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Towards a New Mythology: the Poetry of Ted Hughes, English Poet Laureate

Again and again Hughes calls attention to the power that creates life and sustains it, Energy or *vis vitalis*. Those who close themselves to it are the living Dead: "If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death"¹. Pure energy, however, can be compared to atomic radiation: It poisons and destroys man. The first and foremost task of the poet is to tame it, to bring it under control, to make it serviceable for man. Once this function was fulfilled by religion. According to Hughes, religion has now lost its power, and at any rate was only an invention meant to explain to others the sense of life. In order to make life understandable for himself, man invented art: music, painting, sculpture, and above all the form of expression which incorporates all the arts, namely poetry.

What, then, is the task of poetry? It is meant to create rituals analogous to religion, in order to restore contact with the archetypal powers of being. In this way poetry can restore the balance of power in Nature and the Universe — a balance which had been destroyed by man. Poetry is therefore the new religion of man. It teaches us to see the world as it truly is, ruled by opposing forces: light and darkness, power and helplessness, growth and decay. Even pain and suffering are sources of life, whose goal from the very beginning is death but which is continually being born anew. Chaos is just as much a part of life as the world of light and good. For Ted Hughes God is at first mere absence, of only imaginative significance.

Ted Hughes has no use for the usual Christian concept of God. Those who profess to believe in an almighty, benevolent and everpresent Deity

¹ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, 1980), p. 200.

will find Hughes' theology in the period when he was writing the *Crow* poems confusing, if not distasteful. God possesses none of the features traditionally connected with him. Above all, he is not the One, nor is he allpowerful. At times the poet appears to make fun of him, to represent him as a clown, a fool, or a madman. At other times God is simply helpless. The poem "Logos"² ends with the statement: "God is a good fellow, but his mother's against him"³. If God can be identified with the Logos, as Hughes seems to suggest, then everything besides God is World and therefore wicked, the realm of Satan.

If, on the other hand, God is the Alpha and the Omega as he claims to be ("Gog")⁴, then he must be identical with horror, suffering and death — an absurd idea, as Hughes sees it. Suffering in this world can thus only be explained as a consequence of God's withdrawal from the Universe. He therewith becomes a kind of absence. But Hughes does not rest content with turning the classical theodicy upside-down, e.g. by observing: This world is evil and thus God does not exist. The poet's religious realism is far more based on the concept of a world as a power field of clustered and incarnate energies, impelled by the will, scarcely influenced by the intellect, hampered by disturbing moral and ethic ideas. The power field of the world is chaotic and unstructured.

There is no *telos* and no meaning in this world. What philosophers and prophets have claimed about the Divine Order is for Ted Hughes at the beginning of the seventies nothing more than hollow wordpods containing emptiness. For him there is only a single entity in nature: Death. The horseman of the apocalypse⁵ emerges from the centre of the earth. For him life and love are nothing more than dust and ashes. The dream of meaning in life is even an enemy which must be destroyed. The horseman recognizes this meaning in the ideal of the Grail, which Hughes associates with the principle of Hope, visualized in the image of the unborn child. This child is advised to arm itself and to give up all illusions. The Grail no longer supplies all kinds of food like the old Celtic "cauldron of plenty", but is rather equipped with poison fangs. Even the foetus in the womb becomes a ravenous beast and attacks the apocalyptic horseman. A battle ensues and the outcome is uncertain.

In view of the misery in this world Ted Hughes appears to have been haunted by the thought that God cannot be the only principle at work. There must be an opposing force outside of God. But in contrast to the literary philosophers of the 18th century, Hughes does not stoop to a justification of this world, or to the claim that this world is good without reservation. Nor does he simply view the Devil as the principle of Evil, since for him nature is what the Devil is to Christianity. Thus he conceives a mythology of his own in which *Crow* becomes an antagonist of God.

² Ted Hughes, "Logos", in: *Critical Quarterly*, 8 (1966), p. 109.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems*, p. 93.

⁵ *Ibid.*

This Crow, from which the 1970 volume of poetry derives its name⁶, is a creature of the imagination which takes on mythical proportions. Hughes, himself, terms the Crow (or raven) the genuine heraldic emblem of England — the Lion, he says, is only a late intruder from France. Thus Crow is for him Everyman, as well as Clown. Even North American tribes of Red Indians regarded the crow as the adversary of God, much as in Ted Hughes' poetry. At the beginning of the world, he says, crow was the only creature and the world as black as himself. Crow is the invincible enemy, the archenemy, who can only be put out of action for a time, but will never be totally destroyed.

Crow comes from Nothingness, was not created and existed before creation took place. Thus he is at least every bit as powerful and influential as his play-fellow, God. He refers to him as "bastard" and plays a series of tricks on him, as, e.g. in the poem "A Childish Prank"⁷. In this poem Crow, who is of male gender is given credit for having invented sexuality. With his beak he bites the worm which is God's Only Son right through the middle. He stuffs the two ends into Adam and Eve respectively. Since that time the head end has yearned for its tail half and longs to be reunited with it. God recognizes in Crow an antagonist who is his equal. "You have won, Crow", says God in "Crow's Song of Himself"⁸ and to restore the balance God creates the Redeemer. But he himself is full of despair and leaves the field to Crow.

The central theme of the *Crow* poems is the myth of creation; Hughes offers various versions, with and without the title figure Crow. All of them are variations on the biblical account of the Creation of the World and the Fall of Man. Some parody or burlesque the Bible, others turn the story upside-down. The basic conviction seems to be that the world as it is now can by no means be the best of all possible worlds. Above all something seems to have gone wrong in the course of human evolution. An outward symptom of this is the negation of the life-principle by Judaeo-Christian theology, a negation which, in Hughes' eyes, is strongly realized in Puritanism. At the same time Hughes was convinced that the methods of the Bible, i.e. the method of nearly every world religion, namely to teach by images, to argue mythically, was the only right one. There is no other possibility to bring Order into the chaos of being: "The old method is the only one"⁹.

Hughes rewrites the Genesis account of creation, he turns it upside-down ("Theology")¹⁰. It was not the serpent, who tempted Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. This is an invention of Theology. Corruption did not come into the world through the Fall, this fabrication is proof of the corruptness of theology. Hughes sees the flaw as lying somewhere in the course of human

⁶ Ted Hughes, *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London, 1970).

⁷ Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems*, p. 116.

⁸ Ted Hughes, "Crow's Song of Himself", *Critical Quarterly* 12 (1970), p. 107.

⁹ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, 1980), p. 201.

¹⁰ Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems*, p. 92.

evolution. Adam ate the apple of knowledge, but this was no sin. Adam, in turn, was eaten by Eve — a typical example of Hughes' ambivalent attitude towards the female sex, which was — at least at the time — largely determined by the image of the all-devouring Great Mother. The serpent then eats Eve, and in his "great intestine" we are still living today. The God of the poem is powerless. In vain he whines for Adam and Eve, while the serpent digests his meal in Paradise, eyeing God with a disdainful smile.

Let us have a closer look at the poem "Apple Tragedy"¹¹ in order to find out what Hughes thought about the world, the Fall and human destiny. The poem opens with the statement that the serpent rested on the Seventh Day. This is a paradoxical reversal of the passage in Genesis. So it was not God who created the world, but the serpent. This idea is not so unique as it appears at first sight. We already find it in Pelasgian mythology, in the belief of that great people which inhabited the Eastern Mediterranean before the Hellenes. According to this myth Euronyme was the sovereign ruler of all beings in this world. She cohabits with the great snake Ophion, but crushes his head with her foot because he claims to be creator of the universe. It is, however, open to doubt whether Hughes would have accepted such an analogy. On the one hand, he would not be prepared to attribute the position of a Euronymic to a mere woman, or even to the feminine principle. During this period he tended more towards misogyny, towards a basic distrust of women.

Above all this myth would have been too orthodox for Hughes and therefore banal. In his universe the Logos has no central meaning and function. He is likely to cause chaos rather than order. He brings death to Mankind, incinerates whole countries, and destroys the world. Ted Hughes has more sympathies for the serpent. At any rate he prefers this figure to a God who is always sleepy and who lies agape on the ground after the act of creation. This is a macabre pun on the Greek word *agape* (ἀγάπη) which means 'brotherly love' and is used to describe the feast of love celebrated by the early Christians in connection with the Eucharist. With reference to God, however, the English word in Hughes' poem means *a-gape*, i.e. 'with open mouth', that is to say in stupid astonishment.

Even the serpent cannot be reduced to a simple formula. At first it stands for the creative principle, which is unconscious of itself and thus without any self-confidence. But, of course, the snake is also an ancient phallic symbol and thus associated with sexual temptation and seduction.

It is God himself who gives the forbidden fruit to Adam and Eve — but not as in the Bible, in the form of an apple. Instead he gives them hard cider — the fluid product of the fruit. God makes himself a nuisance. His contribution to the process of creation is confusion — and that on the Seventh Day, when he is supposed to be resting. The serpent is perfectly justified in regarding God as an interloper, meddling with affairs which are not his concern.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

At first the serpent takes a drink of the cider, then Eve. The mother of mankind was not seduced by the snake, but it happens the other way round. Intoxicated by the cider, she seduces the snake by opening her thighs and calling for him. She "gives him a wild time". God watches indignantly and then runs to tell Adam, who despairs and tries to hang himself.

Not God but rather the snake prevents him from doing so. But nevertheless the situation at the end of "Apple Tragedy" is a hopeless mess. Adam is worse off than Eve. The relationship between men and women has become a battle of the sexes. Adam will, from now on, have a powerful antagonist, who will always cross his endeavours. In future he will always get the short end of the stick.

This is an expression of Hughes' attitude towards the Christian religion and its world view: The world was by no means as good from the beginning as the Christian religion would have us believe. Hughes' rewritings of the Biblical story rub salt into the wounds of Christian theology: Why is the Fall of man the central event of the story of Paradise? Why is it so closely connected with the discovery of human sexuality? Why is human sexuality a negative factor in human existence? Why is the serpent an incarnation of the Devil? But even through his fierce attacks on the Christian myths Hughes proves that they are far more relevant for him than for most modern neo-pagans. All the poems in question testify to a statement Hughes once made in an interview: "... the greatest poetry in English is in the prose of the Bible" ¹². His literary exploration of Biblical themes makes it clear that these are the same old and yet eternally new questions. The authors of the Bible, but also modern authors, have struggled with them: Whence do we come from and where do we go?

The visions and myths of Ted Hughes may be gloomy, but he is far from being a nihilist. During the past few years his darkness has become lighter. In 1970 the blackness of *Crow* clung like a veil over his poetry. But the *Selected Poems* of 1982 ¹³ conclude in a very optimistic way, conjuring up life and light in a poem on fishing salmon written only very shortly before:

So we stood, alive in the river of light
Among the creatures of light, creatures of light ¹⁴.

Only for the period up to 1970, can we say that Hughes refused help for man's attempts at orientation in this world, that is, metaphorical embodiments of energy (jaguar, hawk, pike) were scarcely relatable to man, or at best demonstrate man's total alienation from nature.

But in this respect there has been a perceptible change in attitude since 1970. The collection *Season Songs* (1976) ¹⁵ and *Moortown* (1979) ¹⁶, but in

¹² Ekbert Fass, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara, 1980), p. 204.

¹³ Ted Hughes, *Selected Poems, 1957—1981* (London, 1982).

¹⁴ Ted Hughes, "That Morning." In: *Selected Poems*, p. 235.

¹⁵ Ted Hughes, *Season Songs* (London, 1976).

¹⁶ Ted Hughes, *Moortown* (London, 1979).

particular the animal poems in *What Is the Truth?* (1984)¹⁷ demonstrate a radical new relationship to the natural world. It can be described as a sacramental union of animal and nature and, at the same time, a nearly Christian appeal to cherish and revere all living beings.

The poems in *Truth* are thus not only animal poems, since they represent animal nature from a particular human perspective. They try to convey subconscious matters in the form of theriomorphic ideas — that is couched in animal metaphors. At the end of the seventies Hughes was more and more convinced that poetry had a positive, healing effect on readers and poets alike, even if it dealt with suffering and death. According to Hughes, poetry may treat depressing and destructive matters¹⁸, but it transforms them into health-restoring and tonic substances: “And to reach that final mood of release and elation is the whole driving force of writing at all.”¹⁹

Similar to Wordsworth he feels that reality can only be sublimated to poetry when “recollected in tranquility”. But this imaginative uplifting of ideas from the well of the subconscious is in Hughes’ case rather a descent to the factual. In farmyard, wood and field he recognizes the holiness of nature and he expresses it in terms strongly reminiscent of the Bible. In *Season Songs*²⁰ (1976) he calls the barley corn a sleeping beauty: “Her kingdom is still to come”²¹. Together with the sun, the barley corn prays the Our Father and recites a psalm. Sometimes it even prays together with the moon. The barley corn is made into bread and baked in the autumn and then eaten by men:

Thanking the Lord
 Thanking the Wheat
 Thanking the Bread
 For bringing them Life
 Today and Tomorrow
 Out of the dirt²².

In the poem *The Seven Sorrows* the hardships of Autumn are described parallel to the sorrows of Mary²³.

¹⁷ Ted Hughes, *What is the Truth? A Farmyard Fable for the Young* (London, 1984).

¹⁸ ‘Ted Hughes and R. S. Thomas read and discuss selections from their own poems’. *Norwich Tapes Ltd.*, 1978. Quoted according to Keith Sagar, *The Achievement of Ted Hughes* (Manchester, 1983), p. 268.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 268.

²⁰ Ted Hughes, *Season Songs* (London, 1976).

²¹ *Ibid.*, “Barley”, pp. 69—70.

²² *Ibid.*, “The Golden Boy”, pp. 51—52, here: p. 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, “The Seven Sorrows”, pp. 63—64.