

An Interview with Ted Hughes¹

The following interview took place on 10th May 1970 in the Hampstead flat of the poet's sister where I had first met Ted Hughes early this year. What was then planned as a short half-hour talk grew into a discussion of several hours at the end of which we agreed to meet again and tape our conversation.

During the interview Hughes sat opposite me by the window, his eyes usually fixed on the carpet, apparently undisturbed by music coming from an adjacent room. His replies to my questions had something of the quality of spoken thought and on occasion I felt as if I were overhearing some internal dialogue that might have continued whether I were there or not.

Ted Hughes later asked me to delete many brilliant and interesting passages of the original tape-recording, mainly, I assume, to avoid sending his critics, as Eliot did, "off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail".

Egbert Faas

Critics have often described your poetry as the "poetry of violence". Obviously such a label overlooks the wide philosophical issues even of your earliest work, which according to your own words is inspired by the "war between vitality and death . . . and celebrates the exploits of the warriors on either side". But how does such poetry relate to our customary system of social and humanitarian values and to what degree can it be considered as a criticism of these values? . . . Probably this is two questions in one.

Hughes: The role of this word "violence" in modern criticism is very tricky and not always easy to follow. I wonder if it's used in other countries. Do American critics use it? It's hard to imagine how the distinction can be made, outside recent English poetry.

One common use of it I fancy occurs where the reviewer type of critic is thinking of his audience . . . his English audience. When my Aunt calls my verse "horrible and violent" I know what she means. Because I know what style of life and outlook she is defending. And I know she is representative of huge numbers of people in England. What she has is an idea of what poetry ought

1 First published in *London Magazine*, January 1971, under the title "Ted Hughes and Crow"; reprinted with the permission of Mr Hughes and with acknowledgement to Egbert Faas and *London Magazine*.

to be . . . a very vague idea, since it's based on an almost total ignorance of what poetry has been written. She has an instinct for a kind of poetry that will confirm the values of her way of life. She finds it in the milder parts of Wordsworth if she needs supporting evidence. In a sense, critics who find my poetry violent are in her world, and they are safeguarding her way of life. So to define their use of the word violence any further, you have to work out just why her way of life should find the behaviour of a hawk "horrible" or any reference to violent death "disgusting", just as she finds any reference to extreme vehemence of life "frightening somehow". It's a futile quarrel really. It's the same one that Shakespeare found the fable for in his *Venus and Adonis*. Shakespeare spent his life trying to prove that Adonis was right, the rational sceptic, the man of puritan good order. It put him through the tragedies before he decided that the quarrel could not be kept up honestly. Since then the difficult task of any poet in English has been to locate the force which Shakespeare called Venus in his first poems and Sycorax in his last.

Poetry only records these movements in the general life . . . it doesn't instigate them. The presence of the great goddess of the primaevial world, which Catholic countries have managed to retain in the figure of Mary, is precisely what England seems to have lacked, since the Civil War . . . where negotiations were finally broken off. Is Mary violent? Yet Venus in Shakespeare's poem, if one reads between the lines, eventually murdered Adonis . . . she murdered him because he rejected her. He was so desensitized, stupefied and brutalized by his rational scepticism, he didn't know what to make of her. He thought she was an ethical peril. He was a sort of modern critic in the larval phase . . . a modern English critic. A typical modern Englishman. What he calls violence is a very particular thing. In ordinary criticism it seems to be confused a lot with another type of violence which is the ordinary violence of our psychotic democracy . . . our materialist, non-organic democracy which is trying to stand up with a bookish theory instead of a skeleton. Every society has its dream that has to be dreamed, and if we go by what appears on TV, the perpetual tortures and executions there, and the spectacle of the whole population, not just a few neurotic intellectuals but the whole mass of the people, slumped every night in front of their sets . . . in attitudes of total disengagement, a sort of anaesthetized unconcern . . . watching their dream reeled off in front of them, if that's the dream of our society, then we haven't created a society but a hell. The stuff of pulp fiction supports the idea. We are

dreaming a perpetual massacre. And when that leaks up with its characteristic whiff of emptiness and meaninglessness, that smell of psychosis which is very easy to detect, when it leaks up into what ought to be morally responsible art . . . then the critics pounce, and convert it to evidence in a sociological study. And of course it does belong to a sociological study.

On the other hand it's very hard to see where that type of violence becomes something else . . . a greater kind of violence, the violence of the great works. If one were to answer that exam question: Who are the poets of violence? you wouldn't get far if you began with Thom Gunn . . . and not merely because his subject is far more surely gentleness. No, you'd have to begin with Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, etc., author of Job, the various epics, the Tains, the Beowulfs, Dante, Shakespeare, Blake. When is violence "violence" and when is it great poetry? Can the critic distinguish? I would say that most critics cannot distinguish. The critic whose outlook is based on a rational scepticism is simply incapable of seeing Venus from any point of view but that of Adonis. He cannot distinguish between fears for his own mental security and the actions of the Universe redressing a disturbed balance. Or trying to. In other words, he is incapable of judging poetry . . . because poetry is nothing if not that, the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error. What he can do is judge works and deeds of rational scepticism within a closed society that agrees on the terms used. He can tell you why a poem is bad as a work of rational scepticism, but he cannot tell why it is good as a poem. A poem might be good as both, but it need not be. Violence that begins in an unhappy home can go one way to produce a meaningless little nightmare of murder, etc. for TV or it can go the other way and produce those moments in Beethoven.

You probably know that there has been a whole controversy between Rawson and Hainworth as to whether or not you celebrate violence for its own sake . . .

Hughes: I think I've probably already answered that. The poem of mine usually cited for violence is the one about the Hawk Roosting, this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist . . . the symbol of some horrible totalitarian genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in mind was that in this hawk Nature is thinking. Simply Nature. It's not so simple maybe because Nature is no longer so simple. I intended some Creator like the Jehovah in Job but more femi-

SYDNEY STUDIES

nine. When Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature . . . and Nature became the devil. He doesn't sound like Isis, mother of the gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from Job.

As in the case of "Hawk Roosting" your two poems about Jaguars are often interpreted as celebrations of violence.

Hughes: I prefer to think of them as first, descriptions of a jaguar, second . . . invocations of the Goddess, third . . . invocations of a jaguar-like body of elemental force, demonic force.

It is my belief that symbols of this sort work. And the more concrete and electrically-charged and fully operational the symbol, the more powerfully it works on any mind that meets it. The way it works depends on that mind . . . on the nature of that mind. I'm not at all sure how much direction, how much of a desirable aim and moral trajectory you can fix on to a symbol by associated paraphernalia. A jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects . . . he is a beautiful, powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is a supercharged piece of cosmic machinery, he is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation, he is an ancient symbol of Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power, he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon . . . a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy.

The symbol opens all these things . . . it is the reader's own nature that selects. The tradition is, that energy of this sort once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one. In a perfectly cultured society one imagines that jaguar-like elementals would be invoked only by self-disciplinarians of a very advanced grade. I am not one and I'm sure few readers are, so maybe in our corrupt condition we have to regard poems about jaguars as ethically dangerous. Poems about jaguars, that is, which do have real summoning force. Lots of people might consider I'm overrating the powers of those two poems, but I'm speaking from my own evidence. I wrote another jaguarish poem called "Gog". That actually started as a description of the German assault through the Ardennes and it turned into the dragon in Revelations. It alarmed me so much I wrote a poem about the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control . . . keeping its effects under control.

What you say about "Gog" and "The Knight" reminds me of a similar problem Blake may have had to go through with "Tiger, tiger burning bright".

Hughes: Blake's great poem "Tiger, tiger" is an example, I think, of a symbol of this potentially dangerous type which arrives with its own control—it is yoked with the Lamb, and both draw the Creator. Yeats's poem about the Second Coming is very close—and the control there is in the direction given to the symbol in the last line—"towards Bethlehem". Not so much a control as a warning, an ironic pointer—but fixing the symbol in context.

Behind Blake's poem is the upsurge that produced the French Revolution, the explosion against the oppressive crust of the monarchies. Behind Yeats's poem is the upsurge that is still producing our modern chaos—the explosion against civilization itself, the oppressive deadness of civilization, the spiritless materialism of it, the stupidity of it. Both poets reach the same way for control—but the symbol itself is unqualified, it is an irruption, from the deeper resources, of enraged energy—energy that for some reason or other has become enraged.

From what I gather, the solution to this whole problem of violence, as you see it, seems to lie in some form of new mythology.

Hughes: Any form of violence—any form of vehement activity—invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the contact has been made—it becomes difficult to control. Something from beyond ordinary human activity enters. When the wise men know how to create rituals and dogma, the energy can be contained. When the old rituals and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed, the energy cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive—and that is the position with us. And that is why force of any kind frightens our rationalist, humanist style of outlook. In the old world God and divine power were invoked at any cost—life seemed worthless without them. In the present world we dare not invoke them—we wouldn't know how to use them or stop them destroying us. We have settled for the minimum practical energy and illumination—anything bigger introduces problems, the demons get hold of it. That is the psychological stupidity, the ineptitude, of the rigidly rationalist outlook—it's a form of hubris, and we're paying the traditional price. If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? To accept the energy, and find

SYDNEY STUDIES

methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control—rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one.

You not only find yourself in opposition to some of your critics but also to most of the New Lines poets who write very much from the same point of view, dealing almost exclusively with life in our civilization. And although Robert Conquest included four of your poems in New Lines II he did so only after having rejected the poetry of violence in the introduction.

Hughes: I haven't read that introduction so I'm not sure what he'd mean by the poetry of violence. One of the things those poets had in common I think was the post-war mood of having had enough . . . enough rhetoric, enough overweening push of any kind, enough of the dark gods, enough of the id, enough of the angelic powers and the heroic efforts to make new worlds. They'd seen it all turn into death camps and atomic bombs. All they wanted was to get back into civvies and get home to the wife and kids and for the rest of their lives not a thing was going to interfere with a nice cigarette and a nice view of the park. The second war after all was a colossal negative revelation. In a sense it meant they recoiled to some essential English strengths. But it set them dead against negotiation with anything outside the cosiest arrangement of society. They wanted it cosy. It was an heroic position. They were like eskimos in their igloo, with a difference. They'd had enough sleeping out. Now I came a bit later. I hadn't had enough. I was all for opening negotiations with whatever happened to be out there. It's just as with the hawk. Where I conjured up a jaguar, they smelt a stormtrooper. Where I saw elementals and forces of Nature they saw motorcyclists with machine guns on the handlebars. At least that was a tendency.

From the very beginning of your poetic career you have been considered an outsider. And although this has changed in recent years mainly through your already far-ranging influence on other poets, you still don't fall into what Robert Conquest would consider the mainstream of the English poetic tradition. Now what is your attitude towards this tradition which you once referred to as "the terrible, suffocating, maternal octopus of ancient English poetic tradition"?

Hughes: I imagine I wouldn't have said that if I hadn't burdened myself with a good deal of it. I should think my idea of the mainstream is pretty close to Robert Conquest's. What I meant by the octopus was the terrific magnetic power of the tradition to grip

poets and hold them. Helped by our infatuation with our English past in general. The archetypes are always there waiting . . . swashbuckling Elizabethan, earthy bawdy Merrie Englander, devastatingly witty Restoration blade and so on. And some of the great poets are such powerful magnetic fields they remake us in their own image before we're aware. Shakespeare in particular of course.

As you suggested in our previous interview you try to escape this influence by drawing on your own native dialect and its mediaeval literature. From Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, for example, you derived the title and motto of Wodwo.

Hughes: I grew up in West Yorkshire. They have a very distinctive dialect there. Whatever other speech you grow into, presumably your dialect stays alive in a sort of inner freedom, a separate little self. It makes some things more difficult . . . since it's your childhood self there inside the dialect and that is possibly your real self or the core of it. Some things it makes easier. Without it, I doubt if I would ever have written verse. And in the case of the West Yorkshire dialect, of course, it connects you directly and in your most intimate self to Middle English poetry.

The main poets who are mentioned in the criticism of your poetry are Hopkins, Donne, Dylan Thomas and D. H. Lawrence. Would you agree that these poets exerted the greatest influence on your work? Also what is your relation to Yeats and Blake whose work and development seems to show an increasing resemblance to your own poetry and especially to your development from a poet of nature to a "sophisticated philosopher" and a "primitive gnomie spellmaker"?

Hughes: Well, in the way of influences I imagine everything goes into the stew. But to be specific about those names. Donne . . . I once learned as many of his poems as I could and I greatly admired his satires and epistles. More than his lyrics even. As for Thomas, *Deaths and Entrances* was a holy book with me for quite a time when it first came out. Lawrence I read entire in my teens . . . except for all but a few of the poems. His writings coloured a whole period of my life. Blake I connect inwardly to Beethoven, and if I could dig to the bottom of my strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces. Yeats spellbound me for about six years. I got to him not so much through his verse as through his other interests, folklore, and magic in particular. Then that strange atmosphere laid hold of me. I fancy if there is a jury

SYDNEY STUDIES

of critics sitting over what I write, and I imagine every writer has something of the sort, then Yeats is the judge. There are all sorts of things I could well do but because of him and principles I absorbed from him I cannot. They are principles that I've found confirmed in other sources . . . but he stamped them into me. But these are just the names you mentioned. There are others. One poet I have read more than any of these is Chaucer. And the poet I read more than all other literature put together is Shakespeare. More than all other fiction or drama or poetry that is.

In one of your essays you speak of Shakespeare's utility general-purpose style. I think it is in one of your essays on Keith Douglas.

Hughes: Maybe that's an ideal notion, and yet maybe not. It's connected to the dream of an ideal vernacular. I suppose Shakespeare does have it. I remember the point in *Lear* where I suddenly recognized this. It was very early in my reading, we were going through *Lear* in school and *Lear* as you know is the most extraordinary jumble of styles. I can't remember what I thought of Shakespeare before that, but at one particular mutilated and mistaken-looking phrase I suddenly recognized what Shakespearean language was . . . it was not super-difficult language at all . . . it was super-easy. It wasn't a super-processed super-removed super-arcane language like Milton . . . it was super-crude. It was backyard improvisation. It was dialect taken to the limit. That was it . . . it was inspired dialect. The whole crush and cramming throwaway expressiveness of it was right at the heart of it dialect. So immediately I felt he was much closer to me than to all those scholars and commentators at the bottom of the page who I assumed hadn't grown up in some dialect. It enabled me to see all sorts of virtues in him. I saw all his knotted up complexities and piled up obscurities suddenly as nothing of the sort . . . they were just the result of his taking short cuts through walls and ceilings and floors. He goes direct from centre to centre but you never see him on the stairs or the corridors. It's a sort of inspired idleness. Wherever he turns his attention, his whole body rematerializes at that point. It's as if he were too idle to be anything but utterly direct, and utterly simple. And too idle to stop everything happening at the speed of light. So those knots of complexity are traffic jams of what are really utterly simple confrontations. His poetic virtue is hitting the nail on the head and he eventually became so expert that by hitting one nail he made fifty others jump in of their own accord. Wherever a nail exists he can hit it on the head.

When did you first get interested in poetry?

Hughes: When I was about fifteen. My first subjects were Zulus and the Wild West. I had sagas of involved warfare among African tribes, for some reason. All in imitation of Kipling.

From what you're saying, I gather that the influence of Hopkins, Thomas and Lawrence is not really as great as often claimed.

Hughes: I read Lawrence and Thomas at an impressionable age. I also read Hopkins very closely. But there are superficial influences that show and deep influences that maybe are not so visible. It's a mystery how a writer's imagination is influenced and altered. Up to the age of twenty-five I read no contemporary poetry whatsoever except Eliot, Thomas and some Auden. Then I read a Penguin of American poets that came out in about 1955 and that started me writing. After writing nothing for about six years. The poems that set me off were odd pieces by Shapiro, Lowell, Merwin, Wilbur and Crowe Ransom. Crowe Ransom was the one who gave me a model I felt I could use. He helped me get my words into focus. That put me into production. But this whole business of influences is mysterious. Sometimes it's just a few words that open up a whole prospect. They may occur anywhere. Then again the influences that really count are most likely not literary at all. Maybe it would be best of all to have no influences. Impossible of course. But what good are they as a rule? You spend a lifetime learning how to write verse when it's been clear from your earliest days that the greatest poetry in English is in the prose of the Bible. And after all the campaigns to make it new you're stuck with the fact that some of the Scots ballads still cut a deeper groove than anything written in the last forty years. Influences just seem to make it more and more unlikely that a poet will write what he alone could write.

In fact there is an increasing use of mythological and Biblical material in your poetry, in particular since Wodwo. T. S. Eliot once described the use of myth in James Joyce's Ulysses (and indirectly in his own Waste Land) as a means of "manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity . . . [and as] a way of controlling, or ordering, or giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history". How does your own use of mythological and Biblical material differ from this?

Hughes: He speaks specifically of contemporary history which was his own red herring I imagine. Somewhere else he speaks of *The*

SYDNEY STUDIES

Waste Land as the chart of his own condition, and of history, if at all, just by extension and parallel.

But you speak about the disintegration of Western civilization as well. Might not T. S. Eliot have attempted something similar?

Hughes: I can't believe that he took the disintegration of Western civilization as a theme which he then found imagery and a general plan for. His sickness told him the cause. Surely that was it. He cleaned his wounds and found all the shrapnel. Every writer if he develops at all develops either outwards into society and history, using wider and more material of that sort, or he develops inwards into imagination and beyond that into spirit, using perhaps no more external material than before and maybe even less but deepening it and making it operate in the many different inner dimensions until it opens up perhaps the religious or holy basis of the whole thing. Or he can develop both ways simultaneously. Developing inwardly, of course, means organizing the inner world or at least searching out the patterns there and that is a mythology. It may be an original mythology. Or you may uncover the Cross—as Eliot did. The ideal aspect of Yeats's development is that he managed to develop his poetry both outwardly into history and the common imagery of everyday life at the same time as he developed it inwardly in a sort of close parallel . . . so that he could speak of both simultaneously. His mythology is history, pretty well, and his history is as he said "the story of a soul".

So, when you use Biblical and mythological material, these really represent, as it were, the aim in themselves, and are not merely a kind of device as in Eliot to give order, as he says, to something else?

Hughes: You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed. At the end of the ritual up comes a goblin. Anyway within a week the whole thing has changed, one needs a fresh bulletin. And works go dead, fishing has to be abandoned, the shoal has moved on. While we struggle with a fragmentary Orestes some complete Bacchae moves past too deep down to hear. We get news of it later . . . too late. In the end, one's poems are ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another.

*May we for a moment come back to *The Waste Land* and its difference from *Wodwo*, the main theme of which you described to me as a "descent into destruction of some sort". Even in *Wodwo*,*

anticipating Crow, you seem to go beyond portraying the disintegration of our Western civilization.

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

Which writers are you referring to? Are you thinking of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche whose thought seems to show a striking resemblance to yours?

Hughes: The only philosophy I have ever really read was Schopenhauer. He impressed me all right. You see very well where Nietzsche got his Dionysus. It was a genuine vision of something on its way back to the surface. The rough beast in Yeats's poems. Each nation sees it through different spectacles.

Like Schopenhauer you had to look towards the east in quest of a new philosophy. When did you first read the Tibetan Book of the Dead?

Hughes: I can't say I ever quested deliberately for a philosophy. Whatever scrappy knowledge of Indian and Chinese philosophy and religious writings I have picked up on the way . . . tied up with the mythology and the folklore which was what I was mainly interested in. And it's the sort of thing you absorb out of pure curiosity. The *Bardo Thodol*, that's the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, was a special case. In 1960 I had met the Chinese composer Chou Wen-chung in the States, and he invited me to do a libretto of this thing. He had the most wonderful plans for the musical results. Gigantic orchestra, massed choirs, projected illuminated mandalas, soul-dancers and the rest.

Did you ever write this libretto?

Hughes: Yes, I rewrote it a good deal. I don't think I ever came near what was needed. I got to know the *Bardo Thodol* pretty well. Unfortunately the hoped-for cash evaporated, we lost contact for about nine years, and now of course we've lost the whole idea to the psychedelics. We had no idea we were riding the Zeitgeist

so closely. We had one or two other schemes . . . and maybe we'll do them some day.

The Bardo Thodol must have brought you a confirmation of many ideas which are already latent in your earliest work, even in The Hawk in the Rain. How far and in which way can one speak of its influence on Crow? An expression like "womb door" seems to be lifted straight out of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, and besides such obvious direct parallels one could easily point to several more general metaphorical, thematic, and philosophical resemblances.

Hughes: From one point of view, the *Bardo Thodol* is basically a shamanistic flight and return. Tibetan Buddhism was enormously influenced by Tibetan primitive shamanism. And in fact the special weirdness and power of all things Tibetan in occult and magical circles springs direct from the shamanism, not the Buddhism.

What exactly is Shamanism?

Hughes: Basically, it's the whole procedure and practice of becoming and performing as a witch-doctor, a medicine man, among primitive peoples. The individual is summoned by certain dreams. The same dreams all over the world. A spirit summons him . . . usually an animal or a woman. If he refuses, he dies . . . or somebody near him dies. If he accepts, he then prepares himself for the job . . . it may take years. Usually he apprentices himself to some other Shaman, but the spirit may well teach him direct. Once fully-fledged he can enter trance at will and go to the spirit world . . . he goes to get something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs. Now this flight to the spirit world he experiences as a dream . . . and that dream is the basis of the hero story. It is the same basic outline pretty well all over the world, same events, same figures, same situations. It is the skeleton of thousands of folktales and myths. And of many narrative poems. The *Odyssey*, the *Divine Comedy*, *Faust*, etc. Most narrative poems recount only those other dreams . . . the dream of the call. Poets usually refuse the call. How are they to accept it? How can a poet become a medicine man and fly to the source and come back and heal or pronounce oracles? Everything among us is against it. The American healer and prophet Edgar Cayce is an example of one man who dreamed the dreams and accepted the task, who was not a poet. He described the dreams and the flight. And of course he returned with the goods.

In comparison with Wodwo which, appropriate to its theme, has a kind of open form, your new volume has a much denser and more coherent structure. First of all, the poems seem to inter-connect on the basis of fairly coherent "apocryphal" narrative, as you have called it, in which you turn the Biblical account of the creation, of the fall of man and the crucifixion, etc. upside down. This narrative is quite easy to reconstruct from the poems themselves. But last time you told me a long story mainly concerning Crow himself which is only partly reflected in the sequence.

Hughes: The story is not really relevant to the poems as they stand. Maybe I'll finish the story some day and publish it separately. I think the poems have a life a little aside from it. The story brought me to the poems, and it was of course the story of Crow, created by God's nightmare's attempt to improve on man.

Parts of this story already appear in "Logos". You told me in our last conversation that the imagery in Crow forced itself upon you and that writing the poems had been like putting yourself through a process. Do you feel that this process has come to a kind of completion or do you think that you will enlarge further upon your new mythological system?

Hughes: In a way I think I projected too far into the future. I'd like to get the rest of it. But maybe it will all take a different form.

One of the unifying devices in Crow, it seems to me, is the recurrence of particular themes. Especially complex is your symbolic use of the notions of Laughter, Smiling and Grinning. To each of these notions you also devoted one entire poem, in which Laughter, Smile and Grin appear as vividly realized personifications or allegories. Now would you agree that these three notions stand for an acceptance of suffering and evil and that they also express your attitude towards the absurd, which, however, is radically different from Beckett's?

Hughes: I'm not quite sure what they signify.

Another recurrent motif is Crow eating in the face of adversity, in the face of suffering, violence, etc., or I remember Crow sitting under the leaves "weeping till he began to laugh", weeping being another recurrent motif which here fuses with the notion of laughter.

Hughes: Most of them appeared as I wrote them. They were usually something of a shock to write. Mostly they wrote themselves quite rapidly, the story was a sort of machine that assembled

SYDNEY STUDIES

them, and several of them that seem ordinary enough now arrived with a sense of having done something . . . tabu. It's easy enough to give interpretations I think and draw possibilities out of them but whether they'd be the real explanations I don't know.

So in your poem about Laughter you don't seem to have had Samuel Beckett and his notion of the absurd in mind?

Hughes: No.

You have referred to Beckett's notion of the absurd in your article on Vasko Popa, where you describe Vasko Popa's world as absurd but different from Beckett's because Vasko Popa, as you say, has the "simple animal courage of accepting the odds".

Hughes: Popa, and several other writers one can think of, have in a way cut their losses and cut the whole hopelessness of that civilization off, have somehow managed to invest their hopes in something deeper than what you lose if civilization disappears completely and in a way it's obviously a pervasive and deep feeling that civilization has now disappeared completely. If it's still here 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 some thing that will not vanish. And this is a shifting of your foundation to completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse.

I just remember that in Crow the first and second creation seem to be separated by a nuclear blast which you describe or hint at for example in "Crow Alights", the following poem and "Notes for a Little Play". Perhaps this is pinning it down too much chronologically. But there seems to be this notion of a nuclear blast separating the two worlds.

Hughes: 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.

Do you think that what you said about Vasco Popa applies to Francis Bacon?

Hughes: Yes, and I like Francis Bacon very much. He's very much in both worlds. A complicated case. Because in a way like Eliot and Beckett he's suffering the disintegration, isn't he? Yet one doesn't at all have a feeling of desolation, emptiness, or hopelessness.

You seem to use less and less formal devices such as rhyme, metre and stanza which to some extent occur in your earlier poetry. Do you feel that these devices are generally inadequate in modern poetry or that they just don't suit what you personally want to say?

Hughes: I use them here and there. I think it's true that formal patterning of the actual movement of verse somehow includes a mathematical and a musically deeper world than free verse can easily hope to enter. It's a mystery why it should do so. But it only works of course if the language is totally alive and pure and if the writer has a perfectly pure grasp of his real feeling . . . and the very sound of metre calls up the ghosts of the past and it is difficult to sing one's own tune against that choir. It is easier to speak a language that raises no ghosts.

Which poems in Crow do you like best?

Hughes: The first idea of *Crow* was really an idea of a style. In folktales the prince going on the adventure comes to the stable full of beautiful horses and he needs a horse for the next stage and the King's daughter advises him to take none of the beautiful horses that he'll be offered but to choose the dirty, scabby little foal. You see, I throw out the eagles and choose the Crow. The idea was originally just to write his songs, the songs that a Crow would sing. In other words, songs with no music whatsoever, in a super-simple and a super-ugly language which would in a way shed everything except just what he wanted to say without any other consideration, and that's the basis of the style of the whole thing. I get near it in a few poems. There I really begin to get what I was after.