

The Evolution of 'The Dove Came'.

The way poetry is usually taught, artificially detaching the poem from the poet and from the whole creative process, encourages a belief that, as milk comes from bottles, so poems come from books. The complex and fascinating process by which they came into being and got into the books is totally ignored.

Though, as Hughes says, 'the poem can emerge of a sudden, complete and perfect, unalterable, taking the poet completely by surprise, as if he had no idea where it came from', there is wide-spread belief, particularly among the young, that this is how all poems are written, or should be written. Hughes would be the first to attest to the rarity of this experience. And even when it does happen, the poet more often than not does alter it. However, some poets have encouraged the growth of a mystique about how poetic inspiration works. There is Coleridge's suggestion in 'Kubla Khan' and its preface that once the poet has fed on honey-dew and drunk the milk of Paradise (marketed as laudanum in his day), even such complex poems as this will write themselves 'instantly', though a knock on the door is enough to break the spell. Elsewhere, Coleridge stated more temperately that the poem had been composed 'in a sort of reverie', which could be said of any poem. In fact, if a new Coleridge notebook turned up, it should not surprise us to find in it twenty drafts of 'Kubla Khan'.

Though Dylan Thomas himself to some extent also fostered the myth of unpremeditated art, the fine frenzy, critics should not have been as surprised as they were when the notebooks came to light after his death, revealing draft after draft transforming a poem beyond recognition. He laboured night after night at his craft or sullen art to produce the impression of 'spindrift pages'. He wrote to Henry Treece:

A poem by myself needs a host of images, because its centre is a host of images. I make one image, - though 'make' is not the word; I let, perhaps, an image be made emotionally in me and then apply to it what intellectual & critical forces I possess - let it breed another, let that image contradict the first, make, of the third image bred out of the other two together, a fourth contradictory image, and let them all, within any imposed formal limits, conflict. Each image holds within it the seed of its own destruction, and my dialectical method, as I understand it, is a constant building up and breaking down of the images that come out of the central seed, which is itself destructive and constructive at the same time.

But what I want to try to explain - and it's necessarily vague to me - is that the life in any poem of mine cannot move concentrically round a central image; the life must come out of the centre; an image must be born and die in another; and any sequence of my images must be a sequence of creations, recreations, destructions, contradictions.... Out of the inevitable conflict of images - inevitable, because of the creative, recreative, destructive and contradictory nature of the motivating centre, the womb of war - I try to make that momentary peace which is a poem. I do not want a poem of mine to be, nor can it be, a circular piece of experience placed nearly outside the living stream of time from which it came; a poem of mine is, or should be, a watertight section of the stream that is flowing all ways; all warring images within it should be reconciled for that small stop of time.

Reading back over that, I agree it looks preciously like nonsense. To say that I 'let' images breed and conflict is to deny my critical part in the business.

(Ferris (ed.), *Collected Letters* (Macmillan, 1985), p. 2812)

Hughes related this method to Thomas's larger purposes:

Every poem is an attempt to sign up the whole heavenly vision, from one point of vantage or other, in a static constellation of verbal prisms. It is this fixed intent, and not a rhetorical inflation of ordinary ideas, that gives his language its exaltation and reach.

(Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, p. 182)

Hughes had, at the very outset of his career, described his own method in very similar terms, when he spoke of 'the living and individual element in every poet's work':

What I mean is the way he brings to Peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions onto the battleground of that first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented - the poem is finished.

(Faas, p. 163).

Though the language here ('formal and balanced a figure of melody') is influenced by the New Critics, and not the way Hughes would have expressed himself later, it describes adequately enough the method of an early poem such as 'The Thought-Fox'. It is clearly a time-consuming, paper-consuming process. Yet many young (and not-so-young) readers of 'The Thought-Fox' take literally the

implication that such a poem could be written, without blotting a word, in the time it takes for the fox to cross the clearing, and with the poet having as little part in the business as the narrator who simply lets the fox enter his head and his fingers move automatically over the blank page. Many of Hughes's detractors write as though they believed all his poems to be instantaneous, automatic, lacking the application of his intellectual and critical forces - a hotchpotch of archetypes plundered from the myth-kitty. Seeds of poems and bits of poems do frequently come this spontaneous way, but an examination of Hughes's manuscripts reveals the protracted labour usually required to bring a poem from its first draft to its very different published text.

There is, in this respect, no such thing as a typical Hughes poem. Each poem has its unique kind of evolution. The number of drafts can vary from one to twenty or thirty. A poem can remain essentially the same through all its drafts, or can be transformed beyond recognition. Most of a poem can be there from the start, or only the merest hint. It is almost as common for a poem to grow shorter through its drafts as longer; or it can grow long and then short again. It can come full circle and end where it began. (The poet has here the advantage over the painter or sculptor: if he decides that his first thoughts were best, they are not lost.)

My choice of poem is almost random, since I am restricted to those few poems I happen to have access to in all their drafts. I have chosen from *Adam and The Sacred Nine* (written late 1975) 'The Dove Came', which is fairly typical of Hughes's moderately complex medium-length poems using theriomorphic imagery.¹

When Hughes chose the order of the sections in *Moortown* - first the farming poems, then the Prometheus sequence, then Earth-Numb and finally the Adam sequence, he intended that the whole book, like *Wodwo*, should constitute a 'single adventure', a progress from earth-bound suffering, through numbness to rebirth. So the Prometheus and Adam poems, as it were, bracket a very important phase of Hughes' career as he emerged from the horrors of *Crow* and the numbness of Prometheus into the painful and raw affirmations of Adam. *Adam and the Sacred Nine* is part of a larger process

¹ The final version can be found in *Moortown, New Selected Poems* (1982), *Collected Animal Poems* (vol.4), and *Collected Poems*.

(which also includes *Cave Birds* and *Gaudete*) of reconstituting and resacralizing both the self and the world.

The manuscripts of 'The Dove Came' consist of thirteen A4 pages, eight holograph and five typescript, two of these with holograph revision. With one exception (where there are two drafts of the opening) each page carries the whole poem. I have numbered thirteen drafts, but these do not correspond to the thirteen pages, since some of the holograph pages have two drafts, the original (not always wholly recoverable) and the interlinear, marginal and superimposed revision (not always decipherable either), and some of the typescripts are merely fair copies. The published version constitutes a fourteenth, since it does not exactly correspond with the final manuscript. The drafts are undated, and there is no certainty that I have arranged them in the correct order.

Introducing a reading of several of the Adam poems on radio, Hughes said:

All the creatures of the world come to him, telling him to pull himself together and get moving, but he just lies there, getting limper and limper. At last his creator can't stand it any longer, and so he sends down nine divine birds, to become his guardian, exemplary spirits. They are actually just ordinary birds, except for one, which is a Phoenix.

The dove he described simply as 'a gentle dove, forcing herself through all the opposition'.

The dove, strangely (given its crucial importance in the sequence), was not one of the nine as Hughes first conceived the story, but replaced the kingfisher ('who sews the worlds together').

Each bird brings Adam a particularly clear example of a quality he will require if he is ever to achieve his full manhood. Each quality derives partly from the ornithological character of the species (Just ordinary birds'), partly from the character each bird has acquired in myth and folklore, which is not unrelated, since each bird which has acquired mythological status has done so at least in part by virtue of the observable characteristics of ordinary birds. There is no necessary distinction between 'ordinary' and 'divine'. And in *What is the Truth?*, after the farmer has described pigeons as pests fit for nothing but pigeon pie, the vicar comments: 'The holiest bird of all! What an end!' (p.58).

Doves are unique in being the only birds to feed their young on milk, a high-protein fluid called crop-milk. Since this can be produced at almost any time of year, they have no breeding season and raise several broods throughout the year. They copulate frequently

and openly and were therefore thought to be lecherous and fertile. (The association with sexual love is built into our language with 'love-dovey', 'bill and coo' etc.) Presumably for this reason, the dove became sacred to the great goddesses Ishtar, Venus and Isis. The softness, warmth and milkiness of the dove's breast and its caressing call suggest all that is feminine, loving, maternal, protective. This aspect allowed its sacredness to be carried over into Judaic and Christian symbolism, where the dove symbolizes the Holy Spirit. In *Genesis*, the dove was the first creature to find land after the Flood, and is thereby closely associated with God's renewed covenant with mankind, symbolised by the rainbow, (reflected in its prismatic plumage). In the Gospels the Spirit of God descends on Christ 'like a dove, and lighting upon him' when he is baptised by John the Baptist (Matthew 3: 16). The Holy Ghost is traditionally pictured as a dove. For Hopkins the dove symbolised the perpetual daily renewal of the world: 'Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings'. In both Christian and alchemical iconography the soul itself is frequently pictured as a dove. Proverbially, the dove symbolises meekness and faithfulness. Nineteenth-century sentimental Christianity gave its qualities to Christ himself - 'gentle Jesus meek and mild'. The association with martyrdom and sacrifice is strengthened by our modern experience of the dove as living target, the extermination of the passenger-pigeon, the slaughter of wood-pigeons, of which *The Birdlife of Britain* says 'everyman's hand seems to be against them'.

By far the most important non-ornithological source for Hughes is Blake. Both *Prometheus on His Crag* and *Adam and the Sacred Nine* were first published by Olwyn Hughes's Rainbow Press, the emblem of which was Blake's illustration to Bryant depicting moon-arc, dove and rainbow. Both books, like most of Hughes's sequences of the 1970s, are reworkings of material which largely defeated Blake - attempts to find a simpler, more dramatic, more coherent, more poetic myth to embody the process by which Albion/Adam, fallen into the sleep of single vision, is gradually and painfully dismantled, reconstituted, and awakened into the fourfold vision of Adam Kadmon, and reunited with his lost bride. Blake's defeated Albion is Hughes's Prometheus on his crag: 'Albion cold lays on his Rock.../ Over them the famish'd Eagle screams on boney Wings' (*Jerusalem* 94). In the third Prometheus poem Prometheus' shout shatters 'a world of holy, happy notions', symbolised by birds: 'The dove's bubble of fluorescence burst'. For Blake the dove symbolises Albion's lost emanation, his

threefold vision of innocence. Only Los, the poet, retains a vision of Jerusalem descending from heaven as a dove, and as a bride adorned for her husband Albion:

I see thy Form, O lovely mild Jerusalem, Wing'd with Six Wings
In the opacous Bosom of the Sleeper, lovely Three-fold
In Head & Heart & Reins, three Universes of love & beauty.
Thy forehead bright, Holiness to the Lord, with Gates of pearl
Reflects Eternity; beneath, thy azure wings of feathery down
Ribb'd delicate & cloth'd with feather'd gold & azure & purple,
From thy white shoulders shadowing purity in holiness!
Thence, feather'd with soft crimson of the ruby, bright as fire,
Spreading into the azure, Wings which like a canopy
Bends over thy immortal
Head in which Eternity dwells.
I see the New Jerusalem descending out of Heaven,
Between thy Wings of gold & silver, feather'd, immortal,
Clear as the rainbow, as the cloud of the Sun's tabernacle.

(Jerusalem 86)

All these sources, and no doubt more esoteric ones, are available for Hughes to draw on, consciously or unconsciously, as he begins his poem. Through the drafts we can see the original images attracting others, falling away, undergoing manifold transformations, as Hughes struggles to let the dove force herself through all the opposition, most of which comes from Adam (Hughes, Everyman, reader) himself.

Here is my attempt to recover the first draft:

THE DOVE

Is the bubble the violet
A breast of quiet lightning
A thunder of softness, care
And endearment, plundered by gods

Arched wings
A gateway of watchfulness
Where the world plays
With a child

When they plucked her
The stars floated off, and became unending [?].
They roasted her
Then they disembowelled her
Their mouths smoked.
Her liver became an oracle.

Her flesh still [?]
[?] cave of slaughter.
Her heart spoke,
An oracle
Of loving words

Her heart became his tongue.

He stood, drenched in her blood
And hardening in the light.

Still her words were his strength.

The first thing that strikes us is that not a line, not even a phrase, of this first draft survives into the published poem. Yet it is clearly the same poem. All the drafts, though they play many variations with the phrasing, begin with the dove's breast, its bulbous shape and its distinctive colouring. All the drafts retain the imagery of thunder and lightning, suggested, presumably, by the similar colour of thunderclouds, the soft rumble of the voice, and the flash and clap of wings. Thunder and lightning also traditionally announce some intervention of the gods (usually angry, but in this case gentle) in human affairs. There is perhaps even a faint echo of the cosmic energies Frankenstein draws down to galvanise his inert monster, which then, all unknowing, kills an innocent child. The core of the poem, from the beginning, is the opposition between the imperative to love in the descending spirit, and the imperative to kill in the material world in which it is obliged to try to incarnate itself. How can man, who is flesh little differentiated from mud, receive the bubble-delicate fluorescence of what the dove brings? The middle part of the poem throughout deals with the killing, disembowelling and eating of the dove, followed by the transformation of the dove's heart into the man's tongue. This alchemical transformation has something in common with such pictures as the Boehme etching, known to Blake, of fallen man awakening when a dove descends, pierces his breast, and enters or becomes his heart and also with those depictions of the soul leaving the body of a saint or martyr at death in the form of a dove emerging from the mouth.

The word 'bubble' is retained, in various combinations, through the first eight drafts. It is the right shape for a plump breast, has rainbow colours, is extremely fragile, and, moreover, exactly mimes the sound of a dove. But it has to be let go at last, probably because a bubble can only be knocked down once, if at all, does

not bleed, and cannot be eaten, cannot force its way through anything, cannot live in the same world as thorns. The whole point about the dove's breast is that it is simultaneously substantial flesh and blood and insubstantial rainbow, both vulnerable and indestructible. The bubble falls between.

'Violet' comes and goes, but is finally retained in the splendid description of the dove's 'voice of thunder' as 'A piling heaven of silver and violet'. 'Violet' is soft, but potentially violent, is closer than 'blue' (the alternative in draft 4) to the actual colour of thunder clouds, and, being at the upper limit of human colour-vision, suggests, perhaps, that boundary between the seen and the unseen, the worlds of body and of spirit, where most of the events of these poems take place. Hughes continues for nine drafts to spell out the meaning of the dove's thunder as softness, care (later caresses), and endearments, but finds at last that these abstractions are redundant.

The next section also remains, little changed, until the tenth draft, when it disappears altogether. At the first revision it had become:

Arched wings
A gateway of watchfulness
And lilac shadow
Where a child plays with the world in the dust.

The dove is here presented as the guardian of a Blakean world of childish innocence. Though the word 'rainbow' does not appear until the fourth draft, the idea of the rainbow, symbolising harmony and unfallen vision, must have been in Hughes's mind from the beginning. Blake's vision of childhood seems to blend with Lawrence's. When, in *The Rainbow*, Tom and Lydia Brangwen came together in perfect marriage, Tom knew 'that she was the gateway and the way out'. They created a rainbow arch of security for their child: 'Her father and her mother now met to the span of the heavens, and she, the child, was free to play in the space beneath, between.'

In Hughes's first draft, the dove is killed by anonymous adults. It comes as a shock to find that after the first revision, she is killed by the child. In the next draft we are told that he does so 'in childish unknowing', and in the fourth 'In childish dreaminess/He disembowels her/Looking for life'. This is the authentic Hughes world, where innocence is inseparable from slaughter. The childish, larval wotwo asks: 'Why do I find/this frog so interesting as I inspect its most secret/interior and make it my own?'

Draft 4 is already beginning to look like a finished poem, but evidently not the poem Hughes wanted to write:

The bubble-blue dove
Brings from heaven
Abreast of sleepy rainbows - the dove's lightning.
An air-stirring softness, caresses
And endearments. This is the dove's thunder.

Arched wings
A gateway of watchfulness
and lilac shadow
Where a child plays with the world in the dust
Soon he grows
He knocks her down, and he plucks her alive
The stars float off
Hardening and sharpening to enmity.

In childish dreaminess
He disembowels her
Looking for life.
His mouth smokes open
A cavern of hot slaughter
With her heart speaking inside it
A deathless oracle
Loving words to the child

Her heart is his tongue. His listening begins.

Though he stands drenched in her blood from head to foot
And hardening among stars
Her words are his strength.

This is the dove's milk.

The hardening of the stars and then the child suggests not only a loss of innocence, but also a process of individuation, like something lifted from the flux, the forge, and cooling into its definitive form.

It seems that only when the child is drenched in the dove's blood from head to foot can he stand, come into his strength, and speak the word 'love'. There are many accounts of pagan rituals where the worshippers are drenched in the blood of a sacrificial animal. Here is Frazer's account of an Attis rite:

A bull, adorned with garlands of flowers, its forehead glittering with gold leaf, was driven onto the grating and there stabbed to death with a consecrated spear. Its hot reeking blood poured in

He disembowelled her, seeking the voice.
His mouth smoked open, tears ran from the saliva ducts.

A cave of hot slaughter.
Inside, the heart, a glory
Went on speaking.
Loving words, a deathless oracle.

The heart named him. The heart
Had become his tongue moving
Thickly and powerfully. His mouth closed.
Dipped in fear, as in her blood, he emerged

And stood in air,
Hardening among stars.
He spoke. And her words were his strength.
This was the dove's milk.

The opening has moved forward a little, with its scattering twigs and piling clouds. The gateway of arched wings, hitherto the most consistent part of the poem, has gone. But the surprising change here is the sudden introduction of the wolf-child, mentioned in no other draft. By a wolf-child are we to understand a child suckled by wolves? If so, the imperative to worship love only would clash even more strongly with 'natural logic' than in a normal child. Yet the normality of the child had seemed essential to the earlier versions. We could, of course, question why there needs to be a child in the poem at all, since the dove is supposed to be visiting Adam, who never was a child. Blake seems to have smuggled the child in, and Hughes has been stuck with him, the poles of his poem having become murderous natural male innocence and sacrificial supernatural (or spiritualised) female innocence.

It is also surprising that the poem has made so little progress in ten drafts. In fact it seems to have lost a good deal of its original energy. 'Kindly' is inert. The dove's lightning and thunders have been reduced to purely descriptive metaphors. The dove loses in reality by having words put into its mouth. 'As in her blood' again reduces to an inert simile what had been a potent and literal drenching. The regular form of the poem seems to have tamed and diluted it. Nearly all the lines are now end-stopped, so there is no tension in the lineation, no momentum, no drama. The poem does not bear comparison with any of the other bird poems in the sequence. But draft 11 throws out the child altogether, with much other dross, and the poem leaps forward almost to its final state.

THE DOVE CAME

Her breast full of rainbows
She was struck down

The dove came, her wings clapped lightnings
That scattered like twigs
She was struck down

The dove came, her thunder
Piled like summer clouds and soft violet
She was struck down

She came with the flesh of her breast
She was eaten

She came with her blood richer than rubies
She was drunk

The dove came again, a blinding
Ear could no longer hear

Mouth was a disembowelled bird
Where the tongue tried to move, like a heart

The dove alit
In the body of thorn
Deep in the body of thorns
The dove of soft thunder
Nested her thunder.

This sudden coming clear may indicate some missing intermediate drafts, but in the absence of any evidence of that, we must assume that the advance is the result of two drastic decisions, to make the whole poem about the dove (in line with the other eight bird poems), and to allow the Christian analogue to become a much more central determinant.

By putting the striking down of the dove in the passive and by having her struck down three times, Hughes suggests much more strongly that it is the fate of the dove to be struck down (as it was Christ's to be crucified) rather than any unusual cruelty in those who struck her down. The eating of the dove's flesh and drinking of her blood echoes the last supper:

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament,

which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

(Matthew 26:26-E)

Yet the lines are not exclusively Christian, for they also echo the myths and folk-songs of the eating of fertility gods, such as Hughes draws on in 'The Golden Boy':

With terrible steel
 They beat his bones from him
With terrible steel
 They ground him to powder
They baked him in ovens
 The sliced him on tables
They ate him they ate him
 They ate him they ate him

And that apparent atrocity is actually the gift of life.

In the typescript the dove is 'big with rainbows', gravid with blessings, tokens of the covenant between man and God. The dove alights, and nests, as doves do, in a dense thorn-bush, there to hatch no longer thunders but rainbows. The 'body of thorns' again suggests the crown of thorns which was the humble and painful token of the glory of Christ in his agony. Christ the king fisher of men sews the worlds together on the cross. The rainbow, reconciling the opposites of sun and rain, symbolises that, or any other, atonement.

The dove is no legless bird of transcendence. She is spirit incarnate. Her voice is also the soft thunder of a beating heart. Noah's dove was sent to find the landfall which would signify God's atonement with man. On her first flight 'the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot'. It is no coincidence that the final poem of the Adam sequence is called 'The Sole of a Foot'. Here Adam is at last erect and reconciled to his earth-bound status. His foot says to the world-rock

I am no wing
To tread emptiness.
I was made

For you.

The purpose of all these drafts and revisions was not to subject the material to 'craftsmanship', nor even, primarily, to produce 'as formal and balanced figure of melody and rhythm', which in many of the poems of this period would be totally inappropriate'. It is a matter of throwing out all that can be thrown out, leaving only that which imperiously proves itself, the simplicity on the far side of

complexity, the essential.

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