

‘THE HORROR OF CREATION’: TED HUGHES’S RE- WRITING OF GENESIS IN *CROW*

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‘In the beginning was Scream’, we are told by Ted Hughes in ‘Lineage’ (*Crow* 2). As a version of Genesis, this may seem liberal: where is Scream when God ‘created the heaven and the earth’ (Gen. 1.5)? In Hughes’s version, it comes well before God, who only appears after Scream has begotten Blood, who in turn ‘begat Eye’ — the chain continues through ‘Eye’, ‘Fear’, ‘Wing’, ‘Bone’, ‘Granite’, ‘Violet’, ‘Guitar’, ‘Sweat’, ‘Adam’, ‘Mary’ — only then do we reach God, who, in turn, begets ‘Nothing’. If this is Genesis, something has gone terribly awry. Yet, as we shall see, Hughes’ ‘Scream’ is not simply an obstreperous sacrilege; it is much more erudite and deliberate than that.

The biblical creation myth is largely an aetiological tale, a straightforward story of how an omnipotent and omniscient deity decided to create the heaven and the earth; how he created man; why husband and wife must cleave to each other and how man is the dominant partner; how he must work, and she must suffer in childbirth, and how the snake must crawl on its belly through the dust of its days. All very straightforward and didactic. But this myth also has a metatextual existence, through its emergence from other mythical traditions, through the Jewish Apocrypha and its manifestation elsewhere — the myth of the struggle with Satan, of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, for instance. It is a myth arguably derived from Babylonian creation myth, the story of the great maternal monster Tiamat, who was killed by her son Marduk before her body was used to create the earth.

This fissure in sources and intentions is evident in the text itself. The creation myth can be roughly divided into two halves or documents known as P and J: P, the Priestly document, which extends from ‘In the beginning’ to the fourth verse of the second chapter, whilst J, the Yahwist document, which is considerably older, covers the creation of man, the temptation of Eve, and so on. This results in an eminently exploitable schizophrenia for any ‘versioner’ of the text in the character of God. J.M. Evans explains that:

Several features set [P] apart from J.... The most obvious of them is lost in the English translation, that is, the use of the generic term *Elohim* (the Lord) rather

than the proper name *Jahweh* (Jehovah) for God. In P the Deity is a concept, in J a person, and this basic difference is symptomatic of the more general characteristics that have enabled practitioners of ‘higher criticism’ to distinguish between the two versions. (Evans 11)

The God of J is the more tempting deity for Hughes — a God of character and flaws. Unlike the omnipotent God of P, the God of J displays shortcomings. This supposedly omniscient God has to ask Adam ‘Where art thou?’ (Gen. 3.9); ‘Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?’ (Gen. 3.11). Either His omniscience has failed or He is employing a wry, feigned ignorance — both offer extraordinary opportunities to anyone who should happen to re-write Genesis. Hence, in Hughes’s *Crow*, we encounter, in part, a cartoon God who routinely fails to prevent Crow from spoiling his plans, a veritable Park Ranger Smith to Crow’s Yogi Bear; a God who sleeps while Crow japes, or else struggles to undo Crow’s pranks. In ‘Crow’s First Lesson’ (*Crow* 9), Hughes undermines the God of P with the God of J. God’s creation in the first chapter of Genesis is typified by an omnipotent use of language, a perfect relationship between signifier and signified: ‘And God said, Let there be light: and there was light’ (Gen. 1.3). In Hughes’s poem, ‘God tried to teach Crow how to talk’; in Crow’s mouth, however, the perfect relationship between signifier and signified fails:

‘Love’, said God. ‘Say, Love’.
 Crow gaped, and the white shark crashed into the sea
 And went rolling downwards, discovering its own depth.
 (*Crow* 9)

Crow’s further attempts produce ‘a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito’, before retching ‘Man’s bodiless prodigious head’, then finally ‘Crow retched again...And woman’s vulva dropped over man’s neck and tightened’. The cogency between signifier and signified that embodied God’s creation is displaced as the word ‘love’ accommodates new meanings: the shark’s ‘depth’; the parasites and their ‘sundry flesh-pots’; man’s head and woman’s vulva struggling ‘together on the grass’. Creation in *Crow* is ugly and complicated, unlike the straightforward creation of Genesis. It is infected with the fallibility of the God of the Yahwist document — a God that, faced with the parody of love that Crow creates, ‘struggled to part them, cursed, wept’.

Likewise, there are numerous other holes in the narrative of Genesis that offer opportunities or present complications: how come the serpent could talk? Why did the snake want them to eat the fruit in the first place, and how did he know about its properties? How did Eve convince Adam to eat the fruit? Hughes's interest does not lie in elaborating around such narrative issues as Milton did, for instance; instead he pulls on these loose threads to uncover something else behind the text. He is constantly excavating Genesis for the myth beneath, using its set and cast to reveal a drama that is adumbrated in the gaps in the text. In 'Crow Blacker than Ever' Hughes probes the consequences for the relationship between man and God following the eating of the forbidden fruit. 'Things looked like falling apart' as God 'Turned towards heaven [sic]' and man 'Turned towards Eve', this is until:

Crow nailed them together
Nailing Heaven and earth together —

So man cried, but with God's voice.
And God bled, but with man's blood. (*Crow* 62)

Here he is using Genesis as a prop with which to portray humanity's relationship with notions of God. In doing so, Hughes is able to succinctly capture both the best and worst of this relationship: the great art of man crying with God's voice, but also the terrible suffering of violence and warfare perpetrated in the name of religion: 'A horror beyond redemption' (*Crow* 62), a horror that will remain as long as God and man are nailed together. In this sense, he is probing the very roots of Genesis, which is essentially a story of man's relationship with God. Hughes's poem is not a version of Genesis, but of the dark underbelly of the text's aetiological veneer. It is the 'black flag' of Crow, who is the product of God's nightmare, 'Crying: "This is my Creation"'.

Accordingly, it is worth looking at exactly what the figure of Crow is doing by infiltrating Genesis, as this is the most obvious and important revision of the text. As mentioned above, Crow is God's nightmare. Though *Crow* is an unfinished collection, Hughes occasionally performed at readings some of the many prose pieces that were intended for the collection, which was originally planned as a vast folk tale. One such piece reveals that in God's recurrent nightmare a great hand made of laughter abuses Him, throwing Him around and mocking His prize creation: man. God challenges the voice to do better; it is then that Crow appears. Granting God an unconscious is one of the great ingenuities of Hughes's version: God explicitly did not create the laughing hand, nor

implicitly Crow, rather, they were thrust upon Him by His unconscious mind. Hughes takes the fallibilities of the J God and stretches them with knowledge of modern psychoanalysis. To this end, Crow is a figure manifest of God's unconscious, a kind of Jungian trickster. Carl Jung argues of the trickster that:

He is a forerunner of the saviour, and, like him, God, man and animal at once. He is both subhuman and superhuman, a bestial and divine being whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness. (Jung 263)

Crow is the Christ of the unconscious, an antithetical Christ, the only son and saviour of God's deified unconscious. In Christian theology, the Fall of Man necessitated Christ: 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Romans 5.19); 'For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive' (Corinthians 15.22). Hughes overturns this, rejecting this metaphysical redemption (rejecting the notion 'of man's disobedience' also) in favour of an alternative redemption — a reconnection to nature. This is not just a reconnection to the natural world, but the natural human — an acceptance of what the trickster represents in the human psyche. Jung suggests that:

The figure works, because secretly it participates in the observer's psyche and appears as its reflection, though it is not recognised as such. It is split off from his consciousness and consequently behaves like an autonomous personality. The trickster is a collective shadow figure, a summation of all the inferior traits of character in individuals. (Jung 270)

Insofar as Crow is a trickster, he is the shadow of God's psyche. Hughes introduces the aspect of the psyche that has been written out of human history in Genesis by the supposedly omniscient gaze of the conscious. From hereon, everything leans towards logic, towards the supremacy of consciousness: Adam and Eve know good and evil, the symbolic urge of the snake is punished — hence Satan's tantalising logic in Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Hughes transforms Genesis by reasserting the unconscious. In 'Conjuring in Heaven', the empiricism and logic of consciousness is undermined as various proofs of the nothingness of 'nothing' are undermined:

So finally there was nothing.
 It was put inside nothing.
 Nothing was added to it
 And to prove it didn't exist
 Squashed flat as nothing with nothing. (*Crow* 46)

When 'nothing more could be done with it', this 'nothing' is dropped, only to break open and reveal 'Crow, cataleptic'. Crow is a menace in the forward march of consciousness and logic initiated by the eating of the Tree of Knowledge in Genesis. As Carl Jung argues:

The so-called civilized man has forgotten the trickster.... He never suspects that his own hidden and apparently harmless shadow has qualities whose dangerousness exceeds his wildest dreams.... Outwardly people are more or less civilized, but inwardly they are still primitives. Something in man is profoundly disinclined to give up his beginnings, and something else believes it has long since got beyond all that. (Jung 267–69)

Hughes's Crow is a timely reminder. But in his malicious behaviour, Crow is also symbolic of the condition of modern man that, for Hughes, is typified by the anthropocentrism of Genesis. Jung argues that 'As soon as people get together in masses and submerge the individual, the shadow is mobilized, and, as history shows, may even be personified and incarnated' (267). The atrocities of his century can't be far from Jung's mind when writing this; so too, they are present in the horrors of *Crow*, and its apocalyptic visions of a 'brittle desert/ Dazzling with the bones of earth's people' ('A Disaster', *Crow* 23–24). For Hughes, this was a consequence of humanity's separation from nature — a separation seemingly instigated in Genesis.

In 'Crow's Theology' this anthropocentrism is mocked by the simple logic of Crow: Crow realized God loved him — / Otherwise, he would have dropped dead' (*Crow* 27). This 'revelation' of God's existence is then questioned by the existence of stones who also seemed to be loved, and so too 'what loved the shot pellets/ That dribbled from those strung-up mummifying crows?' It was then that:

Crow realized there were two Gods —
 One of them much bigger than the other

Loving all his enemies
And having all the weapons. (*Crow* 27)

The idea that God exists singularly to love Crow — and by extension, man — is irreconcilable with the evidence of a world that clearly does not singularly love Crow. This transference of blame onto another God is similar to Jung's ideas on the trickster, that 'so-called civilized man...remembers him only figuratively and metaphorically, when, irritated by his own ineptitude, he speaks of fate playing tricks on him or of things being bewitched' (267). This blamelessness is afforded with even greater conviction to God. It is a trait that results in an inexhaustible propensity to scapegoat — hence the other God of 'Crow's Theology', the serpent of Genesis, the enduring usefulness of Satan. This anthropocentrism can be traced in man's dominion over nature in Genesis. Any subsequent failures in our morals or behaviour must be attributed to an exterior agent because the world is supposed to work for the benefit of man, just as until he looked at the hideous logic of 'those strung-up mummifying crows', Crow felt the world ought to work for his benefit.

In a review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*, Hughes writes:

The fundamental guiding ideas of our Western Civilization are against Conservation. They derive from Reformed Christianity and from Old Testament Puritanism.... 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.... By the skin of her teeth, woman escaped the same role. The subtly apotheosized misogyny of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of Nature, and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature — from both inner and outer nature. (*WP* 129)

Accordingly, the theory of 'Old Testament Puritanism' that Hughes adumbrates here is clearly present in the opening chapters of Genesis, where man is afforded 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth' (Gen. 1.28). It is a notion that Hughes contests consistently throughout his poetry. In *Crow*, 'Snake Hymn' makes use of Genesis to show how the 'suffering' of Eden is entirely human, how the 'subtil' serpent was not a snake, but either God or 'the gliding/ And push of

Adam's blood'. The drama of Eden is that of man: the sexualised 'blood in Adam's body/ That slid into Eve' that Adam 'swore was love', and the subsequent suffering of Christ from 'The blood in Eve's body/ That slid from her womb — Knotted on the cross'. The only nature that is incriminated in this incident is the nature of man, man's blood: 'Still no suffering/ darkens the garden/ Or the snake's song' (*Crow* 81).

Hughes continues:

The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western Man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute the spirit-confidence of the Nature he has lost. The basic myth for the ideal Westerner's life is the Quest. The quest for a marriage in the soul or a physical re-conquest. The lost life must be captured somehow. (*WP* 129)

Imperatively, *Crow* was originally planned as a quest: Crow's quest to find his creator, who turns out to be not a male creator, but a female one. The narrative structure of the collection was therefore intended to parallel Jungian individuation. Individuation for the male, of course, involves the integration of the animus, the female aspect of the male psyche; many of the published *Crow* poems see Crow encountering and attempting to come to terms with various female figures (largely without success). Hence, 'When Crow cried his mother's ear/ Scorched to a stump./ When he laughed she wept/ Blood' ('Crow and Mama', *Crow* 5). But Hughes saw western civilisation, not just its men, as being dogged by this anthropocentrism, Reformed Christianity's 'apotheosized misogyny' and man's exile from 'Mother Nature'. Whilst Crow's quest is a personal Oedipal drama, it is also symbolic of this condition of western civilization — a condition inculcated by the teachings of Genesis.

Hughes goes on to argue:

When something abandons or is abandoned by Nature, it has lost touch with its creator, and is called an evolutionary dead-end. According to this, our Civilization [sic] is an evolutionary error. Sure enough, when the modern mediumistic artist looks into his crystal, he sees always the same thing. He sees the last nightmare of mental disintegration and spiritual emptiness.... This is the soul state of our civilization.

But he may see something else. He may see a vision of the real Eden, ‘excellent as the first day’, the draughty radiant Paradise of the animals, which is the actual earth, in the actual Universe. (*WP* 129–30)

This is the condition of Hughes’s Eden in *Crow*. It is an Eden where Creation has failed because of this ‘fanatic rejection of Nature’. ‘A Childish Prank’ (*Crow* 8) is indicative of all of these issues.

In the poem, God struggles with the problem of giving life to the ‘Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert’ bodies of man and woman. Hughes’s vision of ‘spiritual emptiness’ is presented literally as the failure of the masculine, anthropocentric creation of Genesis. *Crow* offers a solution, biting the ‘Worm’ — described as ‘God’s only son’ — ‘Into two writhing halves’:

He stuffed into man the tail half
With the wounded end hanging out.

He stuffed the head half headfirst into woman
And it crept in deeper and up
To peer out through her eyes. (*Crow* 8)

The two halves appeal to each other to re-unite and overcome the pain, only for man and woman to find themselves irrevocably dragged across the grass towards each other. Hughes conflates the stories of creation and the Fall, giving an account that accommodates sexuality in creation whilst offering an alternative perception of sexuality to that of the Fall. The Christian teaching of St. Paul that the redemption of Christ was necessitated by the sin of Adam is adjusted through the role of the ‘Worm’. Here, the suffering of ‘God’s only son’ is not atonement, but sexuality — it is the creation of life rather than redemption.

The poem subverts the traditional gender roles of Genesis by disregarding the notion of the Fall as a conscious decision. Consequently, Eve, or ‘woman’, is no longer responsible for the Fall — which is not a fall at all, but a rise, or more appropriately, transformation into consciousness in ‘A Childish Prank’. Instead, a rudimentary equality is offered. Adam does not ‘rule over’ Eve as he does in Genesis; both suffer the consequences of their awakening equally.

Hughes toys with the idea of ‘knowing’ and sexuality, symbolised in Genesis by open eyes: ‘And the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked’ (Gen. 3.7). The poem replaces this with sleep, thus retaining the symbolism of the open and closed eyes, but

emphasising the role of the unconscious. Initially, man and woman are neither awake nor asleep, ‘foolishly staring, inert’ — a conundrum that drags God asleep. It is at this point that Crow — the product of God’s unconscious — intervenes. As a consequence of Crow’s actions, man and woman awake, though ‘Neither knew what had happened’. Hughes negates the sin of the Fall along with the notion of knowing ‘good and evil’ (Gen. 3.22). Sexuality becomes a ‘prank’ played on man and woman, an unconscious device beyond their control, but also a life-forming one. Likewise, it is beyond the control of God: ‘God went on sleeping’, while Crow, recalling God’s nemesis portrayed in the introduction to the poems, ‘went on laughing’. It is also explicitly an affirmation of man’s connection to nature: it is the ‘Worm’, whose symbolism is given a nudge by the capitalised initial letter, that brings man and woman to life.

Clearly, given the brutality of this relationship with nature, Hughes’s Eden is not the traditional, idealised vision that has dominated artistic interpretations of Eden. He constantly tried to urge his readers away from any romanticised notions of nature, deliberately reading ‘February 17th’ at public appearances — a poem that describes the failed birth of a lamb, resulting in the lamb being decapitated to save its mother. This is all too evident in *Crow*:

Creation quaked voices —
 It was a cortège
 Of mourning and lament
 Crow could her and he looked around fearfully.
 (‘Crow Tyrannosaurus’, *Crow* 13–14)

Crow is then greeted with various creatures suffering under the ‘screeching finales’ of all they had eaten. Ethically, Crow questions whether, in the face of all this suffering, he ought ‘To stop eating/ And try to become the light?’, only to find ‘grub’ and be forced by the instinct of his ‘trapsprung’ head to eat, all the while ‘weeping’. Unconscious instinct rules to the horror of consciousness. The poem enacts a rebuff to the anthropocentrism that denies man’s kinship with nature — a denial directly repudiated in the poem when man is seen trying to censor his nature:

Even man he was a walking
 Abattoir
 Of innocents —
 His brain incinerating their outcry. (*Crow* 13–14)

The dichotomy of man denying his explicit nature is acutely captured here, where man is identifiably ‘a waling/Abattoir/ Of innocents’ and yet is trying to convince himself otherwise, ‘incinerating their outcry’. If there is a vision of Eden in *Crow*, it is only in its barbarous aspect — *Crow* being aborted at *Crow*’s nadir, before things begin to improve.

Whilst this may appear as merely designed to shock or appal, for Hughes it represented ‘sacred law’. In response to questions posed by Ekbert Faas regarding the overt violence of his poetry, Hughes offered the explanation that the violence of his poetry recognises and reinforces this ‘sacred law’ — that because the thrush of his poem ‘Thrushes’ ‘is doing what it has evolved to do’ it is asserting the rule of this ‘sacred law’ (‘Poetry and Violence’, *WP* 258). (*Crow*’s actions in ‘A Childish Prank’, biting the worm in half, are in essence a mythical demonstration of this ‘sacred law’.) He argues that in contrast to this positive violence, there is also negative violence that violates ‘sacred law’ — citing ‘Hitler’s gang’ as an example of this (*WP* 254). There is neither sufficient space nor need to discuss the complicated ethics of this theory in this essay. However, ‘*Crow Tyrannosaurus*’ suggests that human revulsion at this ‘positive violence’, the ‘sorrow on sorrow’ of feeding in the poem has resulted in ‘the ear’s/ deafness’. This is a deafness not only to the horror of ‘their screeching finales’, but also the affirmation of this ‘sacred law’. This is, in essence, man’s exile from Eden in *Crow*.

It is for this reason that ‘Still no suffering/ Darkens the garden/ Or the snakes song’ in ‘Snake Hymn’ (*Crow* 81). In ‘Apple Tragedy’ (*Crow* 72), the notion that God is responsible for this fissure from nature is dramatised, where God instigates a bout of ‘negative violence’. Traditional roles are reversed in the poem, as God, a surprising ‘interloper’, tempts the serpent who, to complete the reversal, is resting on the seventh day. God invites the serpent to drink cider, whereupon the tragedy ensues. The serpent drank:

And curled up into a question mark
Adam drank and said: ‘Be my god’.
Eve drank and opened her legs

And called to the cockeyed serpent
And gave him a wild time. (*Crow* 72)

God then tells Adam of these events, ‘Who in drunken revenge tried to hang himself in the orchard’, before the serpent gets drunkenly tongue-tied and Eve accuses him of rape ‘stamping on his head’. Consequently, ‘whenever the snake appears’ Eve calls for help, Adam assaults the

snake with a chair, ‘God says ‘I am well pleased’/ And everything goes to hell’. This malicious God is responsible for the enmity between man and nature, symbolised in man’s relationship with the serpent.

With this consistent divergence from the text and ethos of Genesis it is worth questioning what exactly Hughes is translating. Clearly, he is not elaborating or poeticising the text — as Milton did, for example. Nor is he intent on maintaining anything other than the most skeletal aspects of the story. What Hughes does keep, however, indicates why he chose to use the story at all. Above all, he keeps God. His God is obviously not the deity of the Bible, but He can at least be glimpsed in the God of the Yahwist document. This God is also found in *Crow* in the days shortly after Creation. Alongside this God are Adam and Eve, even more thinly sketched than in Genesis. So too the serpent makes the occasional appearance. What Hughes maintains therefore is the central dynamic of the text: the relationship between God, Man, Woman, nature and creation. This is, of course, considerably enlivened by the appearance of Crow. In borrowing the stage of Genesis, he is also using it as a short-cut to the numinous roots of the text, its role as a sacred creation story. Translating a sacred text and sustaining its numen has of course been a problem for every translator of the Bible. Conversely, it was a significant opportunity for Hughes.

In his introduction to his work, *Anathemata*, the poet David Jones writes of what he called ‘The Break’, which in terms of semiotics, resulted in the loss of the religious significance of the linguistic sign:

If the poet writes ‘wood’ what are the chances that the Wood of the Cross will be evoked? Should the answer be ‘None, then it would seem that an impoverishment of some sort would have to be admitted. (Jones 23)

Hughes, however, bypasses this ‘break’ by first of all using the incredibly familiar story of Creation, framing it in the familiar sparse idiom of myth, and then transforming it. The method of taking something inviolable and making it profane has the unusual effect in *Crow* of re-invigorating the force of the original myth, though to a markedly different end. He takes the worn tropes of the biblical creation story and re-charges them with the things that are denied.

He is essentially creating a new mythology from that of Genesis, hijacking its props and characters, but also its numena, its sacredness. In a letter to his dedicated critic, Keith Sagar, Hughes writes: ‘If I couldn’t find it in original in *Crow*, I wasn’t interested to make a trophy of it’ (*Letters* 339). Genesis in *Crow* is stripped to its bones, but what survives

are the factors that allowed Hughes to create a new mythology from them: the essential props of mankind, God and nature. To this end, he goes beyond Genesis, delving further into the depths of its origin, towards the maternal element of primordial creation myths that have fascinated humankind for much longer than Genesis. 'Crow', writes Hughes, 'is a modern evil omen bird only insofar as he is a fallen god — he is Anathema because he was originally Anath' (*Letters* 339).

It is to this end that in 'Lineage', where we started, God does not appear until after Mary, and Adam, and sweat, and so on. We are told that 'In the beginning was Scream/ Who begat Blood' — that all creation is essentially destruction. This is the destruction that is written out of Genesis, the destruction of the maternal figure in Babylonian creation myth, for instance. So too, Hughes wilfully tears through the biblical creation story, destroying it to create something new. Hence in 'Lineage', from the initial 'Scream/ Who begat Blood' we are left with Crow 'Screaming for Blood', as the whole process begins again.

NOTES

Abbreviations

WP *Winter Pollen*
Letters *The Letters of Ted Hughes*

All biblical quotations are taken from the King James translation.

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