This power is ‘an apple’, the taking of which ‘Nails’ us to ‘the leafless tree’ (*G* 184). The tree of knowledge, the tempting serpent and the cross of our human condition are all there to be seen. The whole of the Christian narrative, the poem suggests, is an assemblage of aspects of our creator. Another poem refers to ‘the snowflake crucified / Upon the nails of nothing’ (*G* 186), echoing both ‘Gnat Psalm’ and ‘The Contender’ in its use of the crucifixion to suggest a purposeful suffering omnipresent in nature.

The *Gaudete* Epilogue poems are a complex weave of sources and referents, and few are so purely theological. The Goddess figure being addressed is repeatedly conflated with apparently real women from Hughes’s life, and the poems sway between concrete anecdote and cosmic parable. They are poems of negotiations opened but far from completed, described in the narrative as ‘densely corrected’ (*G* 173), and in Hughes’s note to the 1982 *Selected Poems* as Lumb’s ‘diary of coming to his senses, or of trying to come to his senses’ (*CP* 1263). The persistence, amid such efforts, of Christian elements such as the crucifixion demonstrates the continuing value Hughes places on these elements, and their importance as stock ingredients in his imagination. We would be mistaken, however, to treat the regular appearance of these elements as a mere stylistic habit, or a wholly ironic antagonism. These moments of intersection between Christian ideas and naturalistic (pagan) contexts do real theological work, and in these middle-period collections a new focus emerges alongside Hughes’s ongoing preoccupation with the fall and crucifixion: the sacraments.

## 6.1: Sacramentalism

As discussed in the last chapter, one of the aspects of Protestantism most offensive to Hughes is its tendency to marginalise nature and focus on the salvation of the individual human soul. This marginalisation is linked to Martin Luther’s rejection of the Catholic Church’s sacramental system. The icons, relics and shrines of Roman Catholic worship were regarded as idolatrous symptoms of Catholic paganism, and consequently the material world became, for Protestants, superfluous to the requirements of Christian salvation.[[394]](#footnote-394) As Northcott writes,

Protestant theologians emphasised more strongly than their medieval forebears both the fallenness of nature, and its consequent fearfulness, and they treated of nature as a resource created entirely for human purposes. Through its human use and transformation by Christian people nature might also be gradually redeemed from the effects of the Fall. Protestants sought to remove any vestige of spiritual power in the natural world, as represented in medieval Catholicism in pilgrimages to sacred places, or in the festivals around sacred wells or sites of divine activity. They sought to purge the landscape of the sacred, and locate the site of God’s activity entirely in the individual self.[[395]](#footnote-395)

The Reformation ceded nature to science and arrogated the human soul to itself: thus were the two divorced and diminished.

Tillich, a Protestant theologian though one with a twentieth century appreciation for the need to encourage environmental concern, rejects this anthropocentric view of salvation. While accepting the fallenness of nature, he reimagines this as a positive, a source of unity between humans and the rest of creation.

[M]an and nature belong together in their created glory, in their tragedy, and in their salvation. As nature, represented by the ‘Serpent’, leads man into temptation, so man, by his trespassing of the divine law, leads nature into tragedy. […] For there is no salvation of man if there is no salvation of nature, for man is in nature and nature is in man.[[396]](#footnote-396)

Tillich’s desire to view the natural world as inherently joined to human fate – our *telos*, the restoration through Christ of our unity with God – leads him to the importance of the sacraments.

Let me ask you a question: are we still able to understand what a sacrament means? The more we are estranged from nature, the less we can answer affirmatively. […] For in the sacraments nature participates in the process of salvation. Bread and wine, water and light, and all the great elements of nature become the bearers of spiritual meaning and saving power. Natural and spiritual powers are united – reunited – in the sacrament.[[397]](#footnote-397)

The sacraments, Tilllich suggests, make a twofold offer of estrangement overcome: human estrangement from the natural world brought by the severity of Protestant theology, and creation’s overall estrangement from God as understood through the fall.

With this offer in mind, we return to the *Gaudete* Epilogue. The same poem which shows us ‘a snowflake crucified’ ends with a sacramental image of ‘atoms praying […] To be broken like bread’ so they might bleed on a eucharistic altar and enter the snowflake’s kingdom (*G* 186). Hughes’s poem reminds us that the crucifix and the eucharist are two symbols for the same event, that ‘the breaking of the bread is a clear and adequate symbol for the event on Golgotha’.[[398]](#footnote-398) Hughes’s inclination to see the crucified God constantly revealed in nature progresses through Christian symbolisms to embrace the eucharistic sacrament as a symbol for the violent, often carnivorous operations of nature. Earlier poems suggest this association. The first section of ‘Gog’ (from *Wodwo*), for instance, plays with eucharistic imagery, though in a Crowish tone which, like ‘Logos’, seems to resent its own conclusions.

The dog’s god is a scrap dropped from the table.

The mouse’s saviour is a ripe wheat grain.

Hearing the Messiah cry

My mouth widens in adoration. (*CP* 161)

Do these lines find value in the idea of the eucharist, or do they jeer by reducing the sacrament to the meeting of routine biological need? ‘Gog worships food, like all the creatures of earth’, Sagar tells us, though he also cites Hughes’s commentary on the poem in relating Gog’s open mouth to the dragon of Revelation: ‘the dragon stood before the woman which was ready to be delivered, for to devour her child as soon as it was born’ (Rev 12:4).[[399]](#footnote-399) If Gog is the dragon then metaphorically he is the natural world, ‘a horrible oven of fangs’ (*CP* 225), always on the lookout for a meal. But he is more than that: in Hughes’s poem he is an awakening moral subject, aware of his own appetite, compelled by the biblical story from which he has been lifted into believing himself the enemy of God, but reacting humanly, not bestially or mechanically. In defiance of the omnipresent power of death and entropy at work in living and unliving matter alike, Gog maintains a nascent moral awareness, sensible to ‘the sounds of motherly weeping’ when he eats the new-born child. As Moulin points out, Gog is ‘a persona in the process of becoming a human subject’.[[400]](#footnote-400) He has a lapsarian understanding of himself: ‘What was my error?’ he asks. ‘My skull has sealed it out.’ In amongst Gog’s lapsarian struggles is the suggestion that predation and the meeting of biological need provide fit symbols for understanding divine relationality. The opening section in particular, which proceeds from the homeliness of a hungry dog to the unmistakably eucharistic image of a mouth widened in adoration of the Messiah – though delivered with something like the affected disgust of ‘Logos’ and the irreverence of *Crow* – begins to explore the idea that Christian symbols and sacraments might be biologically embedded.

By Hughes’s middle period this idea has become a given, and not only in *Gaudete*. In ‘As I Came, I Saw a Wood’ (*CP* 432) the protagonist of *Cave Birds,* touring an underworld of his own psyche, confronts a weirdly inanimate, paradisal forest. Trees stand ‘Like savages photographed in the middle of a ritual’. Birds, insects and other animals dance among the trees, paying the speaker no mind, absorbed in their reverie. The speaker notes ‘their holy steps’ and ‘their absolution in sanctity’. But it is a strange place to human eyes. ‘[T]ime was not present’. The protagonist can uproot flowers and break little pieces off the animals without seeming to do them any harm. Nothing changes, nothing develops, nothing is really achieved. The protagonist arrives at a scene of perpetual ecstasy, but cannot take part. Instead,

a voice, a bell of cracked iron

Jarred in my skull

Summoning me to prayer

To eat flesh and drink blood.

The unreal fantasy-land presentation of the forest prevents us from taking it seriously as an achievable or desirable state. It is a romantic temptation. But the voice calling the protagonist to a bloody eucharist, though cracked and jarring – suggesting the gross imperfections of culture and the trials of bodily life – issues an invitation to a more genuine material experience. ‘The bell summons him to participation and to consciousness of participation’, as Craig Robinson puts it.[[401]](#footnote-401) To eat flesh and drink blood is to be involved in the natural world as an animal is involved; it is also to be involved with God, in Christian terms, as God would have us be involved. ‘Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you’ (John 6:53). Clearly there is no meaningful life in the brittle fantasia of the wood. Hughes delivers a parable in which the unreality of escapist religious fantasy leads to a tacit endorsement of the central sacrament of Christian service: cracked, jarring, bloody and real.

‘As I Came, I Saw a Wood’ reminds me strongly of part VII of Stevens’s ‘Credences of Summer’, which begins, ‘Far in the woods they sang their unreal songs, / Secure.’ Stevens’s singers aspire to the unchanging state of Hughes’s stalled creatures: ‘They sang desiring an object that was near, / In face of which desire no longer moved, / Nor made of itself that which it could not find’.[[402]](#footnote-402) Hughes’s speaker does not join in the dancing at which ‘time was not present’, perhaps a little unnerved, or simply unable, whereas an escape from time is the stated goal of Stevens’s poem: ‘This is the last day of a certain year / Beyond which there is nothing left of time.’[[403]](#footnote-403) Stevens’s speaker identifies, if only for a spell, with these singers of the unreal, while Hughes’s speaker stands apart. To this gathering of time-stalled dancers and singers we must add Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’, the first of his *Four Quartets*, to which both Stevens and Hughes appear to respond. Declaring at the outset that ‘If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable’, Eliot’s perennially moribund persona describes a scene eerily similar to the one approached by Hughes’s adventurer:

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement.   
[…]  
The inner freedom from the practical desire,  
The release from action and suffering, release from the inner  
And the outer compulsion[.]

Notwithstanding a ‘grace of sense’ by which ‘a new world’ moves toward ‘the completion of its partial ecstasy’, Eliot’s speaker in the end turns away from these visions of a static paradise, asserting that

the enchainment of past and future

Woven in the weakness of the changing body,

Protects mankind from heaven and damnation

Which flesh cannot endure. [[404]](#footnote-404)

The closeness in thought of the very Christian Eliot and the nominally pagan Hughes is remarkable, and we might seek for some equivalent in Hughes of the transcendent-but-not gesture of Eliot’s conclusion: ‘Only through time time is conquered’. Recall the Eliotic echoes in ‘Examination at the Womb-door’ discussed in Section 4.3, and consider this draft line inserted and then cancelled before that poem’s closing line: ‘Then whom do you fear? *Time. Time only*’.[[405]](#footnote-405) The repetition of ‘time’ accompanied by ‘only’ refers us to ‘Burnt Norton’, with Eliot’s stately assertion wobbling into Crow’s fearful fixation. I will return to the anxiety of time, and to Stevens and other Transcendentalists, later in this chapter, where will see Hughes perform his own transcendence of time by cleaving ever closer to a Christian metaphysic. For now we can affirm that, for Hughes, eucharistic invocation proves experience against fantasy. It carries his protagonist clear of Stevensian imaginative indulgence, fastening him to the material world.

Tillich’s assertion that ‘man and nature belong together […] in their tragedy’, reflecting a general Christian belief that the created world, though of divine origin, exists now at a remove from God, poses again the question of the lapsarian status of non-human nature in Hughes’s poems. Following Hughes in ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, I have discussed the fall into self-regard and estrangement as a uniquely human burden, but as we move from the late seventies into the eighties the lines between human and non-human begin to blur. In the 1990 letter to Merchant, Hughes appears to suggest that something like the spiritual relief of overcoming estrangement could be experienced by other creatures: ‘[W]herever human life (for instance) becomes in some way united to those processes, the experience is felt to be “divine”’ (*LTH* 580). Human reconnection to divine processes is only one ‘instance’ of possible reconnection, from which we might infer that all created beings can potentially experience something like estrangement – even if later in the same letter he states categorically that animals ‘have never been detached’ from the divine world. I am aware of the need not to ask this letter to bear too much theological weight, nor to presume that Hughes, if given the chance, would not revise or at least refine his argument. He was not writing a systematic theology, but a letter to a religiously minded friend. But we can at least, I think, rely on Hughes’s honest intention to seek moments of sympathy and unity between realms which post-Enlightenment thought would view as immiscible: science and religion, paganism and Protestantism, the inner lives of humans and that of animals. It is in this spirit, I believe, that Hughes takes up the sacramental imagery so evident in his mid-career publications: nature is able to participate in the sacraments because something in non-human nature answers to human fallenness.

Hughes’s use of sacramental imagery reaches its height in *River*. Seemingly one of Hughes’s most popular adult collections, the challenge for the reader interested in Hughes’s religious thought lies in distinguishing moments of genuine religious insight among poems crowded with self-consciously religious verbiage. One such crowding occurs in ‘Salmon Eggs’, the poem which ends the 1983 *River* but begins the 1993 *Three Books* sequence, in which the speaker ponders salmon who have mated and are vanishing into death. About two-thirds the way through the poem religious language erupts to the fore.

I make out the sunk foundations

Of dislocated crypts, a bedrock

Time-hewn, time-riven altar. And this is the liturgy

Of Earth’s advent – harrowing, crowned – a travail

Of raptures and rendings. Perpetual mass

Of the waters

Wells from the cleft. (*CP* 681)

‘What does [this passage] add to the poem?’ asks Gifford, referring to the 1983 version which included the additional lines ‘Sanctus Sanctus / Swathes the blessed issue’.[[406]](#footnote-406) Such language, says Gifford, is ‘unnecessary to the generation of awe’ and amounts to ‘special pleading’ for an unearned religious significance. Moulin notes instances, including in this poem, of Hughes revising poems between *River* and *Three Books* toward more explicitly religious language – ‘promise’ to ‘covenant’ for example, and ‘tidings’ to ‘advent’ – calling this ‘a strategy of brinkmanship and subliminal influence’: a confrontational way of deploying Christian language for neo-pagan ends.[[407]](#footnote-407) Roberts assents to this idea, while also suggesting ‘a strategy of recuperation’, an attempt at ‘appropriating, or re-appropriating, the language of the “sacred”’ in a wished-for return to ‘the religious outlook of the primitive’.[[408]](#footnote-408)

The passage I have quoted from ‘Salmon Eggs’ is one of the most sophisticated examples of its kind, beginning with its identification of time as one of the central foils of religious sentiment. Hughes elegantly conflates the perpetual moving of the river with the sacramental ‘mass’ of Christian service, the ‘waters’ emerging from the ‘cleft’ recalling the mixed blood and water which flowed from Christ’s wounded side (John 19:34). Gifford’s protest that such language adds little to the poem suggests an assumption that religious language is ineffectual, that it doesn’t carry the weight Hughes supposes and can at best preach to the converted. No doubt, for many twentieth and twenty-first century readers this is the case. Christ, like the wren, is not a part of many modern readers’ ‘mythos’ (*WP* 313). But I disagree that the poem fails because ‘the essential elemental tension is a dynamic that is not active in the poem’. The poem’s central tension, between the attacks of time and the persistence of biological optimism, is active precisely in these sacramental lines, where the Christological tension between submission to torture and death and the hope of bodily resurrection provides an appropriate template – and with the added tension involved in refitting a piece of human culture to the world of biological process from which, at some remove, it emerged.

‘Salmon Eggs’, as I have said, is one of *River*’s more successful deployments of religious language; there would be many less interesting moments to cite.

You can see the floor of his chapel.

There he sways at the altar –

A soul

Hovering in the incantation and incense. (*CP* 673-4)

Such lines might be justified with reference to Tillich’s statements about natural and spiritual powers uniting in the sacraments, though to say that the lines are informed by sound theology is not to say that they make for very interesting poetry. References to altars and incense are not merely shorthand requests for solemnity in the presence of natural processes; they refer to the eucharistic ceremony at the heart of Christian service, wherein worshippers reconcile themselves to divinity by eating it. In short, these poems participate in a refutation of the Protestant deprecation of the natural world. As Tillich explains,

Nature is not the enemy of salvation; it does not have to be controlled in scientific, technical, and moral terms or be deprived of any inherent power, in order to serve the “Kingdom of God,” as Calvinistic thinking is inclined to believe; rather, nature is a bearer and an object of salvation.[[409]](#footnote-409)

Whatever a reader’s stylistic misgivings, the wealth of religious and especially eucharistic language in *River* would seem an effort to mingle the fates of human and non-human nature in terms which confront Protestant anthropocentricity.

The word ‘sacrament’ comes from the Latin *sacrare*, meaning to sanctify or make holy, and it is worth comparing this to another word with a similar etymological meaning: sacrifice, from *sacer*, holy, and *facare*, to do or make. A sacrifice, like a sacrament, is a making-holy. This sheds a little light on Sagar’s comment, regarding ‘October Salmon’ in *River*, that ‘[t]he spent salmon is the defeated, torn and sacrificed hero whose acquiescence is a form of worship.’ ‘Their sacrifice’, he continues, ‘is also a sacrament, the consummation of being reborn from their own eggs and sperm.’[[410]](#footnote-410) Roberts objects to this on very reasonable terms:

The notion of a sacrifice requires that the object sacrificed has the potential of continued existence, a value of which the community or individual is depriving itself and giving to the deity (in the case of self-sacrifice, one’s own continued enjoyment of life). As Hughes’s own account […] of the life-cycle of the salmon makes clear, the fish has no such potential: it has simply reached the end of its life.[[411]](#footnote-411)

To cast an inevitability as a sacrifice, says Roberts, is to mistake what a sacrifice is. There is, however, another way to consider the issue. The poem, written by a human poet for a human audience, is concerned with human meanings, and Sagar’s use of the word ‘sacrifice’ gains some traction when we consider that humans looking to the animal world for an indication of what it means to be ‘at rest in the law’ must translate what they see into humanly relevant terms. The person looking from a position of existential freedom to an animal fulfilled in its teleological freedom sees something which translates as sacrifice, because conformity to that ideal would involve, for the human, a loss of existential possibility. This touches again the question of whether Hughes’s creatures merely reflect aspects of a human subject’s inner life. In the case of his sacramental framing of natural processes, these are clearly subjective, not objective, depictions. The human subject (and only the human subject), sensing his exclusion from nature, views it all as sacrament and sacrifice, a make-holy, a giving of the self to life and death. A similar defence can be staged for the well-known line from ‘Tiger-Psalm’, ‘The tiger blesses with a fang’ (*CP* 578), against Gifford’s pooh-poohing: ‘bless’ returns to an Old English word for ‘blood’, so that Hughes’s line elegantly refers both to the bloodying of the tiger’s prey and, from the human perspective, its involvement in the sacred world from which he, the human, has fallen.[[412]](#footnote-412)

In his refutation of Sagar’s ‘reverential commentary’, Roberts refers to the ‘conscious extravagance’ of *River*’s religious language, an extravagance which borders at times on self-mockery. When Hughes’s speaker describes steelhead as ‘Arks of an undelivered covenant, / Egg-sacs of their own Eden, / Seraphs of heavy ore’ (*CP* 667), or an eel as ‘The nun of water’ (*CP* 675), or a salmon as ‘A tree of sexual death, sacred with lichens’ (*CP* 673), the poems foreground their own metaphor-making activity. Demonstrating the religiousness of a salmon, not the salmon-ness of a salmon, becomes a poem’s intention. This convention reaches its tuckered-out endpoint in the poem ‘Salmon-taking Times’, in which standing beside a river, surrounded by flowers, watching subtle phenomena of light and mist, is described as ‘like a religious moment’ (*CP* 649). Much meaning pivots on that ‘like’. Hughes presumes that his reader, steered by the phrase ‘slightly dazing’, can call to mind a ready-made notion of religious experience: a moment of transport, perhaps something like a prophet in a beam of light, in which empirical perception is disrupted and a susceptibility opens to experience excluded by rationality – to being, as Tillich says, ‘grasped by the power of something unconditional’. Yet the simile keeps the two worlds separate, the lushly described experience of standing by the river and the pre-bundled piece of culture suggested by ‘religious moment’. The speaker trusts that whatever is evoked in a reader by the phrase ‘religious moment’ will be, for that reader, the appropriate tag for the experience narrated, so that readers disinclined to credit religious experience will find that disinclination shading their view of the story the poem relates. Hughes parodies his own use of religious language while still confronting his readers with a subtle test of faith.

Deciding upon the author’s attitude toward *River*’s religious language – and a reader’s own attitude toward it – is a delicate business. Complex ironies must be parsed, ironies by which religious words and images contribute their original meaning to a poem while calling into question their value in their original setting of human religious culture. That is, when reading *River* one seldom has the feeling that any of the incense, altars and prayers are there because of the author’s positive valuation of the incense, altars and prayers of human worship. This is a mature distinction, an acceptable demand to place on an adult readership, but one unavailable to a young audience, and it is worth comparing Hughes’s strategy in *River* with that of a nearly contemporaneous collection of children’s poetry, *Under the North Star*. A bestiary of twenty-four poems gathered from the boreal wilderness of North America, *Under the North Star* was published two years before *River*, with illustrations by Leonard Baskin. ‘Every new child is nature’s chance to correct culture’s error’, Hughes writes in ‘Myth and Education’ (*WP* 149), and the evidence is everywhere of his regard for the powerful and uncompromised (we might say unfallen) imaginations of children.[[413]](#footnote-413) Surely we can trust that he would not intentionally add to culture’s error by filling his work with dangerous games of misdirection.

We may be surprised, then, to find *Under the North Star* full of the same sort of religious and sacramental imagery which fills *River* – a little simpler in diction and presentation, but otherwise perfectly of a piece with the adult volume. Hughes wastes no time in laying out some of the key associations which underpin his religious thinking. ‘The Loon’, the opening poem, relates the beautiful diving bird of its title to both moon and snake, twin emblems of the Goddess. The loon eats a fish, and then lets loose a ‘cry’ which is like ‘the sky […] trying to die’ (*UNS* 12). The loon thus reflects both fertility (moon) and predation (snake), while giving voice to a cry which expands from individual creature to all-encompassing creation, rather as Jesus’ death-cry expands to the quaking of the earth. These associations may be beyond hearing of children, but it is enough that their symbols reach Hughes’s readership as an apparently natural constellation, complete with memorable rhymes and Baskin’s mesmerising illustration, to encourage future patterns of imaginative enquiry. Another piscivorous bird poem, ‘The Osprey’, acts as a second index of Hughes’s religious preoccupations, this time less subtly, and with a specifically eucharistic focus. The raptor ‘Prays over the bay’, hunting ‘God’ who swims below, hidden ‘In his shadow’, until the Osprey has its meal in terms recalling the eucharistic supplicant: kneeling, with wings folded and head bowed (*UNS* 34). Like the mouse of ‘Gog’ whose God is a grain of wheat, the osprey worships the fish it eats, involving both in a sacrament even a young reader might recognise. The image of God hiding in the bird’s shadow hints at the doppelgänger shadow-self, the divine self encountered as Christ by the human supplicant. The poem illustrates well the ‘primitive’ and ‘completely literal’ connection the young Hughes made between Christ and the natural world, replicating that connection for other children in a few vivid images in which both parties to predation are sacramentally united.[[414]](#footnote-414)

Several *Under the North Star* poems refer to ‘God’ in playful though not mocking tones, as in ‘Puma’: ‘God put the Cougar on the Mountain / To be the organist / Of the cathedral-shaped echoes’ (*UNS* 39). ‘Mooses’, meanwhile, makes play of the imagery of fallenness and self-regard, with a moose searching comically for the ‘lost world’ which surrounds it and mistaking another moose for its own reflection (*UNS* 36). The collection ends powerfully with ‘Eagle’, another predation-as-sacrament poem, though one with a distinctly heathen feel, in which ‘the White Hare crouches at the sacrifice’ and the Eagle dances ‘On an altar of blood’ (*UNS* 46). The domestication of religious and sacramental imagery to the wilderness of *Under the North Star*, especially considering the book’s young audience, tends to blur the line between nature and culture. The wilds are seen as neither more nor less religiously charged than the human sphere, responding to Tillich’s regret that ‘the religious devaluation of nature has been answered by a naturalistic devaluation of religion’.[[415]](#footnote-415) In both *Under the North Star* and *River* the naturalisation of sacramental activity authenticates human religious concerns.

## 6.2: Transcendence defined and defended

I now return to ‘Salmon-taking Times’, and to the riverside walker in his slightly dazing religious moment. This moment takes place after a rain storm has passed and the speaker, pausing by the flooded river, witnesses a ‘warm shower’ which hazes the scene, encouraging a vision of the river as a young bride, arrayed in ‘glistenings’ and ‘bridal veils’, rising in ‘a wedding / Delicacy’ (*CP* 649). The speaker touches this vision, and it vanishes into ‘a strengthless wreckage of dissolving membranes’, a moment of contact so brief it registers only as loss. Then we find the line comparing this to a ‘religious moment, slightly dazing’. And then another single-line stanza closes the poem: ‘It is like a shower of petals of eglantine’. Eglantine, also called sweetbrier, has some colourful associations in Christian folklore, such as being the bush from which Judas Iscariot hanged himself, and being condemned by God to grow as a bush rather than a tree to foil Satan’s plan to climb back to heaven on a ladder of eglantine thorns.[[416]](#footnote-416) But Hughes’s line concerns the petals, not the branches or thorns, and a much more pertinent reference presents itself.

One of the passages Hughes selected for *A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse*, a passage significant enough to provide the name for the American edition, is the following short speech in *Cymbeline*, delivered by Arviragus in the company of his brother Guiderius over what he believes is the dead body of their newfound friend, a young man named Fidele.

With fairest flowers  
While summer lasts and I live here, Fidele,  
I'll sweeten thy sad grave; thou shalt not lack  
The flower that's like thy face, pale primrose, nor  
The azur'd hare-bell, like thy veins, no, nor  
The leaf of eglantine, whom not to slander,  
Out-sweeten'd not thy breath: the ruddock would,  
With charitable bill, – O bill! sore-shaming  
Those rich-left heirs, that let their fathers lie  
Without a monument, – bring thee all this;  
Yea, and furr'd moss besides, when flowers are none,  
To winter-ground thy corse.

Fidele is in fact their disguised sister Imogen, a sister they don’t know they have, and she’s not actually dead. The precise machinations of the plot are less significant for us, of course, than what Hughes makes of them in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. *Cymbeline* is the first of the ‘four last plays’ in which Hughes traces the emergence of ‘Shakespeare’s Theophany’, a figure of redivinised humanity, reunited with the Goddess (*SGCB* 335). The petals of eglantine (‘leaf’ has the additional meaning of flower petal) which Hughes’s riverside speaker offers as appropriate to the moment are, I suggest, the same petals Arviragus promises to scatter over ‘Imogen’s great death and rebirth scene’ (*SGCB* 340). From this she will arise and, eventually, reunite with her lost and found husband Posthumus as ‘two halves of the same being’ (*SGCB* 342), forming ‘a vision of the ultimate union and sacred peace’ (*SGCB* 343), a ‘death and rebirth into redeemed life’ (*SGCB* 344). This vision of redeemed life is, Hughes tells us, ‘a whole new technical process for dealing with the ‘uncontrollable’, the Tarquinian madness’ (*SGCB* 344) – that is, the destructive fallout of mismanaging the divine content trapped and corrupted by our estrangement. ‘Salmon-taking Times’ ends with a hopeful hint that this newfound ceremony, this process for ‘rebirth into redeemed life’, is underway.

‘If we could see the holy in every reality, we should be in the Kingdom of God’, writes Tillich in his essay ‘Nature and Sacrament’.[[417]](#footnote-417) This is an important point to remember: the idea of a kingdom of God does not refer to some external heavenly realm or naively literal kingdom, but to the perfect divinity of what surrounds us, a divinity from which we are excluded by our lapsarian condition: ‘Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you’ (Luke 17:21). Achievement of this kingdom is a matter of reconciling sundered parts: ‘thy faith hath made thee whole’ (Luke 17:19). ‘My kingdom is not of this world’, says Jesus (John 18:36), and as Moltmann explains, this ‘does not signify that his kingdom is elsewhere, but that it is of a different pattern from this world. Yet, different as it is, it is in the midst of this world through Jesus himself.’[[418]](#footnote-418) It is a wholeness upon which the internal and external, as ever, converge, as Jung declares in speaking of the self-discovery and integration of individuation with the same biblical reference: ‘individuation corresponds […] with the Christian idea of the Kingdom of Heaven “which is within ourselves”’.[[419]](#footnote-419) The ‘religious moment’ in ‘Salmon-taking Times’ offers something of this quality, a moment of seeing beyond the routine patterns of one’s world toward a metaphysical process of reunion and redemption. The notion of a kingdom of God, if we can look beyond the Christian idiom, corresponds closely to a realm of transcendent experience which *River*, more than any other of Hughes’s collections, embraces and explores.

The word ‘transcendence’ must be sharply defined. Gifford frequently takes issue with the term and its related forms, maintaining a thoughtful reluctance to credit the suggestion of a transcendent element in Hughes’s writing on the apparent grounds that to indulge the transcendent is to weaken one’s commitment to the material earth.[[420]](#footnote-420) I hope to demonstrate that the ‘religious transcendence’ to which he objects can actually be a means of strengthening ecological commitment.

But to begin: what exactly do we mean by transcendence? It is too easy to think of ‘transcend’ as a more-or-less intransitive action, with the question of what is being transcended receiving as answer a vague ‘all this’ or ‘things as they are’, or perhaps something more specific like nature, the human condition or the physical body. But which to choose? And *to what* does one transcend? A misty world of spirits? A plane of streaming, illuminating truth? A bodiless, universal over-mind? Heaven? In the absence of specifics, references to transcendence in discussions of spiritually inflected poetry such as Hughes’s can throw a reader back on received religious imagery: saints being welcomed into marshmallowy cloud-cuckoo-lands, or Eastern mystics detaching their psyches from their perfectly reposed bodies. The danger in any imprecise discussion of transcendence is that the term is taken as a general rising above our lives, including those parts of our lives, such as the physical experience of our ecological entanglement, that really matter to us.

For a precise understanding of religious transcendence I turn to Karl Rahner, whose highly technical *Foundations of Christian Faith* is difficult to quote in brief – but this passage should provide a sound theological starting point for identifying how transcendence works in Hughes’s poetry.

transcendental knowledge of god as experience of mystery

The knowledge of God we are referring to here is rooted in […] subjectivity and free transcendence and in that situation of not being at one’s own disposal […] Now this transcendental experience, which is always mediated by a categorical experience of the concrete and individual data of our experience in the world and in time and space (all of our experience, including so-called “secular” experience), may not be understood as a neutral power by which, among other things, God can be known. It is rather the basic and original way of knowing God, so much so that the knowledge of God we are referring to here simply constitutes the very essence of this transcendence.

The transcendence in which God is already known, although unthematically and nonconceptually, may not be understood as an active mastering of the knowledge of God by one’s own power, and hence also as a mastery of God himself. For this transcendence appears as what it is only in the self-disclosure of that towards which the movement of transcendence tends. It exists by means of that which gives itself in this transcendence as the other, the other which distinguishes this transcendence from itself and enables it to be experienced as mystery by the subject who is constituted as such by this transcendence. By its very nature subjectivity is always a transcendence which listens, which does not control, which is overwhelmed by mystery and opened up by mystery. In the midst of its absolute infinity transcendence experiences itself as empty, as merely formal, as necessarily mediated to itself by finiteness, and hence as a finite infinity. If it does not want to mistake itself for an absolute subject and divinize itself, it recognizes itself as a transcendence which has been bestowed upon it, which is grounded in mystery, and is not at its own disposal. For all its infinity it experiences itself as radically finite. It is precisely in and through the infinity of its transcendence that it is a transcendence which can grasp its own finiteness and must grasp it.

Transcendence as such knows only *God* and nothing else, although it knows him as the condition which makes possible categorical knowledge, history and concrete freedom. Transcendence exists only by opening itself beyond itself, and, to put it in biblical language, it is in its origin and from the very beginning the experience of *being known* by God himself.[[421]](#footnote-421)

We can translate some of Rahner’s key statements into language familiar from previous discussions. The ‘situation of not being at one’s own disposal’ refers to the ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ which Schleiermacher identifies as the essence of ‘personal religiousness’,[[422]](#footnote-422) and which Tillich describes as the relation between the ‘conditioned’ creature and the ‘power of something unconditional’,[[423]](#footnote-423) a feeling or relationship which we see in Hughes’s poetry, for instance, in Crow’s inescapable connection to his Mama. This relationship provides our *telos*, that toward which the corrections of God direct us. Rahner’s statement that the ‘transcendental experience […] may not be understood as a neutral power by which, among other things, God can be known’, but is instead solely and entirely ‘the basic and original way of knowing God’, excludes from talk of transcendence and transcendental experience the merely magical or superstitious. When Rahner writes of subjectivity as a ‘transcendence which listens’ and is ‘opened up by mystery’ – recalling the wodwo and, negatively, the Egg-Head – we reach a key aspect of transcendence: it is a two-way commerce.

Tillich’s systematic statement of this reciprocity begins by acknowledging the problem of using spatial metaphors for a nonspatial relationality, a reminder which helps, among other things, to take the hubristic edge off the wodwo’s self-centredness.

Immanence and transcendence are spatial symbols. God is *in* or *above* the world or both. The question is what does this mean in nonspatial terms? Certainly, God is neither in another nor in the same space as the world. He is the creative ground of the spatial structure of the world, but he is not bound to the structure, positively or negatively. The spatial symbol points to a qualitative relationship: God is immanent in the world as its permanent creative ground and is transcendent to the world through freedom. Both infinite divinity and finite human freedom make the world transcendent to God and God transcendent to the world.[…] The infinite is present in everything finite, in the stone as well as in the genius. Transcendence demanded by religious experience is the freedom-to-freedom relationship which is actual in every personal encounter.[[424]](#footnote-424)

The two-way commerce of transcendence, combined with the subjective experience of this transcendence as, in Rahner’s terms, ‘empty’ and ‘merely formal’, recalls Hughes’s vision of gnats ‘At large in the nothing’, a vision culminating in the speaker’s skull (a hollow space, not a head) rolling away into the vacuum. Rahner’s statement that transcendence is ‘the experience of *being known* by God’ completes this reciprocity, echoing Tillich’s statement that faith is the experience of being ‘grasped’ by the power of something unconditional. In stressing the importance of this reciprocity for avoiding self-divinisation as an ‘absolute subject’, Rahner addresses the nub of Gifford’s misgivings over the ‘hubris of transcendence’ he sees in ‘Wodwo’: religious transcendence, precisely understood, emphasises the radical dependence of the subject on that to which it transcends. And that to which it transcends is exclusively God, the divine natural world of Hughes’s poetry, the real.

These are of course sympathies only, and I don’t want to pretend an exact systematic alignment between Rahner/Tillich and Hughes. But these points of sympathy allow us to construct a concept of religious transcendence adequate to the job of interpreting Hughes’s poetry, and honest to the definitions of twentieth century theology; one which avoids the dualistic deprecation of material nature by stressing, as Rahner says, ‘the ultimate unity between God and the world’,[[425]](#footnote-425) and which understands transcendence not as an escape from reality, but as a reciprocal knowing or grasping which places the finite creature in communion with the creative ground of its being. In a lapsarian existence, moments of transcendence are moments of repair.

## 6.3: Transcendentalism

Having established a theological context for my discussion, I wish now to establish a complementary cultural-historical one, focused on a group of writers I have been allowing to gather at the margins of this study: the American Transcendentalists, the community of writers and thinkers centred on Concord, Massachusetts and Ralph Waldo Emerson, who exerted a powerful influence on successive generations of American poets. And at the risk of boiling matters down a little too severely, I wish to propose a Transcendentalist motto for the basic function of transcendence in Hughes’s poetry, especially in *River*: ‘We need to witness our own limits transgressed’.[[426]](#footnote-426) So writes Thoreau in the penultimate chapter of *Walden*. Our fallenness, our estrangement from the divine world, biological or otherwise, throws up a set of limits on our experience, trapping us in isolating, illusory self-sufficiency. The cosy arrangements of civilisation are likewise a series of limits, of lines drawn and agreements made, which in our hubris we aspire to set as absolute. Our fine moral distinctions likewise. All of these limits are present in the motto’s larger setting:

Our village life would stagnate if it were not for the unexplored forests and meadows which surround it. We need the tonic of wildness,—to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander. We are cheered when we observe the vulture feeding on the carrion which disgusts and disheartens us, and deriving health and strength from the repast.[[427]](#footnote-427)

By *Walden*’s conclusion this very naturalistic transgressing of limits has become something more spiritually and philosophically pregnant: ‘The light which puts out our eyes is darkness to us. Only that day dawns to which we are awake. There is more day to dawn. The sun is but a morning star.’[[428]](#footnote-428)

The progression from Thoreau’s concern with limitations of culture and control to profounder limitations of perception and insight encapsulates the Transcendentalist value system. Insight arrives not through efforts of culturally fettered human scholarship and empirical data-gathering, but by encouraging the transgression of all those limits we find upon us, so that reason and intuition may function naturally. This includes the need to throw off the stultifications of organised Christianity, the better to perceive the immanence of God in all nature. David M. Robinson refers to the Transcendentalist idea of ‘self-culture’ which

became the groundwork for a new conception of religious life which accentuated a process of disciplined intellectual and moral growth, and a deepening sensitivity and capacity for spiritual perception and discernment. […] This spirit of restless energy and earnest spiritual aspiration, articulated with both rhetorical brilliance and poetic delicacy by Emerson, characterized the mood of the Transcendentalist movement.[[429]](#footnote-429)

The Transcendentalists shared much of their agenda with the British Romantics on whose chronological and ideological heels they followed: both sought to redivinise a natural world which the Enlightenment had stripped of its power and mystery. The Transcendentalists had the additional motivation of cultivating a distinctly American body of literature by which their young nation might express itself without recourse to the hand-me-downs of European culture.

Immediately, resonances present themselves. Hughes writes of the ‘terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus of English poetic tradition’ (*WP* 213), and of the difficult but necessary effort any would-be original must make at resisting the constraints of so hefty a cultural inheritance. Immersion in the natural world provides for Hughes and Thoreau alike a challenge to the cultural ego – that is, external limits on the self – and an incitement to internal growth and discovery. ‘In the woods, we return to reason and faith’, writes Emerson, the presiding intelligence of Transcendentalism, in his 1836 essay ‘Nature’. Reason here is not to be confused with the idea of the rational in Hughes’s lapsarian discourse; it is rather a natural endowment impervious to the distortions of culture, an inner resource receptive to transcendental truth. Faith, meanwhile, secures this receptivity in an attitude of dependence and humility. Emerson proceeds from this line with a metaphysical rhapsody recalling both the self-deprecation of ‘Gnat Psalm’ and the all-seeing centredness of ‘Wodwo’:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.[[430]](#footnote-430)

The vanishing of ‘all mean egotism’ and the transparency of the self-as-eyeball correspond to the wodwo’s commendable difficulty in seeing its own reflection, while the wodwo’s awareness of the ‘all this’ and the roots which surround it aspire to Emerson’s sense of connectivity and involvement with creation, of being ‘part or parcel of God’. The convergence of subjectivity and ecology in ‘Wodwo’ for which I earlier argued, the renegotiation of our fallen condition, provides one of the basic tenets, perhaps *the* foundational idea, of Emerson’s philosophy. He restates this tenet again and again:

[N]ature is the opposite of the soul, answering to it part for part. One is seal and one is print. Its beauty is the beauty of his own mind. Its laws are the laws of his own mind. Nature then becomes to him the measure of his attainments. So much of nature as he is ignorant of, so much of his own mind does he not yet possess. And, in fine, the ancient precept, “Know thyself,” and the modern precept, “Study nature,” become at last one maxim.[[431]](#footnote-431)

Nature and the self provide the two poles of Emerson’s world, two points on the same orb, governed by the same laws; and though everything in our dualistic, post-Enlightenment epistemology is against it, his constant intention is that these two poles should meet.

These poles present a fundamentally lapsarian structure. Emerson was exceedingly optimistic about the human spiritual constitution, and did not endorse the wholesale fallenness of humanity as did Hughes. Perry Miller summarises: ‘Emerson, having decided that man is unfallen (except as his sensibilities have been blunted by civilization) announced that there is no inherent separation between the mind and the thing, that in reality they leap to embrace each other.’[[432]](#footnote-432) From a Hughesian perspective, of course, that parenthetic ‘except’ makes all the difference. Civilisation with its lines and rules, its dominations and dualisms, its repeated compounding of our estrangement from the divine, is the enemy of spiritual wholeness, and one not easily disarmed. Civilisation is, for Hughes, the (nearly) inescapable condition, and so while Hughes and Emerson make roughly the same diagnosis, Hughes’s prognosis is notably darker.

The difference follows from their measure of Puritan influence in society. For Hughes, as we saw in the last chapter, Puritanism is the *de facto* soul (or soul-shaped hole) of the Christian West, by which nature is alternately demonised or de-spiritualised and then conscripted into human service. Emerson, too, preached emancipation from this miserable condition. As Mason I. Lowance Jr. puts it, for Emerson, ‘nature became more than the announced “symbol of spirit”’ – that is, more than a humanly useful illustration of divine activity –

nature herself becomes spirit, and this understanding was available to *anyone* of uncorrupted, sensitive perception, because all men, while not equally endowed with mystical insight, were emancipated from the Puritan distinction between the regenerate and unregenerate in Emerson’s universe.[[433]](#footnote-433)

Emerson was ordained as a Unitarian minister, though this vocation did not survive the death of his first wife from tuberculosis in 1831. Unitarianism is a far cry from Puritanism when it comes to theological severity, but this was still New England, and Puritanism was in the cultural water. Both Emerson and Hughes wrote and thought against a backdrop, perceived or actual, of remorseless puritanical rejection of nature. Both men ‘protest against [the] false society’ in which they found themselves, a protest which leads Emerson, in a less famous 1844 essay sharing the title of ‘Nature’, to one of his most lapsarian, and Hughesian, utterances: ‘Man is fallen: nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man.’[[434]](#footnote-434)

This lapsarianism, breaking not across the orthodox relation between God and creation but between nature and humanity, provides a template for the writers and poets who follow Emerson in the Transcendentalist tradition, including Thoreau, Dickinson and Stevens. We find this template embedded in Harold Bloom’s schema for the many terms Emerson uses in adapting the ‘Romantic dialectic’ of *ethos*, *logos* and *pathos*[[435]](#footnote-435) to his Transcendentalist purpose:

*Ethos:* Fate, Destiny, Necessity, Fortune, Race, Powerlessness, Experience, Limitation, and Nature, but Nature only its most alienated or estranged aspect. *Logos:* Freedom, Wildness, Nature (in its humanized or redeemed aspect), Vocation, Temperament, Self-Reliance, Solitude, Reason, Transcendentalism, Thought, Subjectiveness, Wholeness. *Pathos:* Power, Potential, Will, Vitality, God, Greatness, Salvation, Vital Force, Victory, Inspiration, Surprise, Mastery, Ecstasy.[[436]](#footnote-436)

*Ethos*, Bloom tells us, returns via Greek meanings of ‘custom’, ‘image’ and ‘trait’ to a root for ‘self’ – appropriately, as we can recognise in the terms gathered under *ethos* various expressions for how the estranged, self-regarding human experiences divine law and nature. In theological terms these are expressions for the experience of our *telos* prior to our acceptance of it, when we cling to the infinite vacancy of mere existential freedom. *Logos* of course means ‘word’, and, though Bloom has nothing to say on the matter, the Christian significance is entirely relevant. The ‘Freedom’ referred to is the freedom of meaning as opposed to merely existing, of intending and being the actualised self, as Rahner says, and the freedom of existing in proper relationship with the divine, a relationship figured on the cross. Tillich speaks of ‘Freedom in polarity with destiny’ as fundamental to the human condition, joining the first two terms of the Emersonian triad. Emerson’s most frequent version of this triad is Fate, Freedom and Power, and in the gap between Fate, with its alienated sense of nature, and Freedom, with that relationship redeemed, we can recognise the lapsarian divide as Hughes understood it.

The third term, *pathos*, completes the Christian equation, and suggests what a Hughesian solution to our estrangement would look like on the page. Such assertive and celebratory words should be conditioned by a reminder that *pathos*, Greek for ‘passion’, returns to a root meaning ‘suffer’. Moments of surprise and vitality unalloyed with an awareness of suffering (physical and spiritual) are vanishingly rare in Hughes, though a few of the *River* poems come close, and the much-loved *Wodwo* poem ‘Full Moon and Little Frieda’ accomplishes the act through its assumption of a childlike innocence: ‘Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein’ (Luke 18:17; see also Matthew 21:16). Most of Hughes’s poetry exists in the human tension between fate and freedom, between nature experienced as alien and estranged and nature experienced as forming, with the self, a restored whole. His poems strive toward an expression of *logos* multifarious in nature; that is, they strive toward the constant revelation of the sacrificed god. In *River* this striving takes on distinctly Transcendental shades, and in one family of poems in particular: the fishing poems.

Hughes’s dedication to fishing began in childhood and never let up, or let go. In 1967’s *Poetry in the Making* he offers an overture to every fishing poem and prose gloss he would write, describing how when watching a float your senses, preternaturally boosted by your imagination, reach out in ‘a horizonless and slightly mesmerized way’, until finally a fish arrives ‘from a world where nothing exists but those inevitable facts which raise life out of nothing and return it to nothing’ (*WP* 19). The dust-to-dust echo of that final line injects a bit of mystery into the ‘inevitable facts’ of the fish’s world, mixing the empirical mechanics of life and death with a suggestion of profounder forces at work at the far end of a fishing line. Not Emerson but his friend and pupil Thoreau matches Hughes in his admiration of fishing as a metaphysically charged pastime. He endorses fishing as ‘the true industry for poets’, and writes in *Walden* of the experience of fishing at night:

Sometimes, after staying in a village parlor till the family had all retired, I have returned to the woods, and, partly with a view to the next day’s dinner, spent the hours of midnight fishing from a boat by moonlight, serenaded by owls and foxes, and hearing, from time to time, the creaking note of some unknown bird close at hand. These experiences were very memorable and valuable to me,—anchored in forty feet of water, and twenty or thirty rods from the shore, surrounded sometimes by thousands of small perch and shiners, dimpling the surface with their tails in the moonlight, and communicating by a long flaxen line with mysterious nocturnal fishes which had their dwelling forty feet below, or sometimes dragging sixty feet of line about the pond as I drifted in the gentle night breeze, now and then feeling a slight vibration along it, indicative of some life prowling about its extremity, of dull uncertain blundering purpose there, and slow to make up its mind. At length you slowly raise, pulling hand over hand, some horned pout squeaking and squirming to the upper air. It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmological themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element, which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook.[[437]](#footnote-437)

The communication taking place, the whole act of fishing, of which Thoreau writes with such a show of detail and significance, sends him wandering through ‘vast and cosmological themes’ until a strike on his line returns him to ‘Nature’ and the ‘inevitable facts’; except, as in Hughes’s account, there are intimations of something more, so that the fish Thoreau pulls from the lake is mirrored by one pulled from the air, suggesting insight, inspiration, transcendental access to something beyond the usual human ken. The one-sided predation of fishing makes it a far from perfect figure for the transcendental moment, but to the extent that it creates a physically situated two-way relationship between human subject and natural mystery, it offers an intriguing experiential approximation of transcendence.

Hughes’s ‘Pike’ ends with a scene of night fishing every bit as mysterious as Thoreau’s:

[…] past nightfall I dared not cast

But silently cast and fished

With the hair frozen on my head

For what might move, for what eye might move.

The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods

Frail on my ear against the dream

Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed,

That rose slowly toward me, watching. (*CP* 85-86)

It is not a pike which rises toward Hughes’s speaker in the final line, but a ‘dream’ freed by a darkness deeper than night’s darkness. We are in a realm now of fantasia, of ‘still splashes’ and ‘floating woods’, and the dream would seem a piece of the speaker’s own psyche, except that he feels watched by it, as it approaches. This dream sounds like a premonition of the doppelgänger of ‘Gulkana’; recall that the speaker of ‘Gulkana’ feels ‘hunted’ by ‘one inside me […] whose gaze I could feel as he watched me’ (*CP* 667). In both poems, lines drawn between self and nature, the inner and outer worlds, are being transgressed.

‘Earth-numb’, first collected in *Moortown* but later gathered into the *Three Books* version of *River*, begins in similar territory, with the speaker both ‘Hunting Salmon’ and ‘hunted and haunted by apparitions’ in the river (*CP* 541). The language becomes more religious: ‘The lure is a prayer. And my searching – / Like the slow sun. / A prayer, like a flower opening. ‘ Hughes’s image emphasises the reciprocity of the ‘prayer’, especially in the rhythm by which the images arrive. The comparison of lure to prayer makes immediate sense; it is almost glib. By following this with an image of the fisher as sun, Hughes disrupts this glibness, equating the human with both the fundamental mechanics of nature and the classic object of primitive religious devotion: the fisher is no longer a supplicant at prayer, but the mighty sun. Nor is the sun, for all its might, typically a killer, rather a source and sustainer of life. The prayer then returns as ‘a flower opening’, an image which interacts naturally with that of the sun, for the arrival of the sun, whether to the northern hemisphere in spring, or at dawn, brings the opening of flowers. An open flower is also a lure for insects, and seldom in a predatory way – but when hunting salmon, insects (real or artificial) are the lures of choice. In their quick, easy-reading succession on the page the images convey a sense of biological relationality in which predation is downplayed and ecological reciprocity, significantly cast as prayer, is emphasised. In these terms, Gifford’s objections to the poem as ‘pastoral’, following those of David Moody, are entirely justified: ‘a lure is not a prayer, a river is not a trap, the struggle for life of a hooked salmon cannot terrify the fisherman in any deeply-felt sense, otherwise he would not be hunting it to death’.[[438]](#footnote-438) As reports of predatory human activity, Hughes’s fishing poems indulge in many ethically questionable distortions, but these are committed in service to an ethic of solidarity with the natural world, including its predatory activities. The speaker in ‘Earth-numb’ describes the sudden strike of the salmon as ‘trying to rip life off me’, an incredibly lopsided statement but an attempt, even if in this case unconvincing, at conjuring a sense of continuity between the world of salmon and the world of humans, the divine and the fallen. To admit the ethical awareness Moody and Gifford request would be to admit our removal from nature, our abject fallenness, exactly the admission the poem does not want to make.

Thoreau may as well have been writing about Hughes when, in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, he introduces us to a man who had come to Massachusetts from the north of England, and ‘was always to be seen in serene afternoons haunting the river, and almost rustling with the sedge […] almost grown to be the sun’s familiar’, a man who

took his way in silence through the meadows, having passed the period of communication with his fellows. […] His fishing was not a sport, nor solely a means of subsistence, but a sort of solemn sacrament and withdrawal from the world, just as the aged read their Bibles.[[439]](#footnote-439)

The withdrawal from the world – the world of people, the world of clear boundaries – which ‘Earth-numb’ tries to depict, is brilliantly evoked in the *River* poem ‘Go Fishing’ (*CP* 652), whose prosaic title leads on to a succession of imperatives urging us to relinquish our self-regard and renegotiate our estrangement. The poem commences a dissolution of ego-consciousness which by line 6 has become simply ‘Cease’. This one-word line suggests a stoppage of both time and the lapsarian delusion of standing apart in our humanness: cease to be the individual you were; cease in the activity of individuality. The poem’s imagery illustrates the unity of matter and spirit so important to the theological understanding of transcendence already outlined. We are told to ‘Ghost loosen away downstream’ and yet to ‘Gulp river and gravity’, to ‘Be supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles’ and yet to ‘Become translucent’. The image of light, which risks being read as a simple image of spirit’s priority over matter, is incorporated into the complicated phrase ‘a weight of earth-taste light’, insisting that this translucence remains a physical and earth-bound translucence, and nothing more. Yet by the poem’s conclusion the finitude of the individual creature has clearly been transcended, as the subject’s culminating translucence gives way to a return from the river to ‘Search for face’ and ‘let the world come back’. That is, to return to your fallen subjectivity and all the concerns and demands of the human you are. But this is not a return from simple escapism. The poem’s final line, ‘Heal into time and other people’, hints at what Tillich’s discussion of transcendence states outright, that our ability to transcend our fallen condition and experience the divine is made possible by the same freedom which constitutes our relationships with other people, the ‘freedom-to-freedom relationship which is actual in every personal encounter’. The ‘flow’ of ‘healing’ discovered in the subject’s rivery reverie is essentially the same healing found now among people, because both are occasioned by transcendence of our estrangement: the impoverishment of our interactions, our lapsarian shame in each other’s company – a return, we might say, to the state of Golding’s Neanderthals, who possess a kind of communal, tribal telepathy. Relationality does not sit to one side of transcendence; it is evidence of our potential for transcendence. Emerson in ‘The Over-Soul’ puts this idea in more human terms: ‘In all conversation between two persons tacit reference is made, as to a third party, to a common nature. That third party or common nature is not social; it is impersonal; is God.’[[440]](#footnote-440) ‘Go Fishing’ does not end ‘*Break again* into time and other people’, as we would expect if the experience offered by the poem were an escape into something at odds with normal human life, as if the assumption and translucence were something accessible only to fancy. Rather, continuity is suggested between the transcendental language of the fishing trance and the world of time and people to which the subject returns. The point of the trance is to broaden the horizon of our workaday wakefulness, renegotiating the limits of our estrangement.

## 6.4: Dickinson, Stevens and resistance to time

In Chapter 3 I discussed time in the context of *Moortown Diary*, noting that close involvement in the cyclical birthing and dying of farm animals provokes moments of pushing back against time: the badger skeleton, the orf-lamb memorial, Jack Orchard’s wire fence. Such efforts – and even more so their honouring in poetry – are what Tillich calls ‘forms of human resistance against the ultimate threat of non-being implied in the category of time’, a resistance which ‘stems from man’s belonging to the eternal [and] his exclusion from it in the state of estrangement’, so that ‘His existential unwillingness to accept his temporality makes time a demonic structure of destruction for him’.[[441]](#footnote-441) Beginning with the *Gaudete* Epilogue poems and proceeding into *River* (and so paralleling the rise in sacramental imagery) we see a more deliberate confrontation with time. And not just time in the abstract, but its manifestation in the other three dimensions of our experience: physical change and, ultimately, death – ‘the final form of change’.[[442]](#footnote-442)

Time fits into my lapsarian reading of Bloom’s Transcendentalist schema as an aspect of *ethos*: our sense of fate, necessity and limitation which surrounds the self-aware self. Time is therefore associated with nature ‘in its most alienated or estranged aspect’, ‘a demonic structure of destruction’, as Tillich says, the ‘all / One smouldering annihilation’ of Hughes’s early poetic. The effort to redeem time and the processes of change and death – or to redeem human perception of them, to flip the dialectic – and not merely to contain them in a perpetual counterbalancing of vitality vs death or creation vs destruction, is a central theme of *River*, and provides its most typically Christian quality. It is the quality of suggesting a human *telos* of divine reunification beyond reach of the ravages of historical time.

By way of introduction to a deeper discussion of death and time, we can turn to Emily Dickinson, a poet whose religious sensitivity, ecstatic response to the natural world and indifference to the incidental currents of society show the mark of Transcendentalism which had emerged one generation earlier and eighty miles to the east. The solidarity implicit between Hughes and Emerson on the grounds of their opposition to a prevailing cultural puritanism becomes, for Dickinson and Hughes, explicit. In his introduction to *A Choice of Emily Dickinson’s Verse* (1968), Hughes writes of Dickinson in terms which echo his discussions of both Shakespeare and Coleridge. A crisis of unrequited love, says Hughes, impelled the poet to refocus her passion on ‘the only possible substitute – the entire Universe in its Divine aspect’, in a way which mirrored ‘the whole religious dilemma of New England, at the most critical moment in its history [as] the old Calvinism of the New England States was in open battle against the spirit of the new age’.

While radical Puritan revivals were sweeping Emily Dickinson’s friends and relatives away from the flesh and the world, like epidemics she was almost alone among her friends in resisting, she quarantined herself in Jonathan Edwards’s faith that the visible Universe was ‘an emanation of God for the pure joy of Creation in which the creatures find their justification by yielding assent to the beauty of the whole, even though it slay them.’ (*WP* 156-7)

The ‘radical Puritan revivals’ of the time would be more properly termed Congregationalist, and were quite different affairs than the rowdy open-air events of the Great Awakening which gave rise to, among other denominations, Primitive Methodism. Rather, as Polly Longsworth writes, they were ‘intense, silent, inward spiritual awkenings that over a matter of weeks or months gripped individuals wrestling with their need for salvation.’[[443]](#footnote-443) The influence of Emerson’s essays and poems seems to have helped inoculate Dickinson against conversion,[[444]](#footnote-444) and Hughes’s commentary emphasises the Transcendentalist values of her life and practice: ‘Whether from Church or Science, she would accept nothing by hearsay or on Authority’, but ‘was first of all true to herself and her wits’ (*WP* 157). Her poetry thus becomes the document of her religious scepticism even as it battled with her rapturous adoration of the cosmos.

Like Shakespeare and Coleridge before her, Hughes recruits Dickinson to the anti-Puritan cause, though other habits of his religious thinking – a lost paradise, rival siblings, a Christ figure suffering in maternal communion – are absent from his account of her work. Instead, he draws our attention to the particularly apocalyptic aspects of her poetry. First, there are her repeated visions of a ‘final reality, her own soul, the soul within the Universe’, ‘a final revelation of horrible Nothingness’ which ‘was the source of the paradox which is her poetic self’ (*WP* 158). By ‘paradox’, I take Hughes to be referring to his earlier point about Dickinson’s transference of her frustrated love from human to all-encompassing divine object: for how could the object of so strong a love prove such a comfortless and inhuman vacuum? How could her poetic gift betray her to such despair? Hence, ‘her spiritualized love and its difficulties became also a topical religious disputation on the grandest scale’ (*WP* 157), and the nub of this disputation is the question of whether anything in the universe answers to the human cry of love and passion. We have heard Crow ask similar questions. Prompted by the phrase ‘horrible Nothingness’, we can wonder whether Dickinson, in Hughes’s account, is grappling with the topic of transcendence itself, the ‘absolute infinity’ of human transcendence which ‘experiences itself as empty’, as Rahner says: the paradox of ‘a finite infinity’. But whereas Crow struggled toward life, Dickinson, according to Hughes, struggled toward death – not toward suicide (though poems such as ‘Severer Service of myself’ flirt with that solution) but toward death as toward a final truth. ‘Death obsessed her, as the one act that could take her the one necessary step beyond her vision’ (*WP* 159). Death particularly obsesses the version of Dickinson we meet in Hughes’s selection of her work. The 105 poems which comprise *A Choice of Dickinson’s Verse* dwell on death, decay and the ‘eerie openings of the cosmos’ which constitute, for Hughes, the heart of her religious sensitivity. The teeming of the natural world, such an important aspect of her work, as Hughes acknowledges elsewhere in his Introduction, is reduced to a secondary, ambivalent presence. Hughes is clear about the personal, non-representative nature of his selection, which allows us to ask: why these poems?

Given the 1968 publication of the Dickinson selection, we might view the book as a self-provocation toward a confrontation with death, part of the conjoined processes of grieving over Plath’s suicide and editing Plath’s work for publication, as Gillian Groszewski suggests.[[445]](#footnote-445) Such poems as ‘I saw no Way – The Heavens were stitched –’, ‘After great pain, a formal feeling comes –’ and ‘There’s a certain Slant of light’, with their chilly tone and sense of resignation to physical and psychic ordeal, recall the poems Plath wrote in her final months. Among the poems more responsive to the natural world which Hughes selected, the dominant note is typically of the gulf between the human and natural spheres. ‘Four Trees – upon a solitary Acre –’ depicts the trees as having ‘No nearer Neighbour […] But God’, and ‘Bloom upon the Mountain – stated –’ concludes that the poet’s rich experience of a sunset is hers alone: the mountain doesn’t feel a thing. ‘I dreaded that first Robin, so’, meanwhile, exhibits positive fear of the creatures returning with spring, as each in turn enforces the speaker’s sense of alienation:

I dared not meet the Daffodils –

For fear their Yellow Gown

Would pierce me with a fashion

So foreign to my own – [[446]](#footnote-446)

It is interesting to compare not just this stanza but the whole poem to Hughes’s ‘Daffodils’ from *Flowers and Insects* – later to appear in *Birthday Letters*, where the poem’s thematic dread at life receives a clearer autobiographical explanation. In the *Flowers and Insects* version a naïve delight in daffodils as something to be harvested and adored changes slowly to ‘alarm’: ‘They became awful, / Like the idea of atoms. Or like the idea / Of white-frosted galaxies, floating apart’. This vision leads to language seemingly pulled from Revelation: ‘It was Resurrection! / The trumpet! / The earth-weight of nightmare!’ (*CP* 713), all of which reflects the speaker’s ‘bereaved acknowledgement’ of the ‘unthinking Drums’ of spring which concludes Dickinson’s poem.

Dickinson’s poetry, especially as presented in Hughes’s selection, exists in a liminal space between physical nature and a realm of the dislocated, at times disembodied, self. Yet these realms, together, are bounded by death, and so indulge nothing of an afterlife, Christian or otherwise. They constitute a subjective, phenomenal world flowing continually toward death as toward an event horizon beyond which nothing can be seen and from which no information returns. In general terms, this describes Hughes’s poetry as it moves through the *Gaudete* Epilogue poems, which repeatedly attempt to wring revelation from death, suffering and time:

Who are you?

The spider clamps the bluefly – whose death panic

Becomes sudden soulful absorption. (*G* 177)

A dead man lies, marching here and there

In the battle for life, without moving. (*G* 198)

‘Trying to be a leaf’ (*G* 180), ‘Music, that eats people’ (*G* 182), ‘A doctor extracted’ (*G* 188) and several other poems employ images of injury, death and dead bodies to provoke moments of harrowing though inconclusive metaphysical enquiry. In their swings between concrete detail and abstraction,[[447]](#footnote-447) their devotion to a sacred and destructive power, their sacramental familiarity and their fixation upon moments of culminating pain, the poems of the *Gaudete* Epilogue are the most Dickinsonian that Hughes wrote. They think in religious terms but refuse religious consolations; they experience the night-fishing alarm of transcendental contact but feel the self diminished, not expanded, by the ordeal. To this reader, at least, they offer little in the way of hope – perhaps only the practical hope of endurance.

But if we turn to the first poem of *Orts*, we find a profound hope under consideration. A bog-preserved oak ‘is nursing a hope’ of being pulled from the muck and ‘lovingly carved into a hard body / For the goddess of oaks’ (*CP* 393). This image subtly invokes the crucifixion, as well as the birth ceremony of the changeling Lumb, itself a crucifixion of sorts (‘The lopped trunk lies like a mutilated man, with two raised arms’ (*G* 16)). What is the nature of the oak’s hope in *Orts* 1, a hope shared by the seasonal ephemera of ‘acorn’ and ‘leaf-skeleton’? It cannot be a hope predicated on the cycles of nature, for the oak slowly rotting in the bog is already involved, as is the acorn, whether it becomes pig food, sapling or more soil for the forest. The least we can say of this hope is that it involves escape from the action of time on organic life. It is a hope for removal from the cycles of creation and destruction. A Christian sensibility is clearly at work: we are reading a poem about the resurrection of the body. This hope, which here might be considered an aberration given the marginal status of *Orts*, proliferates in *River*.

To say that a hope exists is not to say that it is fulfilled. But, provoked by the transcendental rapture of fishing, and true to his anti-Puritan insistence that nature has a share in redemption, Hughes achieves at least one supreme moment of hope fulfilled, in which a Dickinsonian death-obsession is overcome with an intriguing mix of heathen milieu and Christian metaphysics: ‘That Morning’. To explain why this poem so speaks to a Christian perspective, and how Hughes brought himself to that point, I begin by securing a final intertextual tie with the Transcendentalists: Wallace Stevens.

I’ve quoted Stevens here and there throughout this study, wherever his poetic preoccupations and Hughes’s align, to suggest affinities of thought which Hughes’s own comments might have obscured, and I wish now to refine this occasional hinting into a more precise idea of how the oeuvres of these men relate. Hughes’s feelings toward Stevens and his poetry are rather more fraught than his feelings toward Dickinson. We know he was reading Stevens at least as early as the year he and Plath married, writing to her that ‘I began to read Wallace Stevens aloud, starting from the back because I’ve recently read all the poems in the beginning. I like Stevens continually, but every poem lets you down’ (*LTH* 52). His measured comment here may have masked a stronger dislike, as he remarks years later in an interview that

all along, though with a growing scepticism, she [Plath] preserved her admiration for Wallace Stevens. He was a kind of god to her, while I could never see anything at all in him except magniloquence. […] It’s still a mystery to me how that line [by John Crowe-Ransom] should have stirred me so much after I’d read acres and acres of Wallace Stevens and William Carlos Williams who never had any of the like effect on me.[[448]](#footnote-448)

Recall, too, the 1957 letter in which Hughes compares Crowe Ransom’s ear-inspired poetry to the ‘arbitrary & colourful & partial & questionable’ froth of Stevens’s ‘eye-nerve’ verse (*LTH* 96-7). Yet the very terms of the letter suggest the degree to which Hughes was familiar with Stevens’s work. The poem ‘Thinking of a Relation Between the Images of Metaphors’, from Stevens’s 1947 volume *Transport to Summer*, takes readers to the Perkiomen Creek in Pennsylvania, where we find a man fishing for bass as he listens to doves singing overhead. Already we’re on very Hughesian turf. ‘A Dove’ is the poem Hughes chose to conclude his 1995 *New Selected Poems*, as it now concludes his *Collected Poems*, making this bird a culminating vessel for his poetic energies, ‘wobbling top-heavy / Into one and many’ (*CP* 1195). In Stevens’s poem, ‘In the one ear of the fisherman, who is all / One ear, the wood-doves are singing a single song,’ while at the same time ‘The fisherman is all / One eye, in which the dove resembles the dove.’[[449]](#footnote-449) Stevens’s fisherman is a figure of total sensory engagement, with an imagination capable of refining the many songs of many doves into a single song, using both eye and ear in their entirety: a proleptic rejection of Hughes’s either/or theorising. The true poet, Stevens tells us, attends entirely to both. The bass, meanwhile, ‘lie deep, still afraid of the Indians’, suggesting a collective bass-memory of being hunted by natives. Stevens presents us with a scene so Hughesian – river, fisherman, dove, aboriginals – as to seem a parody of all the fishing poems Hughes would come to write.

We also find this entry in Stevens’s ‘Adagia’ notebook, first published in 1957 in *Opus Posthumous*: ‘Values other than those merely of the eye and ear.’[[450]](#footnote-450) Did Hughes resent Stevens’s fishing poem, and seek to insult him on his own terms? Did he read a fresh-off-the-presses copy of *Opus Posthumous* and feel himself provoked to differentiate between the values of eye and ear while rejecting outright the suggestion of other values? Even if this is all coincidence, we can note a strong stylistic antipathy between Stevens’s metapoetic parable and the ‘unquestionable’ glandular physicality of the young Hughes’s poetic esteem.

All of this protest notwithstanding, Stevens clearly got under Hughes’s skin, and to the extent that Hughes was influenced by Plath – ‘Her early poetry is Wallace Stevens almost every other line’, as he says[[451]](#footnote-451) – we would expect Stevensian textures and concerns to emerge in Hughes’s work. They do. These lines from ‘A Wind Flashes the Grass’ in *Wodwo* resound with echoes of Stevens:

We cling to the earth, with glistening eyes, pierced afresh by the tree’s cry.

And the incomprehensible cry

From the boughs, in the wind

(*CP* 153)

This poem elides two key Stevens poems, quite deliberately I suspect: ‘Domination of Black’ from his first book, and ‘The Course of a Particular’, written within a few years of his death. In ‘Domination of Black’ the speaker watches hemlocks in a night wind while hearing peacocks call as they fly among the branches.

I heard them cry—the peacocks.

Was it a cry against the twilight

Or against the leaves themselves

Turning in the wind[[452]](#footnote-452)

The cry is heard, as Bloom says, as ‘a lament against mutability’, a protest ‘against the color of mortality’ and ‘the immanence of death’.[[453]](#footnote-453) The poem’s final movement expands to an image of ‘planets’ gathering ‘Like the leaves themselves / Turning in the wind’, and the speaker starkly discloses, ‘I felt afraid’, just as Hughes’s speaker, realising that the movement of branches against the dark sky ‘Is the oracle of the earth’, reports, ‘They too are afraid’. Scigaj notes the speaker’s ‘state of anxiety and fear at the prospect of mortality in the time-bound world of woe’; Robinson notes its ‘vision of death and ephemeralness’.[[454]](#footnote-454)

These stark mortal anxieties are amplified by turning to ‘The Course of a Particular’, which sets a similar scene: ‘The leaves cry, hanging on branches swept by the wind’.[[455]](#footnote-455) But these leaves cry something worse than mortality. It is the cry of human meaninglessness, of the listener’s inability to relate, and the realisation that ‘being part is an exertion that declines’.

The leaves cry. It is not a cry of divine attention,

Nor the smoke-drift of puffed-out heroes, nor human cry.

It is the cry of leaves that do not transcend themselves.

If something cannot transcend itself it cannot, as Tillich tells us, encounter or be encountered, not meaningfully; and especially considering the reciprocity of transcendence, this is rightly felt as a failure by the human listener. And this is the dark vision of ‘A Wind Flashes the Grass’, a poem partaking of two of Stevens’s most chastened moments. There are further echoes of Stevens to be found even in this poem; Hughes’s reference to ‘below words’ listened for in ‘the rock’ mimics the ‘sub-music like sub-speech […] Letters of rock and water’ of Stevens’s ‘Variations on a Summer Day’, for instance. But the main conclusion to be drawn from the poem’s intertextuality is that Hughes’s anxieties over death, time and the self’s limitations find sympathy and enlargement – even if unselfconsciously – with Stevens.

To be sure, Hughes’s official stylistic antipathy but underlying thematic sympathy with Stevens makes for an unsteady and often obscure intertextual relationship. But the relationship becomes most visible, and most useful as a means of appreciating Hughes’s religious thought, when we return to the world of rivers. My proposal is to use Stevens’ river poems as tools for understanding Hughes’s, relying upon Steven’s lawyer-cum-aesthete detachment to highlight tensions potentially smothered by Hughes’s gonzo outdoorsiness. Two poems in particular suggest themselves for this purpose. The first is ‘A Completely New Set of Objects’, from *Transport to Summer*, where we find ourselves along the Schuylkill River, again in Pennsylvania – significantly where Stevens was born and raised, but not where he made his home as an adult.

From a Schuylkill in mid-earth there came emerging

Flotillas, willed and wanted, bearing in them

Shadows of friends, of those he knew, each bringing

From the water in which he believed and out of desire

Things made by mid-terrestrial, mid-human

Makers without knowing, or intending, uses.[[456]](#footnote-456)

The bearers are ‘verdant with time’s buried verdure’, and the objects they carry are ‘the exactest shaping / Of a vast people old in meditation’. Stevens’s objects are Thought-Objects, freshened epistemologies, the novel creations of an enlivened subjectivity. Time in this poem is a source of revelation and authority, the bearers arriving in the form of spectres from the beholder’s past, like voices issuing from ‘The Dark River’ of *Remains of Elmet*, verdant with their involvement with the earth. Stevens here rejects notions of the spiritual, noumenal and naively transcendent, insisting that revelation results from the processes of time, the interactions of time and earth and one’s own sense of place in their passing. The poem closes with a suggestion of ‘the fathers of the makers’ buried and dissolving – vanished revelations of the even more ancient, reabsorbed by the earth. This is a poem submissive to time. Yet only belief and desire need be brought to bear for new meaning to be willed from the constant passing away of everything.

‘This Solitude of Cataracts’, from *Auroras of Autumn* (1950), refuses to submit, and longs to end the passing. It begins with a Heraclitean admission of the ever-changingness of the studied river: ‘He never felt twice the same about the flecked river, / Which kept flowing and never the same way twice’.[[457]](#footnote-457) ‘Flecked’ connotes for Stevens a physical authenticity, the organic complication of the real which cannot be matched in art, and above all the quality of living-in-change.[[458]](#footnote-458) Stevens begins where we might expect Hughes to finish: witnessing the river’s capacity for continual self-renewal. But Stevens refuses to celebrate this quality, longing instead for an escape from time:

He wanted to feel the same way over and over.

He wanted the river to go on flowing the same way,

To keep on flowing. He wanted to walk beside it,

Under the buttonwoods, beneath a moon nailed fast.

He wanted his heart to stop beating and his mind to rest

In a permanent realization […]

released from destruction

This last line recalls, perhaps repressedly on Stevens’ part, the ‘release from action and suffering’ of Eliot’s ‘Burnt Norton’. Time may be verdant, but an eventual product of verdure is death. Stevens as much as admits the impossibility of escape from time, expressing an exasperation that the metaphysics of thought are unaccommodated in reality’s physical unfolding, and venturing only to express this escape as an unfulfilled desire: ‘He wanted […] He wanted’. He concludes the poem by imagining finally what it would be like ‘To be a bronze man breathing under archaic lapis […] Breathing his bronzen breath at the azury centre of time’. Perhaps not an escape, then, but a re-imagining of time as emanating and returning to the self, exempting the self from the necessity of change.

These two poems suggest alternatives to the question of one’s relationship to time and death: you can accept the verdure of change leading to death, or you can take refuge in a strenuously imagined escape. Conspicuously absent is the Christian notion that an escape from the cycles of life and death is part of the human destiny; ‘This Solitude of Cataracts’, like ‘Credences of Summer’, expresses a desire for escape yet views it as ‘unreal’. Hughes’s desire for such an escape, and his repression of the knowledge this would be an escape from reality, is suggested by the opening poem of the 1983 *River*, ‘The Morning Before Christmas’, in which a detailed account of harvesting and fertilising salmon eggs pans out to this conclusion:

A world

Wrought in wet, heavy gold. Treasure-solid.

That morning

Dazzle-stamped every cell in my body

With its melting edge, its lime-bitter brightness.

A flood pond, inch-iced, held the moment of a fox

In touch-melted and refrozen dot-prints. (*CP* 640)

The scene offers an emblem if not of permanence then of the desire for permanence, sealed with a visit from Hughes’s most sacred animal. Words such as ‘wrought’, ‘solid’ and ‘stamped’ cannot fool us into believing that the ‘world’ of that morning, and the self created (‘every cell in my body’), will ultimately last. But the desire for such a lasting, ‘a permanent realization’, is poignantly evoked in the refreezing of the fox’s prints.

The nature of rivers makes them perfect emblems of constancy-in-change: always different yet always there, hurriedly shifting great volumes of water yet never doing anything but that. Standing in a river, one feels suddenly involved in the fundamental machinery of the physical world, and yet poignantly out of synch with it, as the water pushes and pushes, and fleck after fleck passes by. As with fishing, one feels plugged-in and yet other. This is to say, rivers lend themselves toward lapsarian symbolism and encourage, in turn, a desire for reconciliation with nature. This is the trajectory of ‘The Bear’ (*CP* 845-7), a long poem incorporated into the *Three Books* version of *River* which narrates part of a fishing trip to British Columbia. For the first seventy-odd lines Hughes and his buddies hunker in their camp, waiting out bad weather as they watch a river grow torrential with rain. Their light-hearted patience and sheer delight at their surroundings culminates in an admission that they are all ‘besotted voyeurs’ of the spectacle, especially of the spawning steelhead enacting ‘the giddy orgasm of the river’. They want to be a part of it, ‘to hook ourselves into it.’ The note of shame and exclusion introduced by ‘voyeurs’ sets the poem up for the final six lines, in which the fishermen suddenly spot a dead bear tumbling down the torrent: ‘The night before’s mystery upstream gunshot / Materialized, saluted us, and vanished / As a black sea-going bear, a scapegoat, an offering.’ A scapegoat is more than someone who prosaically takes the blame; the term’s specifically biblical origin concerns instructions given to Aaron, whose sons were killed for making improper offerings to God. The instructions propose a ceremony to remove sin and repair Israel’s relationship with God:

And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness:

And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-2)

Leviticus 16 prophecies Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and the transformation of the bear across the two twin-titled bear poems, from the frightful predator of *Wodwo* (*CP* 160) to this victimised carcass, illustrates Hirschberg’s observation that, with *Crow*, Hughes turns ‘from his unspoken allegiance with the mythical life of devouring predators to the poetry of the scapegoat, a poetry of humilities that celebrates and embraces the symbolic death of his former self’.[[459]](#footnote-459) The use of ‘scapegoat’ in Hughes’s poem (and ‘offering’ also appears several times in Leviticus 16) has the same air of slight overstatement and provocation we see in much of *River*’s sacramental imagery, of a piece with the grotesque irony of ‘saluted’; yet this irony adds merely a shade of dismay to the speaker’s desired identification with the bear, a forlorn acknowledgement of the gap between his current self and his would-be Christ-like self. The speaker knows that he and his companions sit in a presumptive state of transgression, a state hinted at earlier in the poem when the speaker wonders if ‘maybe this was The Rains – / The winter coming early’. The uppercase gravitas suggests the rains which bring God’s retributive flood in Genesis 7, suspending the possibility over the dash and line-break, until the next line turns to thoughts of weather. But the reference does its work, magnified by the poem’s closing passage, of hinting at the speaker’s doubting thought: that for all their enjoyment of their time by the river, they sit in a state of transgression and estrangement.

## 6.5: Redemption achieved

‘The Bear’ occupies one pole of Hughes’s river poems: realistic, journalistic and decidedly un-transcendent. The other pole is occupied by ‘That Morning’ (*CP* 663-4), by general consensus one of the most appealing poems in *River*, and ‘perhaps the most paradisal poem in his oeuvre’, as Roberts says.[[460]](#footnote-460) Hughes’s speaker – though in this poem it is particularly hard to resist conflating author and speaker – stands in a river, fishing for salmon with a companion. The sight of the gathered salmon provokes a memory of the bombers Hughes watched as a boy in South Yorkshire as they passed overhead on their way to war in Europe. The syntax is ambiguous, but watching the planes, the salmon, or both at once as by the inner and out eye, gives a sense that ‘the world had seemed capsizing slowly’. Hughes addresses this memory’s inclusion in the poem with a rare moment of metapoetic candour, a statement of what ‘England could add’ to the Alaskan scene, so that a reader watches the poem being pieced together. That is, what Hughes sees in the river is truly ‘willed and wanted’, arriving ‘From the water in which he believed and out of desire’. As Roberts suggests, ‘That Morning’ potentially addresses Hughes’s relationship with both his brother and son, invoking particularly the lost ‘paradise’ of his earliest adventures with Gerald,[[461]](#footnote-461) fulfilling Stevens’s claim that the significance of his morning at the Alaskan river is borne to him by ‘Shadows of friends, of those he knew’. The first six lines of ‘That Morning’ express a valuation of time and personal commitments akin to that of ‘A Completely New Set of Objects’, and these lines act as framing devices for the remaining twenty-four lines, so that when the poem begins anew at line 7, as it very much does, the spiritual experience which follows is not simply the spontaneous product of the gorgeous setting and the act of fishing, but of the water in which the speaker believes – that is, his sense of personal history – and ‘out of desire’ – the desire that a personally redemptive, recuperative experience occur.

Line 7 begins with the word ‘Solemn’, a performative, tone-setting word, in workshop parlance a tell rather than a show, whose inclusion here demonstrates the willing and the wanting of what is to emerge. What emerges is a vision of ‘the body’ as it ‘Separated, golden and imperishable, / From its doubting thought’. Nearly every word here speaks to the religious dilemma of the poem, namely, how to understand time in light of the fall and the Christian sense of a *telos* or endpoint aimed at undoing the fall. The separation of ‘body’ from ‘doubting thought’ is not a wholesale dualism of body *vs* mind, but the rejection of a single ‘thought’, the thought of our separateness, our transgression. The golden body is in turn called ‘a spirit-beacon’: dualistic categories of body and mind do not easily adhere to the poem’s language. ‘Doubting’ brings a popular biblical echo of ‘Doubting Thomas’ (though the word ‘doubt’ doesn’t actually appear in most translations), a story found in the Gospel of John though in none of the synoptic gospels. The story of the apostle Thomas’s scepticism (John 20:24-9), like the story of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead (20:1-10), emphasises the resurrection of the body and Christ’s physicality, even in his post-resurrection appearances: ‘Then saith he to Thomas, Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust *it* into my side’ (20:27). To call the fisherman’s body ‘golden’ has, as Roberts says, ‘alchemical connotation’ of achieved purity and perfection;[[462]](#footnote-462) it also chimes with Stevens’s ‘bronze man’ as an image of timelessness and the evasion of an organic fate. And as the first movement toward the poem’s closing image of a ‘river of light’ filled with ‘creatures of light’, it connects us again to the gospels, particularly the scene of Jesus’s transfiguration upon the mountain in which ‘his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light’ (Matthew 17:2[[463]](#footnote-463)), and the light imagery which forms such a prominent feature of the Gospel of John.[[464]](#footnote-464)

The second adjective given for the body, ‘imperishable’, moves us closer to a Christian *telos*, in which all of creation, matter and spirit alike, even to the point of its ‘tingling atoms’, experiences redemption. To imagine, even fleetingly, an imperishable physical state is to join Adam in dreaming ‘the religion of the diamond body’, and to admit the hope of poem 1 of *Orts*. ‘Everything that exists and yet does not endure raises the question of a being which exists and endures eternally, and which can give it endurance in the midst of impermanence’, as Moltmann says.[[465]](#footnote-465) The obvious perishability of the human body implies what Hughes here imagines, an imperishable form of the same. To take matters one theological step further, Moltmann refers us back to Tillich: ‘“God” is the answer to the question implied by man’s finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately.’[[466]](#footnote-466) That to which the golden, imperishable body is welcomed, the river of light and creatures of light, are Hughes’s translation of the idea of God. In a letter discussing the ‘double plot’ structure of *Gaudete*, Hughes writes of the un-narrated adventures of the original Reverend Lumb: ‘As if the brilliant real thing were happening to creatures of light in another world – but these are the shadows of it, confusedly glimpsing and remembering’ (*LTH* 428). The ‘brilliant real’ – real in the Lacanian sense – is the divine, that toward which the word ‘God’ gestures. As we have already heard Tillich say, ‘If we could see the holy in every reality, we should be in the Kingdom of God’. ‘Whole’ and ‘holy’ have the same etymological root, and it follows that to see something in its entirety, its realness, is to see it as holy (something Lacan himself, it should be noted, considered impossible). The idea of subjectivity and sight, of the individual’s ability to see completely, instead of in confused glimpses, is powerfully expressed in a Gospel passage particularly resonant with ‘That Morning’: ‘The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light’ (Matthew 6:22). Neither the villagers of *Gaudete* nor Hughes’s speaker at the outset of ‘That Morning’ sees or participates fully in the real. But the reappeared Lumb begins his reconciliation in his incremental approaches to ‘the glare’ of the Goddess (*G* 179, 200), a reconciliation which ‘That Morning’ seeks to fulfil.

The next stanza introduces two notes centrifugally balanced. The first is a knowing play of naively transcendent language: ‘we flew’ and ‘lifting us’. The second is the scepticism and restraint of ‘As if’, a phrase used three times. This phrase produces the same subjunctive mood as Stevens’s repetitions of ‘He wanted’, holding Hughes back from the fullest commitment to the ideas and sensations the poem indulges. These ideas, while collapsing to an extent the dualism of mind/spirit and body, uphold the dualism of darkness and light as symbols for fallenness and holiness, a signature of the Gospel of John (as well as Gnostic and Manichaean theology, with its emphasis on the corruption of matter). The ‘sooty twilight’ of the wartime memory dates from after Hughes’s expulsion from the Calderdale moorland paradise he shared with his brother – compare the language of ‘Two’ from *Remains of Elmet*: ‘Two stepped down out of the morning star […] The sun spread a land at their feet (*CP* 480) – setting up the trajectory of private redemption which resolves in ‘That Morning’ with visions of light, visions which ‘might darken’ should the imagination’s effort falter.

The dualism of darkness and light is explicitly one of fallenness: ‘As if the fallen world and salmon were over’. Does the construction of this sentence imply that the salmon too are fallen? Even if we decide not, or not necessarily, we are still left with a strong statement of the lapsarian status of the world, including, presumably, its creatures. Salmon and salmon-fisher both become, within the poem’s vision, ‘imperishable’, ‘creatures of light’, and this vision requires a suppression of Hughes’s knowledge of the cyclical life-struggle for which salmon are such a consistent symbol in his poetry. Even the bears who appear are subject to a curious naiveté, described in terms which tell us nothing of the fear and awe experienced by a flabby primate in the company of forty-four-stone ursine carnivores. We see the same suppressive effort in ‘This Solitude of Cataracts’, where Stevens’s ‘permanent realization’ is described as ‘without any wild ducks’, wild ducks being a Stevensian synecdoche for the sprawl and vitality of nature.[[467]](#footnote-467) ‘Two’ is again relevant, particularly in Hughes’s revision of the 1979 line ‘the stream spoke oracles of abundance’ (*CP* 1275) to the final 1994 version, ‘The stream spoke an oracle of unending’ (*CP* 480); the revision swaps the copious earthiness of ‘abundance’ for the stronger escape from time *per se* of ‘unending’, bringing it closer to the vision of an ‘imperishable’ nature we find in ‘That Morning’.[[468]](#footnote-468)

In short, ‘That Morning’ dramatizes aspirations of transcending cycles of creation and destruction. Hughes embraces the idea, even if only for the space of one poem, of a fallen earth redeemed by removal from the ravages of time, with the dross of change ‘fallen away’ and the remainder ‘imperishable’. To say the salmon ‘had let the world pass away’ echoes Revelation 21:1, in which the author receives a vision of ‘a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away’. Hughes’s poem engages with an explicitly Christian apocalypse.

It must be stressed that this transcendence, though a release from the destructive action of time insofar as that destruction is no longer allowed to dominate the speaker’s vision, is not a forsaking of the material world. The transcendence of man to God takes place through the physical act of standing in a river, fishing; the transcendence of God to man takes place through the arrival of the creatures of light, the imperishable fish and companionable bears. Hughes in this one river poem accomplishes what Stevens in either of his individually does not: to carry the verdure of earth and personal commitments into a vision of light and eternity. The difference is made by Hughes’s willingness to embrace a more emphatically Christian sensibility. The apparent paradox in ‘That Morning’ of an unfallen power transcendent of life and death arriving into the creaturely world is precisely the mystery of Christian faith as centred on Christ. As Barth says, ‘This time which now breaks in, the time of the Church, is at the same time the end-time, the final time, the time in which the existence or the meaning of the existence of the creaturely world reaches its goal.’[[469]](#footnote-469)

This creaturely goal is not limited to creatures in the familiar sense, either for Barth or Hughes. ‘It will rise, in a time after times,’ Hughes writes in the poem ‘River’, the next poem in the 1983 sequence (later retitled ‘The River’), in which the religious implications of ‘That Morning’ are echoed and amplified (*CP* 664). Apart from the speaking voice, there are no humans and no animals here; the river itself has become the Christ-like locus of redemption. The river is ‘Fallen from heaven [and] lies across / The lap of his mother, broken by world’ – a familiar image by now. The poem’s original periodical title is ‘The Word River’ – perhaps too blunt a reference to the Logos in Hughes’s later judgement, but still the poem is busy with references to Christ’s crucifixion, including the rending of the temple veil and the resurrection of the bodies of the faithful. The Christ-river ‘will return stainless’, we are told, and finally ‘will wash itself of all deaths’. This would seem to be the river of the final chapter of Revelation, ‘a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb’, the lamb being Christ. Hughes’s theology here is pieced together astutely. Jesus Christ is the means by which the kingdom of God emerges in the midst of a fallen world. But the kingdom of God is not somewhere else; it is all around us, as ‘That Morning’ implies and as Moltmann and Tillich have told us. By imprinting the apocalyptic river of the water of life with the marks of Christ’s ordeal and triumph, Hughes’s Logos-river argues for the simultaneity of the momentary experience of redemption in our creaturely world and the eternal reality of the kingdom of God, the sacred real from which we are estranged.

‘If all time is eternally present / All time is unredeemable’ writes Eliot. ‘The River’, with its tricky phrase ‘a time after times’, posits a single time superseding previous durations of time such as Eliot’s ‘time past’, ‘time present’ and ‘time future’, so that for Hughes, too, all time would appear to be eternally present. But Hughes, with an irony against Eliot which I frankly adore, invokes Christ as proof that all time is redeemable. ‘He is the beginning of a new, different time from that which we know, a time in which there is no fading away, but real time which has a yesterday, a to-day and a to-morrow’, writes Barth.[[470]](#footnote-470) The atheistically inclined or just reasonably sceptical reader is certainly allowed to hear this as only so much hokum, for if there is no fading away how can ideas such as yesterday, today and tomorrow have any real significance? But if hokum it is, we find the same brand of hokum in the announcement of imperishable fish beyond reach of a fallen-away world by an imperishable human speaker who remains nonetheless in a temporary river, in the company of temporary animals. To state the matter more credulously, in ‘That Morning’ and ‘The River’ Hughes dramatises the essence of Christian teleology, of a kingdom of God toward which we progress in the midst of our time-bound world, a convergence with the divine predicated on the unitive figure of Christ: ‘That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth’ (Ephesians 1:10). It is not a matter of simply or naively escaping time. ‘Death,’ as Barth writes, ‘is timeless, nothingness is timeless. So we men are timeless when we are without God and without Christ. Then we have no time. But this timelessness He has overcome.’[[471]](#footnote-471) It is instead a matter of seeing that time has begun to run in a certain direction, toward a certain end, a fullness, ‘a time after times’, in which the restored and redivinised subject remains – like a perfected wodwo – ‘breathing’ – physically breathing – ‘at the azury centre of time’.

# Afterword: Glimpses

While men believe in the infinite some ponds will be thought to be bottomless.

– Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods*

I return, as I often have, to that 1990 letter Hughes wrote to Moelwyn Merchant in which he tells of identifying Christ with ‘the whole of life outside the human ego’. If Christ is myriad in nature, then contact with God – the divine ground of our being, communion with which Hughes recognises as ‘the steady illuminating thought in my waking life’ – is in a constant state of renewal. The ‘constant revelation of the sacrificed God’ is an awareness of a continual invitation to participate in the real, the divine. In the name of collapsing dualisms, this awareness requires a reciprocal self-sacrifice. That is, it requires crucifixion. The opportunity to stand as a creature of light in the river of light, a subject beyond reach of the injuries of time, is achieved by an acceptance of every preceding trial and torture referred to so lightly in ‘That Morning’ as ‘our journey’ (*CP* 664). This muting of the cry of crucifixion allows ‘That Morning’ to enjoy its paradisal moment. But such a muting is only ever temporary.

‘Glimpse’, from *Crow*, another key poem of divine contact, offers a more complete account of what it is to meet God in a Hughes poem. It shares its title with an uncollected 1988 poem about Hughes’s late father, in which Hughes peers down from an airplane at the arctic desolation of Greenland. Hughes imagines his father as a wounded seal ‘Far from its breathing hole’, dying under the ice, ‘Straining’ toward air as toward death, against the now ‘alien’ bonds of creaturely life: ‘His bones, his family’ (*CP* 740). The seal’s breathing hole is mirrored in the port-hole and cloud-hole through which Hughes looks: father and son search across the dividing line of death in a chance alignment of narrow apertures. Who glimpses what – does Hughes glimpse his father? Does he imagine his father glimpsing some great beyond above the threshold of the metaphorical ice? How does the Great War factor, as we feel it must? The poem keeps its precise meanings duly private. But I want to highlight the reciprocity of the glimpse: the son looking downward, the father straining upward, of a piece with the relationality of God discussed in Section 1.1, and the two-way commerce of transcendence discussed in Section 6.2.

The poem ‘A Citrine Glimpse’, from the ‘Earth-numb’ section of *Moortown*, incorporates this reciprocity into its two-section structure (*CP* 554-6). In the first section the material world, including sun, air and water, cry out in plural at the coming of a human subject: ‘He will lift us / We shall be in his arms, our fingers will touch the soul’. In section II the perspective switches, and now the man arrives, stepping tentatively, hearing the familiar Hughesian sound of a suffering creation: ‘He had hardly stepped // When he heard the water crying’. Cries, shrieks and the ‘stony words’ of the earth continue until the man accepts his crucifixion, a figure accommodated by the poet’s choice to disrupt syntax with choppy lineation:

Too late to flee

He hung

A nerve torn from the root of the tongue

The wind breathed on his rawness a word

And a wolf cried in its deformity

This word is *the* word, the *logos* interdicting between the sacred real and the human subject, but never mind that: observe how this glimpse of the divine is, as I stress, reciprocal. The real cries toward the man as the man steps and listens toward the real.

Even outside the title of a poem the word ‘glimpse’ is a scarce but significant marker in Hughes’s work, like a poetic rune, almost always suggesting the opening of a spiritually charged two-way relationship. The *Gaudete* Epilogue poem ‘I know well’, in its tender portrait of a woman dying of leukaemia, tells of her ‘eye darkened larger’ from ‘Holding too lucidly the deep glimpse / After the humane killer’ (*G* 191).[[472]](#footnote-472) We normally speak of holding a gaze, and to speak of holding a glimpse suggests a similarly responsive opening between the dying woman and the personified disease. In the *Elmet* poem ‘Tree’ the ‘priest from a different land’ becomes ‘The lightning conductor / Of a maiming glimpse’ (*CP* 467): whatever has been glimpsed here strikes back like lightning. We find a playful spark of religious contact in reading of how through the kingfisher, ‘God, whizzing in the sun, / Glimpses the angler’ (*CP* 663). And in ‘The City’ from *Howls & Whispers* Hughes tells Plath that, reading her poems and stories, ‘Nearly always / I glimpse you’, a gesture hauntingly returned: ‘Then you see me in my car, staring at you. / I see you thinking: ought I to know him?’ (*CP* 1179-80).

All of this informs my reading of *Crow*’s‘Glimpse’ (*CP* 256) – a poem so brief I’m not allowed to quote very much of it. In the first line, Crow sings tremblingly to leaves. That is, he tries to reach the sacred real of nature through art and cultural performance. In the second and third lines a leaf touches his throat and chops his head off. This is the moment of reciprocal transcendental contact, illustrated literally and cartoonishly as befits the *Crow* project, but all the more genuine for that. As the poem ends, Crow continues his ‘Speechless’ regard of the leaves ‘Through the god’s head instantly substituted’ for his own decapitated ego. Why speechless? Recall that in ‘A Citrine Glimpse’ it is the wind which breathes its word on the man’s rawness, a man otherwise silenced by the tearing of a nerve from the root of his tongue. As I observed earlier, *Crow* is full of poems telling us not to trust language, and the collection’s style bites its thumb generally at conventional poetic expression. Crow’s guillotined speechlessness in ‘Glimpse’ is a verbal crucifixion, the ‘post-apocalyptic silence’ when ‘the wound cannot speak’, as Hughes wrote of Pilinszky: ‘the silence of that moment on the cross, after the cry’. The raucous spectacle of *Crow* gives way, at this point late in the sequence, to a moment of genuine transcendence, a welcome dose of ego-death for which the head, banner of the ego and lapsarian self-regard, is traded for the god’s head of divine participation. In the reciprocity hinted by the poem’s title, and keeping in mind the leaves’ role as synecdoche for the sacred real, to see god-headed Crow stare at the leaves is to see God stare at God: a glimpse of the truth of the self’s continuity with and through the divine.

We are not adrift in an existential nothingness, but are disconnected – estranged, fallen – from a definite *something*, something profoundly more than our own self-contained self. Hughes tells us this much at every turn. Were this relationality limited to biology and ecology, we should not expect the continuous spate of religious language, imagery and cultural engagement we find in his work – and for all of the discussion undertaken here, there remains plenty more to discuss. How could I have passed by ‘Fallen Eve’(*CP* 130) from the *Wodwo* outtakes collection *Recklings*, such a vivid condensation of Hughes’s thoughts on Christian offense against women? Where was the occasion to tour ‘Photostomias’ (*CP* 549-50), whose third and final section ends with the abyssal fish framed as ‘A decalogue / A rainbow’, biblical signs of the covenant between creature and creator? I must leave these and much else to a reader’s own pleasure – guided, I hope, by the ideas I have set out here. The soteriological arc Hughes pursues in his poetry, from fall to crucifixion to brief and harrowing glimpses of redemption, confronts us in a great variety of forms and voices, moods and modes, with poems and stories emerging from every station of the arc. Immersing oneself in his world, one senses the carcass on the table of Bacon’s triptych begin to twitch.

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31. For unpublished drafts consult Emory Mss 644, Box 53, ff. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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57. Ibid. IV. 480. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
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83. William Poole, *Milton and the Idea of the Fall* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 1*, pp. 255-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Tillich, *Systematic 1*, p. 255. Note that by ‘creature’ Tillich does not mean animal as contrasted with human, but any contingent being: ‘Man is a creature. His being is contingent; by itself it has no necessity, and therefore man realizes that he is the prey of nonbeing.’ (Tillich, *Systematic 1*, p. 196). [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 2* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 44 illuminates this point: ‘If God creates here and now, everything he has created participates in the transition from essence to existence. He creates the newborn child; but, if created, it falls into the state of existential estrangement.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Milton. IX. 782-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Ibid. IX. 1000-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid. X. 412-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Limited, 1962), p. 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ibid., p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
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98. See for instance Alessandro Minelli, Amazonas Chagas-Júnior and Gregory D. Edgecombe, ‘Saltational evolution of trunk segment number in centipedes’, *Evolution and Development,* vol. 11, no. 3 (2009), pp. 318-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Hughes, ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Rebecca L. Cann, Mark Stoneking and Allan C. Wilson, ‘Mitochontrial DNA and human evolution’, *Nature*, vol. 325 (1987), pp. 31-36 (p. 31). [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Cann et al, ‘Mitochondrial DNA’, p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
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105. Ibid., pp. 167-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
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107. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 2*, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Hughes, ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, p. 166. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. The irony of Hughes’s dependence on Gould for this should be noted. Gould is continually at pains, most eloquently in *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (1989), to argue against the false iconography of evolutionary ‘progress’ particularly regarding *Homo sapiens*, while Hughes reads back into Gould’s science the Judeo-Christian teleology and anthropocentricity so assiduously purged. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Graves, *White Goddess*, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Hughes, ‘Baboons and Neanderthals’, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Later referred to as an angel: ‘Yea, he [Jacob] had power over the angel, and prevailed’ (Hosea 12:4). The sense of physical triumph over a higher spiritual form remains. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. See Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 118-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Edom is the nation for which Esau was progenitor. The word means ‘red’, a reference to Esau’s thick red hair, and the fateful way he lost his birth right by bartering for Jacob’s tasty red lentils. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Milton. XI. 86, 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Ibid. IV. 799-803. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 2*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 2*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Moulin, ‘Psychoanalytic Readings’, p. 125. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
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126. Gifford, *Ted Hughes*, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. by Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
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130. Ted Hughes, ‘Myth and Education’, *Children’s Literature in Education 1*, (1970) pp. 55-71 (p. 60). [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Paul Kingsnorth and Dougald Hind, *Uncivilisation* (The Dark Mountain Project, 2009) <http://dark-mountain.net/about/manifesto/> [accessed 12 September 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Sagar, *Laughter*, p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Faas, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
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135. Nietzsche, *Geneology*,p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*,trans. by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. by Walter Kaufmann (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), pp. 434-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
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139. Gifford and Roberts, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 2*, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
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243. Catechism of the Catholic Church para. 460. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
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246. Additional unpublished *Crow* poems available in the archives illustrate the close identification of Crow with the crucifix. In ‘Today’ (Emory Mss. 644, Box 86, ff. 76, BL Add. MS 88918/1/34), Crow poses as a ‘flying signpost’ pointing in both directions, the signpost reading ‘to CROW’, so that crucifixion leads quite literally to self-actualisation. In ‘Crow Fails’ (Emory ref 644/57/5, BL ref Add MS 88918/1/34), the God-character presents Crow with his inspired creation, the crucifixion. Crow treasures the gift, but fails to defend it from the ‘black flock of God’s second thoughts’; that is, he fails to preserve it against the distortions and accretions of human culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
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256. It is worth noting that section VIII, added a later point, whilst tonally jarring, does, according to Moulin, uphold the sequence’s thematic commitment to the Christ symbol (Moulin, ‘Anti-Mythic Method’, p. 99). [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
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384. My account of Primitive Methodism draws primarily on Julia Stewart Werner, *The Primitive Methodist Connexion: Its Background and Early History* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Joseph Ritson, *The Romance of Primitive Methodism* (Weston Rhyn: Quinta Press, 2004), p. 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Bate, p. 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Paulin, p. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Joanny Moulin, ‘The problem of biography’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, ed. by T. Gifford(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 14-26 (p. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Ritson, *Romance*, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. John W. B. Tomlinson, ‘The Magic Methodists and Their Influence on the Early Primitive Methodist Movement’, in *Signs, Wonders, Miracles: Representations in the Life of the Church: Papers Read at the 2003 Summer Meeting and the 2004 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical History Society* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2005), pp. 389-399 (p. 389). [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Tomlinson, ‘Magic Methodists, p. 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Tomlinson, ‘Magic Methodists’, pp. 393-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 3* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 121; Chidester, p. 342. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Northcott, *Environment*, p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Tillich, *Shaking*, p. 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. Ibid., 91-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Sagar, *Art*, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Moulin, ‘Psychoanalytic Readings’, p. 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Robinson, Craig, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1989), p. 134. [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Stevens, *Collected*, p. 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Ibid., p. 372. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. Eliot, pp. 171, 173. [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Emory Mss. 644, Box 61, ff. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. Gifford, ‘Gods of Mud’, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. Moulin, ‘Anti-Mythic Method’, pp. 98-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Roberts, *Literary Life*, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. 103. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Sagar, *Laughter*, p. 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Roberts, *Literary Life*, p. 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. Gifford, ‘Introduction’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. ‘Infancy is the perpetual Messiah, which comes into the arms of fallen men, and pleads with them to return to paradise.’ – Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Hughes applies the same language to the creatures of his adult poetry, referring to his famous hawk and pike as ‘angels’ for whom ‘killing is a sacrament’ (*WP* 261-2). [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Richard Folkard, *Plant lore, legends, and lyrics: Embracing the myths, traditions, superstitions, and folk-lore of the plant kingdom* (London: S. Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1884), p. 317. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Moltmann, p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. Moulin, ‘Psychoanalytic Readings’, p. 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. See for instance Gifford, ‘Gods of Mud’, p. 138; ‘Introduction’, pp. 6-8; *Ted Hughes*, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Rahner, pp. 57-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. Adams, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. Tillich, *Protestant Era*, p. 163. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
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426. Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Nal Penguin, Inc., 1980), p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
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429. David M. Robinson, ‘Transcendentalism and Its Times’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. by Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 13-29 (p. 16). [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
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432. Mason I. Lowance, Jr., *The Language of Canaan: Metaphor and Symbol in New England from the Puritans to the Transcendentalists* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 278. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
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439. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1906), pp. 22-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Emerson, *Selected Essays*, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 2*, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. Bloom, p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
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444. Ibid., p. 345. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
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447. Gifford and Roberts, pp. 193-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. Faas, pp. 210-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
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454. Scigaj, p. 95; Robinson, p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
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456. Stevens, *Collected*, p. 352. [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. Ibid., 424. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. ‘We saw in his head, / Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal, / The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.’ – ‘The Auroras of Autumn’, Ibid., p. 412. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Hirschberg, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Roberts, *Literary Life*, p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Ibid., pp. 145-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. Roberts, *Literary Life*, p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. See also Mark 9:3 and Luke 9:29. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. See for instance 1:6-9, 9:5, 12:36. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. Moltmann, pp. 85-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. Tillich, *Systematic Volume 1*, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. See Stevens, *Collected*, pp. 328-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. See Roberts, *Literary Life*, pp. 145-6 for an interesting discussion of the relationship between these poems. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. Barth, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Ibid., p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
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472. Bate, p. 339. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)