

TED HUGHES' *CROW* : UNDERMINING SCIENTIFIC RATIONALISM

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Abstract : Hughes' perceptions of puritanical Christianity's hypocritical repression of the instincts, its attempt at going against Nature have led to a hiatus between the faith professed and the natural instinctual urges. Hughes exploits the contradiction that this variety of Christianity gives rise to: it professes a doctrine of love, compassion, benevolence, humanity and hope, but ends up producing hatred, depravity, pride, arrogance, and frustration. As a way out, he seeks to explore the pagan roots of Christianity itself, particularly of the cults of the Mother Goddess that helped archaic man to come to terms with his instinctual energies. His poetry thus gradually embarks on a quest for the Great Mother which alone is in harmony with the processes of Nature. The present paper is concerned with how Hughes' imaginative engagement with Nature in *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970,1972) critiques, interrogates and undermines Post-Renaissance scientific materialism and rationalism which gets in the way of acknowledging the demonic devil within us and thereby of seeking a harmonious balance between the creative/benign and the destructive/malign forces/aspects of Nature.

Index Terms : Crow, Rationalism, Demonic, Christianity, Technology, Nature, Sexuality, Carnival, Laughter, Neurosis

The poetry of Ted Hughes (1930-1998), acknowledged as one of the most original and powerful English poets of the post Second World War era, has more often than not engaged in a continuous dialogue with literary, socio-political, religious and intellectual history. Hughes fuses his scientific observation and poetic vision in his poetry while addressing the most significant issues of life in the contemporary world – one ravaged by a series of dirty and 'great' wars, unprecedented bloodbath and carnage, jeopardized by the threat of extinction by nuclear weapons, ridden by intense psychical conflicts and horrors, and an ever-increasing danger of environmental pollution. His preoccupations during the sixties and the seventies with myths and folklore, with *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, his interests in shamanism, Sufism and Indian mystic thought, clearly mould the recurrent tropes he draws upon in the poems of *Crow*. Hughes has not only made use of the Indo-European traditions but also of the myths and folktales of the Eskimos, the Japanese, the North-American Indian tribes, the Persians, and the lore of the *Talmud* and the *Quran*.

The last lines of Ted Hughes' poem "Crow's Theology" read:

Crow realized there were two Gods -
One of them much bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons.

Here the 'two Gods' in the first of the quoted lines are Christianity and technology, representing logical rationalism that Hughes seems to undermine in his *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (1970,1972) by formulating a mythology of the demonic. During an interview with Ekbert Faas in the January, 1973 *London Magazine*, in reply to a statement by Faas that his two jaguar poems, like "Hawk Roosting", are interpreted as celebration of violence, Hughes commented: "I prefer to think of them as first, descriptions of a jaguar, second . . . invocations of the Goddess [Nature or Isis, Mother of the Gods], third . . . invocations of a jaguar-like body of elemental force, demonic force" (Faas: 1973, P.8.). Hughes takes up this demonic force again in *Crow*. The word 'demonic' or 'daimonic' derives from the Greek 'daimon', meaning love, the great spirit. But, for Charles V. Fernandez, the demonic in "Crow" is not "so closely associated with the spirit Love" (153). Hughes' 'demonic' is irrational, in the sense that it is ungraspable by rational thought

processes and rational principles; it is emotion instead of reason; a type of violence and “the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe” (Faas: 1973, P.9.). According to Fernandez, “the demonic has a definite creative potential when used correctly. It is the creative inspiration of the artist, the procreative drive of male and female sexuality, and the recreative energy of dance, games, dreams and nightmares” (154). The demonic can be destructive as well, in the sense that energies of this type “once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one” (Faas: 1973, P. 8-9.). Hughes believes that the demonic is getting more and more destructive because of man’s increasing failures to contain and control it through religious myths, rituals, and technological formulae. Christianity, as well as technology, has become for Hughes “just another provisional myth of man’s relationship with the creator” (Sagar 32.). By using Crow as a representative of the demonic, and thereby reinterpreting the religious myth, Hughes attempts to show that the demonic has a vital part to play, not only in creation, but in the continuation of creation through copulation and procreation also.

The basis for the ‘Crow’ myth is the Eskimo legend that “tells that in the beginning the raven was the only creature and the world was, like him, black” (Sagar 29.). This legend is contained in the first of the *Crow* poems, “Two Legends”. Hughes says that his Crow is “created by God’s nightmare’s attempt to improve on man” (Faas: 1973, P. 18.). We can recognize the poem “Crow’s Song of Himself” as the centre of the ‘Crow’ mythology for it deals with such a series of trials and ordeals as the Eskimo legend describes. Crow is the product of the demonic force which is God’s nightmare, which is beyond any rational control. P. R. King observes: “In one poem after another he (Crow) is the spirit undergoing trial, he is courage, he is the essence of ruthless willpower, he is amoral energy and he is the radical doubter of God’s purpose and capacity. That is, Crow experiences modern man’s struggle to survive in a world of relentless suffering and pointlessness and which is as much a test of his endurance as of his understanding”(136). Man is a mélange of earth and the demonic spark of life, and woman, his other half, is united to him in the demonic force of sexuality. In many essays and interviews, Hughes reiterates that “post-Renaissance Western science- especially its inert laboratory analysis, its refusal to consider subjective states, and its utilitarian attitude towards the environment- and Western religion’s repression of sexuality and relegation of the natural world to the devil, have caused a divorce of man from nature and a tendency to rely only upon abstract thinking, quantifiable fact and material success” (Scigaj 164).

Hughes believes that Christianity deposes Mother Nature and begets, on her prostrate body, Science, which ventures to destroy Nature. The spiritless scientific materialism and repressed sexuality in Western culture thwart Crow’s attempts to rise from a trickster to an adventure hero. In 1970, when collecting his *Crow* poems into a volume, Hughes wrote: “The subtly apotheosized *Misogyny* (my emphasis) of Reformed Christianity is proportionate to the fanatic rejection of *Nature* (my emphasis), and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature- from both inner and outer nature. 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 for the spirit- confidence of the Nature he has lost” (Hughes: 1970, P. 81-83). In infancy Crow’s every moment, instead of taking him to the maternal care of the natural world (“Crow and Mama”), alienates him from it; his cries, laughs, first steps, and tantrums have the effect of scorching his mother’s ear, bloodying her breasts, and filling her face with scars and gashes. When she attempts retaliation, Crow knows he must “get going”. He finds refuge in a car, a plane, and a rocket. Crow finally lands on the moon, but only to find himself “Under his mother’s buttocks”. “In cartoon form”, writes Scigaj, “Hughes satirizes twentieth century technology, from the invention of the automobile to the Apollo expeditions, as a crazed, neurotic flight into ‘mechanical and rational and symbolic securities’ ” (165). David Lodge also points out the similarities of style and convention that *Crow* has in common with the contemporary strip or animated cartoon: “the caricatured, quasi-human bird reappearing in a series of heterogeneous but familiar contexts; the mixture of comedy and violence; the stark, hard-edged quality of the visual images; ... the sudden transformations, mutations, mutilations, reversals and recoveries, which defy all the laws of logic, physics and good taste; above all, perhaps, the very direct, rapid, economic, simple manner of delivery” (171-72).

Hughes, through the mythology of ‘Crow’, places the demonic forces at the centre of Christianity’s three principal myths: the Beginning, the Creation of Man, and the Redemption. “Lineage” deals with

Beginning, its first three words ('In the beginning') echoing both the Old Testament (Genesis 1:1) and the New Testament (Revelation 1:1). The genealogy of the next fourteen lines is akin to that of Genesis (5:1-32) and of Matthew (1:1-16). But the similarity ceases there for, according to the 'Crow' myth, "In the beginning was Scream" that reverses the Christian tradition of the logos ("In the beginning was the Word"). Scream is the origin of all things. It is the violent exhale of the 'bowel- emptying' birth cry in "A Kill". In contrast to the rational 'word', it is irrational. It is the demonic force "Who begat Blood", the symbol of life and thus set creation in motion. The poem inverts the Christian teleology and "suggests it is Adam who begat Mary who begat God and that man mistakenly made of this God a creator of Goodness, of the Word and light because of his desire to believe only in perfect good and to reject pain and evil" (King 137). Thus Adam and Mary beget God and religion to control the demonic. It is God, or more correctly the frantic repetition "Never/ Never Never Never" of His nightmare, from which Crow arises. Crow, to complete the cycle, is "Screaming for Blood", the demonic lust for life.

"A Childish Prank" deals with the Creation of Man. The poem is based on a Jewish legend: "In a Talmudic version of the creation, God, having made man and woman of the clay of the earth, tries for hundreds of years to lure into these inert bodies the free souls which fly through space. But the souls value their liberty, and will be neither cajoled nor tricked into bodies. Crow steps in and invents sexuality" (Sagar 32). Although God has already created them "Man's and Woman's bodies lay without souls, / Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert". God falls asleep pondering the problem of how to instill in them the spark of life, the "soul". But once asleep the demonic force of His nightmare is freed from the constraints of His rational thought. It is this demonic energy which the 'inert' bodies lack. Crow, an off-spring of the demonic, solves the problem by giving man and woman sexuality. According to the 'Crow' myth, the real "Redeemer" is not Christ, but the demonic force that "redeems" man by instilling in him the ability to regenerate himself through sex. "God's only son" is the "Worm", a symbol of regeneration. The two halves of the Worm seek to become one through the sexual intercourse of man and woman, like Crow being chopped in two in "Crow's Song of Himself" to produce man and woman. Crow, walking through "A black doorway: / The eye's pupil" in "The Door", is a symbol of man's creativity. "Crow's First Lesson" shows that the demonic love in the 'Crow' mythology is indeed the sexual love of Jewish tradition. Here God tries to teach Crow the rational word "Love". But Crow "retched again, before God could stop him. / And woman's vulva dropped over man's neck and tightened / The two struggled together on the grass". Fernandez writes: "The only love, Crow knows, that is, is the demonic kind. It is neither rational nor spiritual, but irrational and physical" (157). Paul Bentley argues: "God's attempt to teach Crow how to talk in 'Crow's First Lesson' sets the pattern for the book: Crow's difficulty is that he cannot adapt to the alien discourses in which he finds himself placed, he cannot normalize himself within any single cultural code (in this case the Christian idea of God as Love) - hence his trials and ordeals" (49). About Crow Hughes writes, "...maybe his ambition is to become a man, which he never quite manages" (Bentley 49). Crow cannot become a man because he cannot identify himself with what it means to be a 'man' in society, with man as a socio-cultural construct. Crow cannot assimilate himself into a society which is dictated by repressive institutional laws. Thus, the possibility of identification itself is done away with in *Crow*.

"Crow Blacker Than Ever" deals specifically with the role the demonic plays in the Christian Redemption. When "Things looked like falling apart . . . / Crow nailed them together, / Nailing heaven and earth together -". The demonic saves creation from destruction by binding it together. In the demonic "all is bound together"; it is "the mediator who spans the chasm" between God and Man. Hughes' demonic not only 'nails' man to woman but also man to God. In this sense it is a compound of both the physical and the spiritual. Like W. B. Yeats, Hughes must have been influenced by Tantrism, a marginal and radical offshoot of Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, which differs from the orthodoxies of these religious systems in practice, in an emphasis on sensuality and eroticism as a gateway to emancipation and rebirth. In Tantrism, sexual intercourse is perceived as a spiritual practice of the highest order where pleasure is tantamount to emptiness or the "nothing" state of Buddhist *sunyata*. In "Snake Hymn" the snake, unlike God in *Crow*, is the demonic force of regeneration. According to the poem, the snake "was the gliding / And push of Adam's blood". The fact that this blood, or this snake, "slid into Eve" is symbolic of both her coming to life and the sexuality which is its spark. Fernandez argues: "it is through the demonic force of sexuality that man is regenerated, the race continued, and the Redeemer born. Through procreation there is the possibility of the

evolution of a better species of man, thus, in some way, “redeeming the original race” (157). The death of Christ and the resurrection of His body, which Christianity holds as the culmination of man’s redemption, is nothing more than the “skin of agony” shed by the demonic, as a snake annually sheds its skin. The failure of Christianity lies in viewing the death of Christ as a “final act of redemption” instead of the demonic as a continuing process of creation. Thus Christianity foregrounds a metanarrative of finality and absolutism which Hughes’ demonic represented by Crow seems to subvert. Hughes believes that the Christian God has become impotent. It is He who, in “Lineage”, “begat Nothing”. In “A Childish Prank”, He is unable to give life to His creations. In “Crow’s First Lesson”, He can neither teach spiritual love nor prevent physical love. “Apple Tragedy” shows Him as an ‘interloper’ capable only of sham magical tricks like “ ‘you see this apple? / I squeeze it and look – cider’ ”.

In its attempt to rid itself of the demonic, Christianity also uses such sham magic. In “Conjuring in Heaven”, it tries the now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t approach of theologians who try “to prove it didn’t exist”. We see the opposite approach in “Apple Tragedy”. Here Christianity admits the presence of the demonic in order to “project its own guilt onto the demonic by telling man the half-truths of a sham morality based on innate ‘sin! Thus the demonic becomes the evil demon’ and sexuality becomes guilt-ridden and ‘sinful’ ” (Fernandez 158). The failure of Christianity to deal with the demonic is quite evident in “Crow’s Song of Himself”, where God vainly tries to obliterate it through torture. One cannot forget the fate of heretics and ‘witches’, those tragic victims of the Inquisition and other forms of religious intolerance. But even as Christianity “hammered” and “roasted” and “crushed” and “tore” them to pieces, ultimately “God went off in despair”, unable to destroy the indestructible demonic. The failures of other myths and religions to contain the demonic surely preceded that of Christianity. “Crow’s Playmates” shows the results of religions which tried to contain the demonic force by the enchantment of natural forces like the “mountain god”, and the “river god”. But one by one, “god” after “god”, the emphasis shifted from recognition of the demonic, through the worship of natural forces, to a worship of the natural objects associated with those forces. And this shift resulted in the progressive alienation of these religions from the demonic and hence their failure.

Christianity was replaced by technology as the container of the irrational demonic. The power of technology’s atom bomb is awesome (“the serpent emerged . . . From the hatched atom” in *A Horrible Religious Error*) – so much so that “God’s grimace writhed, a leaf in the furnace” and mankind willingly submits to it with the words, “ ‘Your will is our peace’ ”. Its “alike self twisted around it” is justified by the reasoning that such technological “advances” as the atom bomb are “for the good of all mankind”. The horrible religious error lies in the replacement of religion by technology and the reasoning behind it. The same idea of religious error is corroborated in “Notes for a Little Play”, where God is not even invited as ‘guest’ to the post-atomic-explosion marriage of two “Maturations- at home in the nuclear glare”. This show of technological strength notwithstanding, the demonic Crow remains nonchalant as his reaction to the atomic serpent of “A Horrible Religious Error” is: “Beat the hell out of it, and ate it”. The demonic remains invincible, its power undiminished by atomic power. Thus in “Notes for a Little Play” where “the flame fills all space / The demolition is total”, the only two survivors “fasten together” in marriage “to dance a strange dance” of continuing the process of creation in spite of the devastation. King rightly says: “It was to express the idea that even a life of great pain and suffering could still contain an irreducible force for survival. Among other things, Crow is the spirit of endurance, the basic grit of survival at the bottom of even the worst experiences” (135). “Crow Blacker Than Ever” speaks volumes for Crow’s power of endurance. When the sun has “raged and charred” against everything and the world has been burnt, Crow’s eye-pupil remains “in the tower of its scorched fort”. Hughes, here, takes us back to an elemental truth of human life: the “spirit of endurance” is a must for mankind to survive amid cataclysm. It is the effort of life to express itself at the reduced level of sheer survival.

The last lines of the poem “Crow’s Theology” drive home the final realization of Crow regarding technology and religion. The “bigger” god who “loved the shot-pellets” and “spoke the silence of lead” is technology, the “god” of modern man who loves his enemies to death for their own benefit. “Crow’s Account of St. George” is the account of the technological Knight’s attempt to vanquish the demonic dragon. He uses his weapons like “tweezers of numbers”, a “knife-edge of numbers”, and a “ceremonial

Japanese decapitator”, each in turn as he approaches closer to the “nest of numbers” that he considers the centre of life. But there he ceases, only to find to his surprise, that the heart of life is not a rational mathematical formula but “A bird-head, / Bald, lizard-eyed, the size of a football, on two staggering bird-legs;” that is, the demonic, symbolized by Crow. Fernandez argues: “It is through technology that super-rational modern man tries, not so much to contain the demonic, as to examine it out of existence . . . The result of man’s technological battle with the demonic is the destruction of his connection to the demonic through sexuality, his ‘wife and children’ ”(160). St. George who seeks to explain the demonic does not recognize it when he finds it. His scientific formulae are of no use to him when, confronted with the demonic that engenders fear in him, he attempts to exert the ultimate form of control by destroying it. But he does destroy himself with the Japanese decapitator by totally alienating himself from the demonic. The alienation of technological man in “Revenge Fable” reinforces the same assumption when he seeks to “get rid of his mother”, the elemental energy, the demonic, as he “pounded and hacked at her / With numbers and equations and laws / Which he invented and called truth . . . / Going for her with a knife, / Obliterating her with disgusts / Bulldozers and detergents / Requisitions and central heating / Rifles and whisky and bored sleep”. The result is fatal: “His head fell off like a leaf”. For man, to contain the demonic with a life style based on the technology of the atom, detergents and central heating, is an impossibility. Crow looks for the source of evil in “The Black Beast” but fails to locate it. In a number of poems including “Crow’s Account of St. George”, “Crow’s Theology”, “Oedipus Crow” and “A Horrible Religious Error”, the combat against evil is seen to be doomed because the combatant has the evil within himself. As the sequence moves towards its end, the world is described as completely penetrated by evil and “everything goes to hell” (“Apple Tragedy”), but Crow remains; even when “truth kills everybody”, he reigns supreme over a silent, empty kingdom.

In “The Battle of Osfrontalis” Crow refuses to be contained by ‘rational’ words by not taking them seriously. Crow reacts through “whistle”, a series of sounds containing no words, which nullifies the efficacy of those words and exposes their essential *sunyata* or emptiness. Beaten hollow by Crow’s “whistle”, these essentially empty words “retreated, suddenly afraid / Into the skull of a dead jester”. “A Disaster” deals with news of a word- the “progress” of technology, which Crow sees, “killing men”, and “bulldozing / Whole cities to rubble”; “its excreta poisoning seas”, and “its breath burning whole lands / to dusty char”. Technological progress is “. . . sucking the cities / Like the nipples of a sow / Drinking out all the people / Till there were none left, / All digested inside the word”. But although it can ‘digest’ rational man in its body of empirical facts, it cannot stomach the irrational demonic. The progress of technology finally gives mankind the “collapsing mushroom of the atom bomb and “a drying salty lake”. Thus “Its era was over”. But Crow “walked and mused” over a “brittle desert / Dazzling with the bones of earth’s people”. Technology, the ‘god’ of modern man, attempts to explain the inexplicable but miserably fails. It tries to contain the demonic within the rational bounds of its scientific theories, little knowing that the demonic force is beyond definition, destruction and examination.

Hughes himself writes that his “guiding metaphor” for Crow was the figure of the Trickster from primitive tales and mythologies (Hughes: 1990, P.112). As the trickster allows a combination of ‘the sacred with the profane, the lofty with the low, the great with the insignificant, the wise with the stupid” (Bakhtin: 1984, P.123), Bentley writes: “Hughes uses the figure of the comic, burgling and irrepressible Trickster in “Crow” as a carnivalesque device” (40). According to Bakhtin, carnivalesque literature is characterized by “an indestructible vitality” (Bakhtin: 1984, P.107) which the irrational demonic, i.e. Crow represents. Bentley argues: “Crow as Trickster is a carnivalistic means for conducting an irreverent and raucous critique of contemporary Western culture, and in particular of the combined legacy of Judaeo- Christian morality and scientific rationality” (40). Crow is the incorrigible prankster of poems like “A Childish Prank” and “Crow Blacker than Ever” where his perverse interference enables the poet to question accepted theological beliefs.

“A Childish Prank” reads like a paradigm of the basic principles of carnivalization. Bakhtin writes: “The ‘absolute past’ of gods, demigods and heroes is here (. . .) ‘contemporarized’: it is brought low, represented on a plane equal with contemporary life, in an everyday environment, in the low language of contemporaneity” (Bakhtin: 1981, P.21). ‘Ritual laughter’ is an important ingredient of the carnival. That

Crow's laugh forms the prelude to his crude intervention in theological matters in the poem is significant. Enigmatic images of laughter, smiling, and grinning occur throughout *Crow*, about which Hughes says: "I'm not quite sure what they signify." (Faas: 1971, P.18). However evasive his opinion may sound, laughter operates as a structuring force or principle in *Crow*. According to Bakhtin, "Laughter degrades and materializes": "It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance . . . Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it" (Bakhtin: 1981, P.23). The comic demolition of "fear and piety" is integral to the technique of "Crow". In poems like "A Childish Prank" Crow functions overtly as a comic device for inverting the biblical Creation myth, which is evident in the colloquial directness and slapstick feel of words like "dragged" and "stuffed", and the pun on "coming". The carnivalesque device of laughter is at its most subversive when "God went on sleeping" but "Crow went on laughing". Hughes also relates the figure of the Trickster to "the infantile, irresponsible naivety of sexual love" – "At bottom this is what Trickster is: the optimism of the sperm, still struggling joyfully along after 150 million years" (Hughes: 1990, P. 110.) – in similar fashion to Bakhtin's linking of carnival forms to bodily life- that which is "opposed to severance from the material and bodily roots of the world" (Bakhtin: 1968, P.19.).

Leonard M. Scigaj remarks: "Crow views the world entirely through the objectivity of his neutral camera eye; his perceptions are strongly influenced by our Western Culture's long-standing connection with a rational, empirical tradition that dissociates scientific laws and factual evidence from the subjective responses of the beholder, through the logic of Cartesian dualism ("Crow Alights")"(166). For Scigaj, being part of an empirical world, Crow's perceptions are "poisoned with scientific rationalism" (167). The empirical tradition places no cultural value upon the anima, or inwardness that provides a foil and an antidote to post-Renaissance scientific materialism. During the publication of *Crow*, Hughes wrote in an essay that our neurotic civilization "is the direct result of the prohibition of imagination, the breakdown of all negotiations between our scientific mental attitude and our inner life" (Scigaj 170). Hughes himself writes of "the basis of Freud's whole therapeutic technique that the right fantasy can free the neurotic, temporarily at least, from his neurosis", that the "devil of suppressed life stops making trouble the moment he is acknowledged, the moment he is welcomed into conscious life and given some shape where he can play out his energy in an active part of the personality" (Bentley 42-43). In *Crow* Hughes asserts that the longer the empirical tradition permeates our culture, the longer our inherited memories of inert objectivity will limit our perceptions, obstruct our psychological development, and bring about periodic explosions of repressed libidinal energy.

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