Ted Hughes's appointment as Poet Laureate in 1984, and Philip Larkin's death in September 1985, left Hughes as—in spite of some dubious connotations of the laureateship—the undoubted doyen of British poetry, which may or may not mean the best poet.

Hughes and Larkin were provocatively polarized by Al Alvarez in his influential, at the time often formative, anthology *The New Poetry* (Penguin, 1962). Larkin, while allowed elegance, was made, with slightly distorting emphasis, the exemplar of gentility:

And gentility is a belief that life is always more or less orderly, people always more or less polite, their emotions and habits more or less decent and more or less controllable; that God, in short, is more or less good.

Alvarez was out to promote poets who confronted libido, the unconscious drives whose "public faces are those of the two world wars, of the concentration camps, of genocide, and the threat of nuclear war." He defined "a new seriousness" as comparable to that of psychoanalysis:

One of the therapeutic purposes, for example, of Bruno Bettelheim's secret psychoanalytic observations when he was in Dachau and Buchenwald was to educate himself into realising how much of what went on around him expressed what went on inside himself. Another analyst has suggested that the guilt which seems to dog the refugees who escaped from Germany may in part be due to the fact that the Nazis fulfilled the deepest and most primitive drives of the refugees themselves, killing fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters and children.

Hughes was singled out as attempting seriously to recreate and integrate such threatening constellations. His images
“reach back, as in a dream, into a nexus of fear and sensation... part physical, part state of mind.” Hughes was closer to Lowell, Berryman, Sexton and Plath than to his British contemporaries. America may, in fact, have been a stronger cultural influence on Hughes than Britain. Apart from working there and marrying Sylvia Plath, he has perhaps been formed more by Dickinson, Ransom, Eberhart, Moore, Cleanth Brooks, trickster tales and American anthropologists than by any British sources except Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence and Robert Graves. Yet American readers do not seem to have grown up reading him as their British counterparts have.

As with any complex major poet, his work is full of contradictions, and his purport can be not what it seems, perhaps even to him. The critic has his own ambivalences to cope with—a blend of admiration and cultural uneasiness. Hughes’s genuine popularity in England is based on his almost hallucinatory imagination, his enhanced and enhancing exact observation, his organ-voice, not always completely under control, like his subjectivity, and his resourceful, textured, hyperbolic verbal gift. The combat of the death wish and the biological spirit of survival he dramatizes seems almost diagnostic of the world’s and can engage the reader like the sight of a fight for life in high seas. His poetry can seem like a lifeline; and Hughes’s life as a shaman is certainly not a theoretical one. Poetry, says Hughes, “seizes upon what is depressing and destructive and lifts it into a realm where it becomes healing and energizing.”

Hughes came to fame through an American prize. Sylvia Plath submitted Hughes’s The Hawk in the Rain (1957) to the Poetry Center of the YM-YWHA of New York, whose competition was for a first book, the prize being immediate publication by Harper. The judges—Auden, Spender and Marianne Moore—chose Hughes. It is still an interesting book, but this phase of Hughes’s work, when he was still following New Critical principles, finds its perfection in Lupercal (1960), which contains some poems that look very good stayers. “An Otter,” for instance, is affectionately and attentively perceived:

1 Ted Hughes and R.S. Thomas Read and Discuss Selections of Their Own Poems (Norwich Tapes, Battle, Sussex, 1978).
Underwater eyes, an eel’s
Oil of water body, neither fish nor beast is the otter:
Four-legged yet water-gifted, to outfish fish;
With webbed feet and a long ruddering tail
And a round head like an old tomcat.

Yet, as with Lawrence, the studied observation is serving the anagogical. The otter is theriomorphic of Jung’s “Self,” the Hindu Atman, “Like a king in hiding”—like Lawrence’s snake—an exile from an egocentric tainted world that hunts him out of existence and reduces him to “this long pelt over the back of a chair.”

So the self under the eye lies,
Attendant and withdrawn.

Though disinheritied, he is the legitimate pretender, inhabitant of two worlds, land and water, conscious and unconscious.

As well as absorbing Birds, Beasts and Flowers, the young Hughes ingested Yeats. “Things Present,” the first poem in Lupercal, picks up Yeats’s image of man as a beggar-man—for Yeats a prince, or son of God, wandered into the mire, or matter, and transformed into a ragged man or toad. Yet Hughes’s atman, like his otter, will “revert to nothing at all”: he is at once a fact and a mere dream in “the sodden ditch.” The here and now are not the intersection of the timeless with time, but “A bare-backed tramp and a ditch without a fire.” The tramp’s progenitors, unlike the otter’s, were mere survivors: dubious honor and hopelessly fearful hope were translated into the practical: shoes and a house, “A roof treed to deflect death,” protective against the enemy nature. The tramp is less “man” than the disinheritied ego of today.

For Hughes the dismissal of “nature,” the loss of the paradisal egoless animal consciousness, which the shaman partially recovers, is man’s original sin. Christianity is not, however, the solution but compounds the error: “treed to deflect death” is a sneer at the delusory offer of survival of death. Christ is a pernicious sublimation of sex, like other devotees of the spirit, Socrates, “complacent as a phallus,” or Buddha:
Visage of Priapus: the undying tail-swinging
Stupidity of the donkey
That carries Christ. How carefully he nurses

This six-day abortion of the Absolute.
“The Perfect Forms,” Lupercal

The “facts” of Eden are revised:

No, the serpent did not
Seduce Eve to the apple.
All that’s simply
Corruption of the facts.

Adam ate the apple.
Eve ate Adam.
The serpent ate Eve.
This is the dark intestine.

The serpent, meanwhile,
Sleeps his meal off in Paradise—
Smiling to hear
God’s querulous calling.
“Theology,” Wodwo, 1967

According to Ekbert Faas, admiring this reduction of myth to sexuality and ingestion—satisfied genitals and belly bring peace—Hughes only began to realize the full importance of “theology” when he began to write Crow.² Yet the poem hardly defines the early agony of Hughes’s meditations on the devouring intestine.

The poet empathizes with the tramp in “Crag Jack’s Apostasy,” who has nightmares of cruel heads and talons: Jack “calls continually” “That I may see more than your eyes / In an animal’s dreamed head,” “Keep more than the memory / Of a wolf ‘s head, of eagles’ feet.” The eyes are the eyes of his god, renounced, but still there, buried under the weight of dark church stone: Jack’s power and his luck have changed

² Ekbert Faas, Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe (Santa Barbara, Calif., 1980), p. 78.
since his apostasy, but he still prays to the abandoned god—for him not to appear in terrifying animal form. In the absence of the civilizing “art that doth mend nature,” a vision like that of the bestial men and women in King Lear haunts the early Hughes. The title “A Modest Proposal” points, as with Swift, to human bestiality:

There is no better way to know us  
Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood.  
The Hawk in the Rain, 1957

Each wolf would “sob contentment towards the moon” if he could devour the other, with “the red smelting of hatred” in his mouth, ready for the “slavering rush.” Yet the contrasting hounds—civilized creatures—trained, leaping together, “making delighted sounds,” are simply better organized devourers in the great lord’s gorgeous hunt.

Though Hughes’s poetry centers on animals, they are heavily anthropomorphized, are in fact excruciatingly lifelike masks: his pike has “the grin it was born with.” Leonard Baskin’s engraved Crow—Baskin, the American engraver, suggested the subject to Hughes—is, with its male human genitals, very apposite. Hughes visualizes animals as human beings peeping out of beaks and snouts: that is the horror: sub-human humans wolfing raw meat or being gorged, their appetites and agonies suffused with human consciousness. Contrariwise, Mozart’s brain is unconvincingly compared to the shark’s mouth. Hughes finds thrushes “terrifying”:

Triggered to stirrings beyond sense—with a start, a bounce,  
a stab  
Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing. . .

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained  
Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats  
Gives their days this bullet and automatic  
Purpose? Mozart’s brain had it, and the shark’s mouth
That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of
its own
Side and devouring of itself.

"Thrushes," *Lupercal*

The latter image clearly echoes that in *King Lear*: "Humanity
must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep"; and Hughes's language in this passage almost out-Shakespeares Shakespeare. Yet Shakespeare is testing a morality of
sacrifice and suffering against this pre-Darwinian Darwinian
vision: Hughes is on his way to the worship of "nature" pro-
posed by Edmund—"Thou, Nature, art my goddess"—but re-
jected by the play. "Thrushes" ends with an image of man at
his desk driven by the same attent purposefulness as the
thrush, reinforced with the devils of his unconscious: beyond
that nothing.

Hughes's "Hawk Roosting" thinks as no bird could:

It took the whole of Creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold Creation in my foot

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

The allotment of death.

*Lupercal*

In verbalizing the dynamics of the hawk, Hughes has
sketched a blueprint for tyranny.

When Hughes is not writing at his peak, disbelief can set
in. Only human beings can imagine death and thus glory in it
or worry about it: grazing deer, unsuccessfully attacked by a
lion, bound off and start grazing again immediately: they
don't go off their food or demand a whisky. Humans, in an
emergency, may have a taste of animal fear—pure reflexes,
adrenalin, cortisone—and find it ecstatically exhilarating; so
much so that they seek to repeat the experience; or they find
that they have been wounded but felt no pain. Blake writes:
How do you know but ev'ry bird that cuts the airy way
Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?

Is it not perhaps Hughes that is being sentimental, rather than Blake? At his worst, Hughes can seem like an inverted Disney. "Ghost Crabs" inhabit man and his history:

All night, around us or through us,
They stalk each other, they fasten on to each other,
They mount each other, they tear each other to pieces,
They utterly exhaust each other.
They are the powers of this world. . . .

They are the turmoil of history, the convulsion
In the roots of the blood, in the cycles of concurrence.
To them, our cluttered countries are empty battleground.

Wodwo

It would be unkind to quote these clichés if the poem had not been overpraised. Even with more closely zoomorphic imagery, a didactic, anti-romantic "pathetic fallacy" can distort his "Skylarks":

The lark begins to go up
Like a warning
As if the globe were uneasy—. . .

Leaden
Like a bullet
To supplant
Life from its centre. . . .

Crueller than owl or eagle

A towered bird, shot through the crested head
With the command, Not die

But climb
Climb
Sing
Obedient as to death a dead thing.
Even if the bird is meaninglessly programmed to exert itself, the experience might seem exhilarating to it, surely—as horses clearly enjoy racing. A skylark is certainly anything but "leaden" or "like a bullet" or "crueller than owl or eagle." Shelley does not make the mistake of supposing the bird climbs out of a fear of death: only we "look before and after / And pine for what is not," whose "sincerest laughter / With some pain is fraught." Later in the poem Hughes does impersonate the action of the bird joyously—so successfully that he later added a new conclusion to correct the effect, comparing the skylark to Cuchulain, torturing himself erect to defy death.

Wodwo (1967), in spite of Hughes's apologists, is not Hughes at his best: it is adjectival, hyperbolic, verbose, often unconvincing, by no means an advance on Lupercal, which contains unforgettable writing. It's a relief after Wodwo to come to Crow (1970), with its new panache, humor, economy and playfulness. The "Trickster Tale," derived from primitive literatures, seems to have released Hughes from depression, or coincided with a release from depression, leading him to a more narrative, neat-statement poem, parabolic, making a single point as bleakly, lightly and obliquely as a nursery rhyme: perhaps too faux-naively for some tastes.

Jung, a large influence on Hughes, wrote an essay "On the Psychology of the Trickster Figure," seeing the trickster as the Shadow, an unconscious archetype incorporating the psyche's unacceptable traits, the opposite of those consciously deployed. Hughes himself has contrasted Trickster Literature with Black Comedy. Black Comedy is the end of a cultural process, drawing on "animal despair" and "suicidal nihilism" that "afflict a society or an individual when the supportive metaphysical benefits disintegrate." Trickster Literature, on the contrary, comes at the beginning of a cultural process and draws on the "unkillable biological optimism that supports a society or individual whose world is not yet fully created, and whose metaphysical beliefs are only just struggling out of the dream stage." It seems likely, therefore, that Crow is this for Hughes, the new start after the breakdown. It is evident that the writing affected Hughes therapeutically, had a "physical

effect” on him, though he knows that this does not guarantee the worth of the poem on the page. But he sees the tale as archetypal and biological:

At bottom, this is what the Trickster is: the optimism of the sperm, still struggling joyfully along after 150 million years.... His recurrent adventure is like a master plan, one of the deepest imprints in our nature, if not the deepest, and one of our most useful ideas. We use it all the time, quite spontaneously, like a tool, at every stage of our psychological recovery and growth.

Both Black Comedy and the Trickster Tale laugh at calamity:

It is the difference between two laughters: one, bitter and destructive; the other zestful and creative, attending what seems to be the same calamity.

Laughter is a recurrent item in Crow. Laughter erupts at catastrophe:

The meteorite crashes
With extraordinarily ill-luck on the pram.

Violent and Dionysiac, it ends guiltily buttoning up “Like somebody the police have come for.” A grin goes through horrific Francis Bacon-like metamorphoses—there is often a great similarity between Hughes and Bacon—before retiring into its final phase: the skull. A smile finally splits “an unlucky person’s” face—

And the crowd, shoving to get a glimpse of a man’s soul
Stripped to its last shame,
Met this smile
That rose through his torn roots
Touching his lips, altering his eyes
And for a moment
Mending everything

Before it swept out and away across the earth.

In “Criminal Ballad” a man who has suffered a chain of catastrophes cannot enjoy simple moments—the children playing
in the garden—because he is haunted by machine guns and burning women. He finds himself like Macbeth:

His hands covered with blood suddenly  
And now he ran from the children and ran through the house  
Holding his bloody hands clear of everything  
And ran along the road and into the wood  
And under the leaves he sat weeping

Till he began to laugh

“God” is an illusory impotent excelsior: a fantasy of the cortex in retreat from the intestine. He has no idea how to give a soul to Adam and Eve. Crow solves the problem:

Crow laughed.  
He bit the Worm, 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 a woman  
And it crept deeper and up  
To peer out through her eyes  
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly  
Because O it was painful.

“In the beginning was the Scream”—and blackness, not light. In a biological creation, Crow is inseparable from his Mother Nature, whom he savages with every device, especially science: but he can’t escape: when he crashes on the moon he wakes and crawls out “Under his mother’s buttocks.” “God” tries to teach Crow the word “live,” but every time Crow opens his mouth to utter it, some horror leaps out: first the shark, then man and woman, “And woman’s vulva dropped over man’s neck and tightened.”

The trickster genre is an ancestor of the comic strip and can suggest it: the reductive shameless parody, the irresponsi-
ble joke, are there to release the unrespectable Shadow. After world catastrophe, “Crow had to start searching for something to eat.” Hearing the weeping of the grubs he is devouring, he trains himself to be deaf. In a world where battle-slaughter is so easy—“Too like potting a snooker-ball”—Crow looks everywhere for the black beast, except in himself. His communion meal is a matter of survival: he tears off a mouthful of God’s carcass and finds himself strengthened. The serpent-power emerges from the atom-nucleus and melts men and women, but Crow survives: he grabs the serpent “by the slackskin nape, / Beat the hell out of it, and ate it.”

Crow’s development is hampered by his religion: he has abandoned the true Goddess, Nature, and whored after the false god, Christ: he has nailed together man and God:

So man cried, but with God’s voice.  
And God bled, but with man’s blood.

“Crow’s Undersong” hymns the fertile Goddess:

She brings petals in their nectar fruits in their plush . . .  
She has come amorous it is all she has come for  
If there had been no hope she would not have come  
And there would have been no crying in the city  
(There would have been no city)

What kind of hope is there? Hughes evidently foresees a pretty catastrophic sort of hope—the kind of hope that for most of us would constitute a despair, an abdication. Hughes is undoubtedly influenced by myth here, the death-and-rebirth myth of the shaman, the hero, and the saint. Perhaps, with Lowell, he sees the world as a grandiose version of the psychotic patient—who may have to endure regression, psychic death and rebirth in order to resume growth. Crow will have to endure what Jung calls an enantiodromia: his conscious and unconscious must be turned upside down—the direction in which he is going must be reversed. Crow’s “ego-system” has to be destroyed before he can experience “the spirit-dimension of his inner link with his Creator,” as Hughes put it.
in a letter to Gifford and Roberts. He must be born again, and that implies spiritual death. In “Truth Kills Everybody” Crow seizes Proteus—the world—and, since his understanding is so inadequate and his procedure so mistaken, the world responds by going through destructive and delusory metamorphoses until it finally becomes a hand grenade and “BANG! He was blasted to nothing.”

Taking heaven by storm, unprepared and ignorant, he is destroyed, to appear again, the same Crow, yet not quite the same. Hughes explains:

That he explodes is positive . . . Now nothing remains for him but what has exploded him—his inner link with his creator, a thing of spiritfire (“he that loses his life shall find it” etc.). This is Crow’s greatest step forward. But he regresses and has to make it again and again, before his gain is finally consolidated in his union with his bride . . .

That this is not merely about individual psychosis is made clear by a remark to Faas: asked if “the first and second creation” were separated by nuclear war, Hughes replied:

Yes, a complete abolition of everything that’s been up to this point and Crow is what manages to drag himself out of it in fairly good morale.

I leave the reader to draw his own conclusions about this. I think that Hughes would assume that the nihilism is not in himself but in a planetary humanity that has driven itself insane through ego-centered rationalism: he is merely drawing the realistic conclusion, as perhaps a rishi, visualizing world-cycles, would.

It’s obviously a pervasive and deep feeling that civilisation has now disappeared completely. If it’s still here by grace of pure inertia and chance, and if the whole thing has essentially vanished, one had better have one’s spirit invested in something that will not vanish. And this is shifting your foundation to completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won’t be under the rubble when the churches collapse.


5 Ekbert Faas, p. 207.
Perhaps Hughes still hopes that catastrophe can be averted through the creation of poetic death-and-rebirth rituals. Perhaps the imaginative enactment of a psychotic episode will be a healing force. At any rate in *Gaudete* (1977) he has dramatized such a psychotic episode. In this Gothic dream-narrative, delivered with a scarifying waking realism, it is no accident that the protagonist is a clergyman: this makes him—Lumb, a sacrificial lamb—not only a deluded Christian, and therefore a ruined human being, but a representative of the whole deluded Christian tradition. He will go through a “conversion into his opposite,” an *enantiodromia*: his unconscious becomes conscious, his conscious unconscious, and he embarks on the process Jung calls individuation, where, in a psychotic development, the Self replaces the ego.

The title refers ironically to the Virgin in a Christmas hymn of 1582.

*Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus*  
*Ex Maria virgine, gaudete.*

This rebirth will involve a debauch.

In the streets of his town, now a town of corpses, Lumb is abducted “by spirits into the other world.” There he finds the Goddess, Nature, an animal-woman, half-dead. She is to be revived. Lumb is crucified, whipped and spread-eagled beneath a bull, while its “Half a ton of guts / Balloon out and drop on Lumb.” Fighting in “the roping hot mass,” he is having his nose rubbed in the facts of the body. His double is now born, to replace him, into the vicarage he has left. This id-Lumb, made out of a log, takes his place as clergyman, organizes the women of the parish into a coven, and proceeds to copulate with all of them—encouraging them to believe that one of them will parturiate with the Messiah. Most of the book is a dramatization of these copulations. Jealously among both the women and the men lead him to be hunted to death like an animal. The original Lumb now appears, roaming the west of Ireland. He shows three girls a “miracle”: making a call with lips and back of hand, he summons an otter out of a lough: it is presumably both beast and emblem of the “self” that “under the eye lies”—the “king in hid-
ing” of Lupercal. The girls tell their priest what has happened, bringing Lumb’s notebook, which contains hymns to “a nameless female deity,” Graves’s White Goddess. The priest goes into an ecstasy of wonder at the creation—and proceeds to copy out Lumb’s verses.

This follows the tragic scheme of death and regeneration, of course. But Keith Sagar’s claim that Gaudete is preeminent among poetic works in our time is unconvincing, to say the least. The incidents are engineered to loose scenes of “sex and violence.” Scenes of healing and insight are replaced by the otter-incident and the anthology of hymns presented at the end. How Lumb’s enlightenment evolves is a mystery: Sagar claims it happens in the “spirit world”—but all we are shown in the spirit world is the slaughterhouse scene. Perhaps log-Lumb represents the id that must be destroyed before a feeling for the sacred can be released in humanity. Perhaps the events are intended as a katharsis of repressed shadow forces for Lumb and the reader, both to be left “all passion spent” at the end; but the scenes are too grotesque for assent, let alone empathy: one watches as if at a horror movie. The wooden debauch of the log-Lumb destroys the community, if it were not already destroyed by its caricaturish stereotyping, whereas a shaman is supposed to heal his community. It is uncertain whether we are to take the priest’s reaction at the end seriously—it is hard to do so. Sagar, who thinks Hughes has outflanked Lawrence, Beckett and Eliot, writes:

The orthodox religious/mystical answers won’t stand up. In The Four Quarters they are vacuous, the product of desperation and repudiation.

But the words apply more to Gaudete than to Eliot. Even The Waste Land enacts spiritual thirst and refreshment: fertility in sex and work depend on a prior regeneration through the Word. Gaudete enacts a barren priapic extravaganza, the physicality without charm, tenderness or love, and ends, such passion spent, in a bogus peace that passeth all understanding. It advertises the violence it portrays and recreates the horrors we recoil from in primitive religion.

Hughes has invented a new religion for himself out of a farrago of Robert Graves's slightly crazed vision of a White Goddess—a religiose sanctification of Darwinian birth, copulation and death, crying “kill, kill, kill”—Jung, the Sufism of Idries Shah, Carlos Castaneda, the *Bardo Thödol*, and shamanism as presented in Mircea Eliade and Joseph Campbell, among others. Shamanism, with its spiritualistic flight and return, centered on a symbolism of animal familiars, can seem to survive the supposed demise of the higher religions. The spirit world can be half-psychologized as the unconscious and half-left-open as potentially a metaphysical domain. The shaman imagery can be seen as a mode of accommodation to the facts of biological sex and death, a way of reinterpreting ourselves as primates, and adapting emotionally. There is no doubt of Hughes's commitment to his beliefs and his emotional participation in them: the poetry gives every evidence of a struggle for intellectual and spiritual survival. He chooses his themes because they offer “a good outcome for me personally.” This is no chic application of anthropology. Yet it is worrying. He is the legitimate successor of D.H. Lawrence: he sees the thrust of Western civilization and technology, together with its Christianity, as a cosmic mistake. Hope, of a cosmic sort, lies in a return to Mother Nature. This seems to me a bourgeois trap, the one Lawrence, in spite of his greatness, fell into as did Robert Graves. The technological development of man is an outgrowth of his spirit and is as endemic to man as “instinct,” or innate knowledge, is to other animals. Without the machine, which starts with the stone and the wheel, there would be no “man,” who invents or imitates but has no “instincts” to speak of. We must get control of our technology, obviously, and make it serve us. There is no way “back” to nature.

As Nietzsche wrote, “Every great philosophy is a species of involuntary autobiography.” So is every poem and every statement, even the trivial one: the scientist who claims “a human being is a gene's way of producing another gene” is making an unverifiable primitivistic testimony: he is expressing an anti-human preference. It is possible to “believe in”

7 "And I was conscious too that the overall theme (Crow) offered a good outcome for me personally" (“A Reply to My Critics”).
evolution and accept that we are advanced primates without accepting every current interpretation of evolution, especially the nineteenth-century one, which is in the philosophical domain. Dealing with the philosophical, the theological and the things that can be neither proved nor disproved, perhaps, as Wittgenstein thought, the great poets we have inherited are not so easily outflanked.

The English poet who has most influenced Hughes’s style is Shakespeare, and this is unusual: most English poets, with the possible exception of Keats, have sheered off from what has often seemed a magnificently successful but imitable baroque conglomerate. Hughes expertly seized what he could handle. Shakespeare’s language, he wrote, has

the air of being invented in a state of crisis, for a terribly urgent job, a homely spur-of-the-moment improvisation out of whatever verbal scrap happens to be lying around, and this is exactly what real speech is. The meaning is not so much narrowly delineated as overwhelmingly suggested, by an inspired signalling and hinting of verbal heads and tails both above and below precision, and by this weirdly expressive underswell of a musical near-gibberish, like a jostling of spirits. The idea is conveyed, but we also receive a musical and imaginative shock, and the satisfaction of that is unfathomable.

Much of this is applicable to Hughes. In his interpretation of Shakespeare he is less happy: he sees Shakespeare’s vision as like his own; but Shakespeare, he thinks, lost this reductive insight in coming to see “nature” as “the foul witch Sycorax.” Yet in Shakespeare there are two conflicting “natures.” There is Edmund’s nature, a Goddess that leads men and women to behave like tigers or sharks: this is natura naturata, “nature natured,” or the created universe. And there is “Great Creating Nature,” natura naturans, or the transcendent that becomes immanent. Yet another “nature,” human nature, is a unique creation; and gardening is an exemplar of its civilization in:

’Tis an art that doth mend nature, change it rather,
But the art itself is nature.

The Winter’s Tale

8 Ted Hughes, “Introduction” to A Choice of Shakespeare’s Verse.
The Goddess of Nature will not do. Even “savages” are not “natural.” Wordsworth’s primitivistic reading of peasants was corrected by Coleridge: their wisdom derived not from nature but from intensive education by parents and clergy: nurture. Even Wordsworth, of course, did not worship “the vegetable universe,” as Blake supposed (not having had the opportunity to read *The Prelude*). Wordsworth worshipped “the Wisdom and Spirit of the universe,” whose presence mountains and lakes made him aware of:

Thou soul that art the eternity of thought,
That givest to forms and images a breath
And everlasting motion.

*The Prelude*, I. 401

Eliot, not in my opinion “outflanked” by Hughes, also recommended “a shifting of your foundations to completely new Holy Ground,” to quote Hughes again. In “Thoughts After Lambeth” (1931) Eliot wrote:

The World is trying the experiment of attempting to form a civilized but non-Christian mentality. The experiment will fail; but we must be very patient in awaiting its collapse; meanwhile redeeming the time: so that the Faith may be preserved alive through the dark ages before us; to renew and rebuild civilization, and save the world from suicide.

These, like all human conceptions, are speculative, but so are the Freudian and Jungian semiologies; and all scientific hypotheses are provisional. I have suggested that in bypassing important dimensions, Hughes has been led to a Manichaean, reductive and provisionally-based anthropology. But of course this is his strength: he could argue that he has resorted, in a rage for the truth, to the biological, psychological and anthropological sources of all religions. Rejecting Christianity, he has rediscovered original sin, the ineradicable black beast that Crow looks everywhere for except in himself. As Bruno Bettelheim sought himself in the concentration camps, Hughes has sought himself in the animal kingdom—and presented humanity to us in the form of a bestiary. He has rediscovered the Fall in man’s retreat from his biological reality. He has rediscovered death and resurrection and dramatized
them in Crow's shattering search for a new inner relation to his creator, and in the adventures of Lumb in the spiritual and material worlds. In all this he has been inquiring implicitly and explicitly into the horrors of our phase of history. And certainly we need a new respect for creation.

He must be judged by the standards we apply to a major poet: the scale of his work, the assault on our culture, the threatened and threatening life-and-death commitment, the imaginative and verbal resources all demand this. He has attempted to be as representative, diagnostic and therapeutic as The Waste Land. He has not been uniformly successful. He has written a handful of poems that are likely to be read as long as English poetry is read. Most of these are justly famous and many to be found in Lupercal: “Hawk Roosting,” “Pike,” “An Otter,” “The Bull Moses,” “View of a Pig,” “Thrushes,” “Esther’s Tomcat,” “To Paint a Water Lily.” I’m inclined to think the success of Lupercal was because Hughes’s energy and preference for overstatement were disciplined by the example and precepts of Ransom and the New Critics. There are many other fine poems, in the less finished Hawk in the Rain, the depressed Wodwo, and in the poems written after Gaudete. Crow is a brilliant, flawed tour de force, Gaudete a scarcely mitigated miscalculation, not unconnected with Hughes’s mania. It would be very surprising if Hughes did not surprise us again, with a masterpiece, in spite of the astounding disasters of his poet-laureate poems.

Hughes is on a big psychic adventure, and it is impossible not to respond to the excitement this generates. It is a traditional symptom of “genius” to fail, sometimes in the bulk of the work, in “taste,” through what Lawrence called “whole-hoggedness.” If Hughes’s sinkings seem partly the ebullition of genius, partly intellectual vulgarity, partly an intermittent coarsening of a wounded and exquisite sensibility, partly a limitation of the spirit, his work is never insipid or tedious.