

Plate P. The first step of the *Leukosis*: the Peacock rises from the black solution of nigredo. An eighteenth century manuscript. From Jung, C.G. *Psychology and Alchemy*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1980.

VI
STAGE II
THE LEUKOSIS

Putrefaction extends and continues even unto whiteness.

(1).

The processes of 'Mortification' and 'Putrefaction' are accomplished, by the practical Alchemist, in a hermetically sealed flask called a 'Bottle of Hermes', or a 'Philosophers' Egg'. This flask is symbolically womb-shaped, or heart-shaped, and it is heated in an oven called the 'Athanor', which, as Burckhardt notes,

as far as the 'Great Work' [is] concerned - [is] none other than the human body, and thus also a simplified image of the cosmos.

(2).

During this careful heating, a flux occurs and, in the hermetic flask, "One can watch the vapour rising up the neck of the flask and condensing down the sides"(3) until the "dry blackness" of the *nigredo* supervenes.

The second stage of the alchemical synthesis, known as the *Leukosis*, now begins. Further careful heating of the black mixture causes rapidly changing colours to appear in the flask, a state descriptively known as "The Peacock's Tail"(4)(Plate P). Next, the colours subside and the flask may look as if it is entirely covered with gold, but this fades and eventually a state of perfect, dazzling, whiteness "like...glittering marble"(5) obtains. This state, the *Albedo*, marks the end of the *Leukosis*.

Symbolically, the progressive purification and mixing of elements within an enclosed vessel represents the union of male and female principles within the cosmic womb, from which the pure Spirit will be born. The metaphors

used by Alchemists for this stage, therefore, frequently describe the return of the physical and spiritual elements of the body to Mother Earth for re-creation.

The *Leukosis*, in *Cave Birds*, covers the poems from 'The accused', to 'A flayed crow in the hall of judgment'. The protagonist's body and soul are stripped of every last vestige of his earlier state, he acknowledges and relinquishes his masks and illusions, and reaches, at last, a state of ultimate nakedness and humility. Committing his body to the earth, he comes to the gate of the Underworld where he awaits released from his dark, hermetic, egg in order to begin the next stage of his journey.

As well as using metaphors of death and rebirth, Alchemists describe the union of opposites and the re-creation of primal spiritual matter in terms conjugation, insemination, fertilization, gestation, and birth. Arnold de Villa Nova's commentary is typical:

...when the blackness appears then the marriage or the matrimonie is made betwixt the male and the female, and then begotten is the spirit which is the dilator of the [path (?)] of the soule through the body.

(6).

Despite these earthy analogies, the first alchemical stages represent Man's initial steps along the spiritual path. Symbolically, they tell of an inner journey in which the soul is examined and purged of its profane and temporal attachments - a journey which is frequently likened to a descent into the Underworld(7). The motive force and the guide for this spiritual journey is the divine spirit within Man, which the Alchemists identify with Mercury. So, having begun the process of transmutation, Mercury now appears in alchemical texts as the "metallic volatile himidity[sic] which is Mercury the wise"(8), the guide who will accompany the pilgrim on this difficult path. This stage in *Cave Birds* is marked by the re-appearance of the accused as the "bedaubed, begauded Eagle-dancer", whose mercurial temperament and "Peacock's Tail" colours make his

embodiment of Mercury apparent, even if the protagonist's inner "wisdom" has yet to be heeded.

Mercury dominates the *Leukosis*. Its silver-white, lunar light is initially tempered by the quicksilver volatility and colours of the 'Peacock's Tail'. Ultimately, however, it becomes 'fixed' in the dry, white, bones of the skeleton, which is all that remains of the physical body when the profane and temporal elements have been relinquished.

Just as the Mercurial spirit enjoys only a brief period of freedom before an intensification of heat dries, coagulates, and then sublimates it to a "supreme grade of whiteness"(9), so the *Cave Birds* cockerel protagonist soon submits himself to the sun's annealing fires. A transformation from cockerel to crow begins(10), and in 'The knight' we see the slow disintegration of the bird's body until only the white bones of the "Death Stone Bird"(ED) remain.

Alchemical texts, at this stage, talk of "bones on a brilliant white field"(11); "a crystalline stone"(12); "glittering marble"(13); "Our Stone"(14); and a "white tincture", "elixir", "virgin's milk", and "White Queen"(15). The form of the matter varies from one text to another, but Canon 95 of Benedictus Figulus expresses a common consensus:

Matter when brought to Whiteness, refuses to be corrupted or destroyed.

(16).

Thus, whiteness can be seen to indicate the presence of a substance which has "acquired sufficient strength to resist the ardours of fire"(17); a substance which can be tempered by the literal, spiritual and metaphorical fires to which it must still be subjected before the true alchemical 'Gold' can be revealed. The exposed white bones of the *Cave Birds* knight suggest that Hughes' protagonist has reached this stage.

'The accused'

'Socrates' Cock'(B)

A12. B11.

'A Tumbled Socratic Cock'(18).

The physical life of the cockerel is offered up to the Creator, the Sun-being, who, in the aspect of Judgment, is a Raven(A).

Having been confronted so forcefully with evidence of his guilt, and having been offered a form of atonement by the vulture, the protagonist's view of himself begins to change. He has reached the stage which was designated by Blake as 'Jehovah', the sixth eye of God, the perception of evil. Blake's Job at this stage recognises his sins with horror, and his body is shown as if on a stone altar surrounded by flames as his "wrought image"(Plate 11) is consumed. Hughes' protagonist, too, acknowledges and confesses his sins, heaping them up to be consumed "on a flame-horned mountain-stone" in the furnace of the sun.

Each part of the cockerel's "mudded" body has some "blood aberration" from which it must be cleansed. His brain is "the sacred assassin" which has sought to destroy the elements of enlightenment within him by rational argument (he is, after all, a "Socratic cock"(19)). The "gripful of daggers", which is his body, has physically driven him to compromise his own integrity and satisfy his desires at the expense of others. His skin and plumage, like that of the "bedaubed, begauded eagle-dancer" who impersonates the supernatural Eagle in Pueblo Indian rituals(20), has bolstered his delusions of grandeur and allowed him to strut and crow in a decaying world - to be "lord of the midden".

The appetites of his body, he confesses, have ruled him: his heart, stuffed with selfhood instead of love; his stomach demanding that he play god with living things to feed it; and his "hard life-lust", the phallic "swan of insemination", driving him to "blind" satisfaction of his needs.

My bones are pierced in me in the
right season & my sinews
take no rest

My skin is black upon me
& my bones are burned
with heat

The triumphing of the wicked
is short, the joy of the hypocrite is
but for a moment
Satan himself is transformed into an Angel of Light & his Ministers into Ministers of Righteousness



With Dreams upon my bed thou scarest me & allrightest me
with Visions

Why do you persecute me as God & are not satisfied with my flesh. Oh that my words
were printed in a Book that they were graven with an iron pen & lead in the rock for ever
For I know that my Redeemer liveth & that he shall stand in the latter days upon
the Earth & after my skin destroy thou This body yet in my flesh shall I see God
whom I shall see for Myself and mine eyes shall behold & not Another the consumed be
Who opposeth & exalteth himself above all that is called God or is Worshipped

WBlake invent & sculp

London, Published as the Act directs March 8 1805 by Will Blake N 3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Plate 11. From William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, (1825).

Mention of the swan of insemination brings to mind the mythological story of Zeus and Leda, and each confession suggests the god-like powers - all of them destructive - which the protagonist has arrogated to himself. He has been a "despot", a "corpse-eating god", and a "sacred assassin".

His confession completed, the protagonist commits his body (which is also the symbol of his pride) to the cleansing fires of the gods he has so profanely imitated. He becomes "Socrates' cock" of Hughes' alternative title, the traditional sacrifice which the dying Socrates acknowledged that he owed to Aeschulapius, son of Apollo and god of healing, medicine, and resurrection of the dead(21). Thus Hughes' protagonist makes of himself a sacrificial offering to ensure his own re-birth in the afterlife, and at the same time the impurities of "his mudded body" are burned away to leave the natural "ore" from which the spiritual gold will be made.

In Baskin's drawing the cockerel is tumbled but still crowing. His gaudy tail curls towards his body like the tongues of flame to which he will soon consign himself.

The destruction of the corporeal body in the sun's purifying flames will reveal the true colours of the protagonist: beneath the profane mask is the rainbowed essence of his soul. Suggesting this, Hughes ends his poem with biblical images of hope and blessing.

'First, the doubtful charts of skin'

A13. B12.

(So) Sentenced, and swallowed by the Raven, the protagonist finds himself on a journey which leads him not to death (to extinction), but to the start of a new adventure(A).

In this poem, the rituals of a shamanic journey are strongly present in the inner journey which the protagonist makes and which Hughes presents as a literal excursion through the physical body. Beginning with an awareness of his skin against the hard rocks, the protagonist moves on to an awareness of limbs, intestines and veins, his skull and, finally, his bones.

This progressively deeper exploration of the body is a process which Eliade describes as essential in Shamanic rites; a process known as "contemplating one's own skeleton"(22). To describe it Eliade quotes the explorer, Rasmussen, who had "interrogated" many Eskimo shamans:

Though no shaman can explain to himself how or why, he can,...as it were by thought alone, divest his body of its flesh and blood, so that nothing remains but his bones. And he must then name all the parts of his body, mentioning every single bone by name; and in so doing, he must not use ordinary human speech, but only the special and sacred shaman's language which he has learned from his instructor. By thus seeing himself naked, altogether freed from the perishable and transient flesh and blood, he consecrates himself, in the sacred tongue of the shamans, to his great task, through that part of his body which will longest withstand the action of the sun, wind and weather, after he is dead.

(23).

Eliade further comments that "reduction to the skeleton indicates a passing beyond the profane human condition and, hence, a deliverance from it": that for hunters and herdsmen, for example,

bone represents the very source of life....To reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth.

(24).

Hughes' protagonist does not name every bone in his body, but he does name each part of his body in Hughes' own shaman/poet's tongue until he

comes to "loose bones". Hughes' "sacred shaman's language" is his poetic voice, and an integral part of this is his use of mythology to enlarge the imaginative scope of his words.

In this poem, Hughes draws on events and situations which are common to the many mythological hero stories which he believes recount shamanic journeys(25). In particular, the story of Odysseus is evoked.

Like Odysseus, the protagonist's predicament has been caused by the anger of the gods. Each hero, too, has been in the power of the goddess, Athena/Diana, who has acted as both protector and tormentor. In the *Odyssey*, it is Athena who sends the messenger Hermes/Mercury to arrange Odysseus' freedom and homecoming, yet she allows delays in his journey which cause him much suffering. In *Cave Birds*, the female principle in Nature (the Goddess/Diana) is responsible for the protagonist's summons, trial, and sentence, but she is also his protector.

Like Odysseus (and like most of humanity) the protagonist's early journeying through life has contained "irrelevant marvels" and "much boredom". Now, however, powerful god-like forces have caused him to be wrecked: he has, as it were, been stripped of his pretensions and brought (in colloquial terms) 'down to earth' - an earth which he experiences directly as sharp and rocky.

The "wet cave" of the intestines which gives Hughes' protagonist "pause", also finds parallels in the several caves in which Odysseus was detained before his homecoming: the cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemos, was one temporary prison; that of the nymph, Kalypso, another.

Hughes' next image of the protagonist, "hung" in a "web of veins", has no parallel in the *Odyssey*. It recalls, instead, the spiders-web image of the earlier poem, 'The Judge', but it suggests, also, that Hughes had in mind a Baskin

woodcut called 'The Hanged Man'. This is a work which Hughes considers to be central to the meaning of Baskin's artistic endeavours, and he has written about it in at least two commentaries on Baskin's art(26). Most recently, Hughes described the work as depicting "the archetype victim of the Mother Earth Goddess...as a Death Goddess", so it is understandable that it may have been in his mind as he worked on *Cave Birds*. In his woodcut, Baskin delineates the hanged man's body by the web of veins and nerves within it so that the figure seems literally to hang in this network which both supports life and limits it. The suggestion is of the paradox of the physical constraints on Man's potential; the biological reality which defines the human condition; the combination of beauty and horror which is Man. Hughes' commentary on this figure describes it as symbolising one pole of the regenerative theme which underlies all Baskin's art (as it does his own). This is a point which will be examined later, but the relevance of 'The Hanged Man' here is that Hughes writes of it:

...this figure insists it is a Prometheus, a Job. And if it could speak, or more likely sing, we would hear the full balanced chord of epic.

(27).

It is, in other words, another form of the epic hero who makes the shamanic journey.

Having suffered the initiatory torments of the hanged man/Prometheus/Job, Hughes' protagonist moves on. Like Odysseus, he visits the "islands of women" (there seems to be no bodily analogy for this); and the land of the dead which, for him, is represented by his skull - a hill-shaped bone container for his visions and his mental battles. Finally, he comes to his skeleton - "loose bones on a heathery moor".

The parallel with Homer's *Odyssey*, however, is not complete, for whereas Odysseus journeys in the geographical environment of the

Mediterranean, the *Cave Birds* hero remains in a Celtic world. The earth on which his bones come to rest is part of a Northern, Celtic landscape of windy moors, heather, decaying churches and ancient standing stones. It is a landscape very like that of Hughes' own Yorkshire background - the landscape which Fay Godwin's photographs capture in *Remains of Elmet*.

In the imagery of the poem, especially from line 11 onwards, there are echoes of Norse and Celtic epic myths and legends. The skull-hill of visions hints at gruesome Viking practices and suggests, also, the prophetic skull of the Celtic god, Bran, which was buried in the White Hill of Britain(28). The valley of screams, too, is like the perilous valley where the chapel of doom is found in the Grail legends(29), and, as if to reinforce this, there is the echo of Eliot's '*The Waste Land*':

...the grass is singing
Over the tumbled graves, about the chapel
There is the empty chapel, only the wind's home.
It has no windows, and the door swings,
Dry bones can harm no one.

(30).

This landscape is one of desolation and death, but, in Hughes' own vivid picture, the wild horses standing among the graves bring a breath of life and energy to temper the bleakness. And the leaning menhir, on which the protagonist finds his name and epitaph, adds a magical significance to the stone and bone which are all that will soon remain of the former man. Here, having completed the examination of his own skeleton, the protagonist is ready to return his body to the earth.

Sketched into the dark background of the Baskin etching for which this poem was written is a figure which seems to combine the sun and the moon. It is as if these celestial bodies have been re-united and returned to earth's primaeval darkness, just as the elements of Mercury and Sulphur are continually

purified in an alchemical synthesis(31) and returned to the solution. The bird itself, the protagonist, is entering that same darkness. Its head and neck are already skeletal but its body, which is still in the light, is still feathered. Around the bird's skull is a wreath of evergreen laurel, symbol of immortality and fecundity, and sacred to Diana and to Apollo(32).

'The knight'

'Death Stone Bird'(ED).

'A Death Stone Crow of Carrions' (Scolar Press Edition).

A14. B13.

'The Stone of Death'(33).

(There) He is no longer (anything) a cockerel (about him). Possession by Raven has transformed him to something crow-like, for (t)his new trials in the underworld.

As a knight (a warrior) he dedicates himself to whatever shall be required (of him in this afterlife)(A).

The various titles of this poem continue the imagery of the previous episode in the drama. Now, the stone and bone which are the essential elements of the protagonist are seen as elements of the grail knight whose quest embodies the paradoxes of the mystical journey. To conquer he must surrender everything, physical and mental, and his victory will be his own defeat. In order to be re-born he first must die, submitting himself totally to the supreme universal powers and relinquishing all selfhood and striving. With infinite patience and infinite acceptance, he must enter what Eliot described as

...the world of perpetual solitude,
World not world, but that which is not world,
Internal darkness, deprivation
And destitution of all property,
Desiccation of the world of sense,
Evacuation of the world of fancy,
Inoperancy of the world of spirit;

(34).

He must enter the grave, returning himself to Nature, which was his mother, that he may be re-created.

The knight's sacrifice is "perfect". The "spoils" which he has gained from Nature he returns. On the altar of earth he exposes his body to the elements, and the insects, like Nature's priests, "officiate" at the ritual dismemberment.

All around the knight there is movement as Nature partakes of the sacrifice, squabbling over his body, tugging, drinking and unravelling it. Yet, in contrast, the slow, measured, lines which describe his kneeling, his offering, his "perfect" sacrifice, his "flawless" submission, and his "vast" patience, impart a religious solemnity to the poem.

The knight's Earthly religion, too, "crumbles" and disintegrates. His ragged banner, the standard which proclaims his allegiance, is his own disintegrating body; and in the chapel of his skull, where the sacred texts of his self-worship have been learned, stored, and glorified, his dead eyes set to a bold stare. With a characteristic intertwining of metaphoric and literal meaning, Hughes combines the imagery of chivalric self-sacrifice with a realistic description of the slow physical processes of death and dissolution.

Baskin's drawing shows the bird - the knight - as completely skeletal. The "blades" of his wingbones, the "shafts" of his leg-bones, and the "unstrung bows" of his ribs are "wrapped in the rags of his banner". He is now totally immersed in darkness. In an early version of Hughes' poem this same darkness was present when (using the personal pronoun) he wrote:

Now I learn everything, I become everything

But alone, in emptiness of stone, temple of sandgrains, ruined and abandoned
An evolving twilight, a total sea of stars...

(ED).

The published version, however, ends with the knight's bones hardening and whitening in the glare of sunlight. Hughes' final image captures, with beautiful precision, the sun's strength, its persistence through time, and its powers of "revelation". The final couplet suggests not only that the white bones (the alchemical symbol of the *albedo*) will be fully revealed, but also that some further, more metaphysical, disclosure is to come. So, "hour by hour", the expectancy grows.

'Something was happening'

A15.

Whilst the (protagonist) hero undergoes his vigil, a helper begins to work for him, calling on the Eagles(A).

This poem appears in the 'A' sequence and also in the Faber publication. It was read at the Ilkley Festival, and it was included in the BBC broadcast. Despite this, it was one of the last poems to be added to the sequence and, as Sagar comments, most of these later poems seem to be "quite outside the bird-drama"(35).

The poem represents one of Hughes' projections of the *Cave Birds* story in to the "human world". Positioned as it is, however, directly after the scene of the hero's complete submission to Nature, it does not fit into the established pattern of events. It depicts a still unresolved alienation between the human male and female of Hughes' "parallel story"(36), and this reversion to a state of affairs which existed earlier in the sequence but which has, on the bird-drama level, just been resolved, is confusing. So, too, is the fact that now it is the female who is sacrificed, thus reversing the situation described in 'The knight' where the female element - Earth - endures.

In this poem the "anaesthetised"(37), unfeeling state of the human male is again apparent. It is demonstrated in the contrast between the man's trivial actions and the horrifying death of the woman: he saunters and munches whilst she suffers and burns. Because the man and the woman and their contrasting situations are linked so closely in the poem, the man's heartless complacency seems unforgivable. There is, however, a suggestion of helplessness in his thoughts. When, "in April", the green hints of Nature's revival appear, he is dismayed. He seems to foresee the repetition of a cycle of events which he cannot control and which, like the annual cycle of Nature, entails death. Whilst his own world of inanimate objects "registers nothing", the world of Nature, "the earth", rejects him totally.

The man's helplessness and his feelings of guilty involvement in the woman's death emerge more strongly in earlier versions of the poem. In one, he thinks "about Hamlet/looking at Ophelia's corpse", as if he feels himself to be similarly constrained by circumstances to deny his feelings, thereby causing the woman's death. In another, everything around him seems to reflect "the laughter of the gods"(ED).

In this human male/human female story, the relevance of the final image in the poem is unclear. The "eagle-hunter" would seem, from Hughes' introductory note, to be the man's "helper". Possibly he is intended to be a guide like those which accompany a shaman through the underworld, but this does not emerge from the poem. Whoever he is, his song apparently exerts power over the eagle-gods which torment the protagonist. He sings, however, "Two, three, four thousand years off key", a time span which may represent the period of Man's existence on earth, or the lapse of time since Nature dominated religion and, thus, the length of time during which man and woman have become alienated from the natural energies.

Baskin's drawing for this poem offers no further illumination of its puzzles. His soaring eagle, with its huge and vicious claws, seems poised to stoop on its prey.

'The gatekeeper'

'A Double Osprey'(Scolar Press).

'A Sphynx. A Two Headed One'(B).

'Death's Doorkeeper'(ED).

'The Signpost Eagle'(ED).

A16. B14.

'Death's Doorway Guard'(38).

The eagles have agreed to weight[sic] him in their balance(A).

In almost all mythologies, at the interface between life and death, heaven and hell, there stands an enigmatic creature which represents a union of opposites. Invariably this creature sets the journeyer some test which must be passed before he continues on his way.

The gatekeeper of Hughes' *Cave Birds* drama is another such creature. It is a "sphynx", a double creature combining human and animal features, female and male. It is "two-headed" like the door god 'Janus', who is etymologically identified with Diana, the Great Goddess(39). This linking of a god and goddess of light is suggested, also, in Baskin's bird, whose shadowy head and mixture of feathers appear to combine both the eagle and the owl which are the birds of Janus and Diana respectively. Such a suggested combination of features is more apparent if the picture is compared with that accompanying 'The Green Mother' later in the poem sequence.

The variety of titles for this poem reflect the several very different versions of the poem which exist. One early draft deals solely with the nature of

'Death's Doorkeeper' who combines "the two in one....The death of darkness and the death of brightness"; "the left hand and the right hand"; "unbeing" and "everbeing". In every version, however, the protagonist is presented with a choice which "is no choice"(ED); a paradoxical situation in which his fate has already been determined by his own nature. This is the traditional, initiatory, "paradoxical passage" to heaven which Eliade describes(40). It is a passage which can only be negotiated successfully by one who has already been well prepared and who "has transcended the human condition": "by one who is spirit"(41).

The *Cave Birds* hero is now to be judged, weighed in the balance like the Egyptian dead, to see if his soul is pure enough to enter the world of the gods. It is a terrifying experience, and the published versions of this poem concentrate on the protagonist's reactions, his "sweatings and grinnings", his "fear" and his "remorse". In describing the protagonist, Hughes again chooses images of terror which are also those of death and decomposition, thus reiterating the analogy between spiritual trials and physical death which he has made in the previous poems. Such reiteration parallels the repetitions of the alchemical process, but, in addition, the blunt and ugly words ("sweatings", "oozing", "blurting", "orifice") and the grossness of the imagery in this poem create a mood of ugliness and terror which contrasts sharply with the calm, the solemnity and the beauty that Hughes created in 'The knight'. Through such repetition and contrast Hughes emphasises Man's physical/spiritual duality.

One draft version of the poem, which concentrated on the protagonist's dilemma, was less realistically evocative and more consistent with the solemnity of mood Hughes had established in 'The knight'. In it, Hughes made an interesting identification between the protagonist and the eagle. It reads, in part,:

And the terror is the revelation
Of yourself for what you are: too late, too late, too late.

The terror: too late (to) remake its path
And promises are futile.

Your history
Here your own history, like an eagle,
Picks up you body's (? *illegible*)

Picks you up.

(ED).

Here, there is no doubt about the protagonist's responsibility for his own situation and his own fate. The published version, however, whilst conveying the protagonist's feelings more dramatically, suggests that he is still the pawn of eagle-gods who can "...drop you in the bog or carry you to eagles".

The marked differences between the several versions of this poem demonstrate Hughes' efforts to present his complex theme on two levels, one of which embodies common (but extremely esoteric) spiritual beliefs, whilst the other sets out to tell a comparatively simple story. In 'The gatekeeper', as published in the Faber edition, the poem succeeds on the story-telling level but it creates some problems of consistency in the spiritual order of events. In contrast, Hughes' next poem combines both levels with grace and beauty.

'A flayed crow in the hall of judgment'

'A (Jonah) Flayed Crow'(Scolar Press).

'The Hall of Judgment'(Scolar Press).

'Waiting for the 1st Judgment'(ED).

A17. B15.

'Awaiting Judgment in the Afterlife'(42).

They allow him a new chance in their world(A).

In this poem, for the first time in the *Cave Birds* sequence, the alchemical imagery predominates. The protagonist describes himself in terms of matter which is being continuously distilled and condensed: he floats "as mist-balls float, and as stars"; and he is condensed into "a globe of blot, a drop of unbeing", "a distillation in which [he] no longer finds anything recognisable"(ED). His body has dissolved, and from this primordial mixture of elements he is being re-created. The pun in Hughes' phrase, "this yoke of afterlife", suggests the generative, yolk-like, nature of the mixture within which the protagonist exists like "the self of some spore". Yet, his choice of 'yoke', rather than 'yolk', defines well the involuntary participation of the protagonist in the process: it prompts, too, the idea of a burden, the awesome and paradoxical nature of which is embodied in the protagonist's description of the great weight which rests on him "as a feather on a hand". Rising, falling, and floating, like an embryo inside an egg, like a foetus in a womb¹, he waits for his future with total acceptance, only wondering what this future will be:

What feathers shall I have? What is my weakness for?

His questions are Wodwo-like, but his humility is perfect. Soul-naked, he offers the very skin of his soul as "a mat" for his judges.

¹Jonah inside the whale is also suggested by one alternative title

Baskin's drawing shows the embryo crow within the "white of death blackness" which is the egg. His feathers are undefined, and he is bowed beneath the frail but tough white of the egg-shell which protects and restrains him, resting on him just as the "great fear" rests feather-like on Hughes' protagonist: it contains and delineates his world as Baskin's line does this picture.

In Hughes' poem, the re-creation of the protagonist is presented as an alchemical process and no mention is made of any controlling creative force. The suggestion of some infinitely terrifying, yet infinitely gentle power, however, is contained in Hughes' simile:

A great fear rests
On the thing I am, as a feather on a hand.

Such a paradoxical situation finds an interesting parallel in Blake's illustrations for the story of Job (Plate 14), which, like Hughes' poem, deals with a re-creation or genesis. Blake pictures Job, his wife and his friends, enclosed in an egg-shaped cavern on which God, the supreme being of infinite wrath and love, kneels. God is the creator. In cloud-shells beneath His outstretched arms are His creations of light, Apollo and Diana(43), the sun and the moon. Surrounding the picture are egg-shaped miniatures depicting texts from *Genesis*. This whole plate illustrates, as does Baskin's drawing and Hughes' poem, the hero's spiritual re-creation, and the beginning of the period of gestation which precedes re-birth. It is a fine example, too, of the similarity of ideas and imagery used by all three artists in their treatment of this theme of spiritual enlightenment.



London. Published by the Act done's March 8. 1825 by Will. Blake N.3 Fountain Court Strand

Proof

Plate 14. From William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, (1825).

VII

STAGE III

SOLUTION AND DISTILLATION: SULPHUR

The alchemical procedures undertaken so far have achieved the reunification of *prima materia* with the element Earth. In order to recreate the perfect unity of matter the mixture must now be washed with cleansing and revivifying Water, then Fire and Air must be added.

Water is essential at this stage for, as Ripley explained:

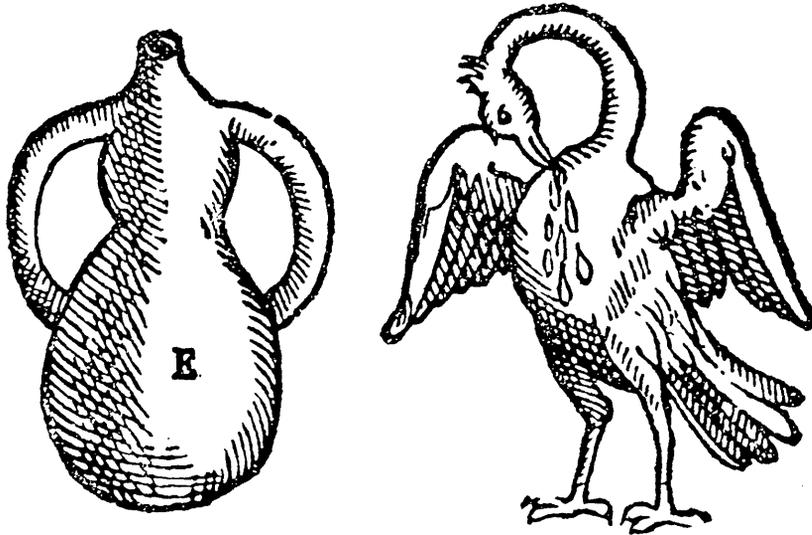
Without thine earth with water revived be
Our true congelation shalt thou never see.

(1).

After the stages of death and dissolution, it is water which "things mortified causith to revive"(2).

Using a specially shaped retort called a 'Pelican', the Alchemist now adds "Our Water"(3) (which may have been any one of a number of different solvents) to the dry mixture and commences a slow process of circulation, distillation and sublimation.

The Pelican retort has metaphorical, as well as practical, significance, being known to Alchemists as a vessel of transformation. It was named for its shape, which resembles that of a pelican pecking its breast, and the significance of this supposed resemblance lay in the ancient belief that the female pelican feeds her young with her own blood, reviving them after killing them.



The Pelican: Alchemist's vessel and symbolic bird. From Porta, *De Distillationibus*, (1608)

This particular belief had, also, a spiritual interpretation which would make it of particular relevance to the alchemical process at this point. This is apparent from the version of the myth quoted by Jung in *Mysterium Coniunctionis*:

For it is said that the pelican so loves her young that she puts them to death with her claws. But on the third day for grief, she wounds herself, and letting the blood from her body drip upon the fledglings she raises them from the dead. The pelican signifies the Lord who so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son whom on the third day he raised up, victor over death, and exalted above every name.

(MC.13f).

The washing procedures which take place in the pelican retort are, therefore, ones of physical and spiritual rejuvenation and purification. In the metaphors by which the Alchemists describe their work, "Our Water" is "divine rain"(4) or "celestial dew"(5) which moistens the mixture and causes germination and growth. It is also written of as "baptismal water" which washes away the last profane impurities from the nascent soul(MC.III:5).

With regard to the essential involvement of Mercury and Sulphur throughout any alchemical process, the washing procedure is held to demonstrate the healing side of Mercury's dual nature (MC.13). The substance which is healed is Sulphur. Whilst Stage II, the stage of *Leucosis*, deals with the perfection of Mercury or the "White Female", the whole of this third stage of the transformation deals with the perfection of Sulphur or the "Red Male"(6).

In *Cave Birds*, 'The baptist' parallels the initial washing operations of the third alchemical stage, and one of Hughes' alternative titles for the poem is 'A Pelican'('B' sequence). The protagonist, at this stage, is re-created, but not yet re-born. In common with descriptions of the mixture found in alchemical allegories, his situation is likened to that of an embryo being nourished within its shell, or a foetus within the womb(7).

Hughes' protagonist now undergoes a period of trials and tests, just as the alchemical mixture is now subjected to repeated purifying sublimation within the flask to prepare it for the final stage of the whole process. Like the soul wandering in the Bardo, he meets a number of manifestations which offer him different kinds of rebirth into different "heavens".

The imagery of the poems from 'The baptist' to 'After there was nothing' moves between Heaven and Earth, but it is predominantly Earthbound. In this respect it parallels the sequence of events which occurs in repeated sublimation, where solids separate from the body of the mixture rise upwards and are precipitated on the walls of the flask before falling back into the mixture. The Alchemists frequently describe this process in terms of the spirit ascending and falling back, being digested, and having its poisons "spued out"(8). Hughes' notes to the two poems which were published in the Faber edition as, 'A riddle', and, 'The scapegoat', describe a similar purifying digestion: the "Monkey-Eating Eagle" "marries" its own substance to that of the protagonist, thus creating a

confusion of identities ("Just as you are my father/I am your bride"('A riddle'CB.44)) from which the cockerel scapegoat is "driven out"(ED).

The protagonist's lack of singularity is expressed again in Hughes' notes for 'After there was nothing', and 'His legs ran about':

'AFTER THERE WAS NOTHING'

At moments it seems as if he were increasingly human, but somehow as if unborn, as if he were in the womb of some woman who is herself of dubious reality.

'HIS LEGS RAN ABOUT'

...he is no longer entirely unborn, though not completely born either, with consequent confusions.

(ED).

This uncertainty and confusion is easily explained in an alchemical context because the process of repeated sublimation involves a mingling of the properties and characteristics of the substances involved. Alchemical metaphor describes the process as being undertaken in order "to make the body spiritual", and the soul "corporeal" and "co-substantial"(9): it entails the combination of the opposing principles - body/soul, male/female, Mercury/Sulphur.

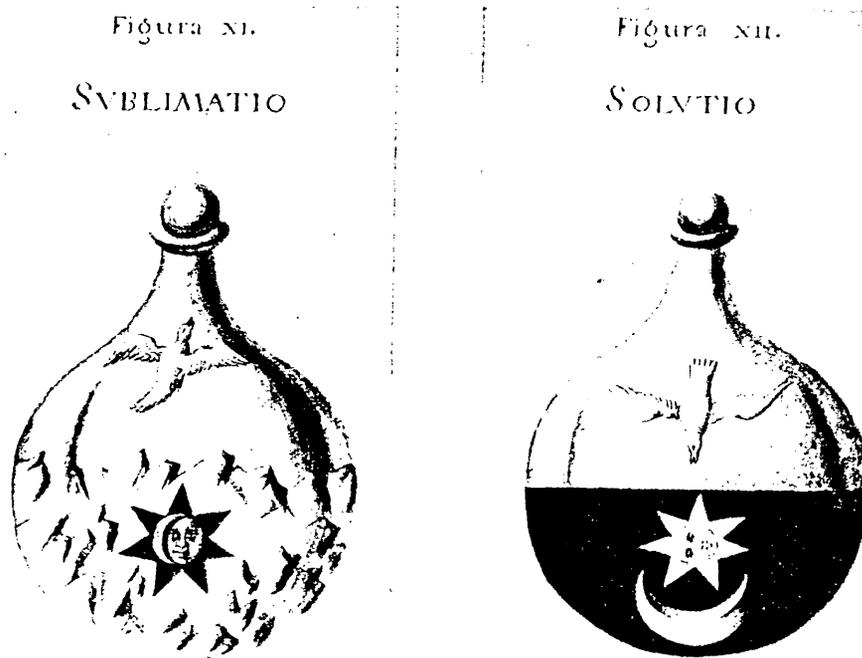
Alchemically, the Sulphur which predominates in Stage III of the process is earthy, non-combustible and fixed (as opposed to volatile). It is described in the texts as being oily, coagulating, and red(10), and is called "red-earth"(11), the "red-male" and "sperm"(12). It is, also, "Adamic Earth"(13) from which Mankind was made and which is associated with Earthly passions; and, in its lunar form, it is a white woman, or a white dove, and is associated with fertility and birth (MC.130-131 and 69). Appropriately, the *Cave Birds* poems which represent this stage are full of images of plants, animals, and earthy fecundity, and they could be described, generally, as dealing with Earth-bound desires and pleasures. In particular, the poem 'A green mother' exemplifies this earthy, sulphurous stage, and an early version of the poem contains references to "a

sulphur glare", and describes the protagonist as a "molten dove", a "trophy" which is lifted "slow and charred from the furnace, in red-oiled strength"(Photocopy VIII). Such specifically alchemical imagery does not survive in the final, published version of the poem, but the earthy, blissful and ecstatic mood does, and it is carried on into the next poem in the sequence -'As I came, I saw a wood'.

The more specifically sexual associations of Sulphur are suitably symbolised in the sequence by the lust-driven "stud cockerel"(ED) of 'The scapegoat'; and in the woman of 'After there was nothing...', who exists for, and is obsessed by, her reproductive functions. These two poems present the essential Adam and Eve, which in alchemical texts are also called the 'Red Male' and the 'White Woman', or 'solar' and 'lunar' Sulphur(MC.131,230 and Ch.V), all of which represent opposites which must be reconciled before physical and spiritual reintegration of the raw material can be achieved(14).

The end of Stage III of the alchemical transmutation is indicated by the appearance, once again, of a dazzling whiteness. The purified substances "sublime up whiter than snow", glowing with a light which, according to Ripley, "will greatly comfort thee"(15) because it confirms that a successful result has been obtained. Similar snow and light imagery appears in Hughes' poem, 'The guide', which marks the end of the protagonist's spiritual testing and, thus, the end of the third alchemical stage in the *Cave Birds* sequence. The hero's passage through the underworld has been completed. Now, a guide comes to help him on the next stage of his journey, lifting him from the snowy whiteness and flying with him into a fiery wind. That this guide is another manifestation of Mercury/Hermes is suggested by the alchemical writing of Bonus of Ferrara, who describes Mercury, now as "a pure, heavenly and glorious water" which "is sometimes referred to as a flying bird"(16) or the "Bird of Hermes"(17). Bonus

it to newly hatched "little creatures" which need the assistance and guidance of some more powerful being(18). For the Alchemist, Mercury in its healing form is always this assistant or guide.



Mercury, the 'Bird of Hermes', the white bird released from and returning to the alchemical mixture. From an eighteenth century manuscript.

'The baptist'

'The Maze Pelican'(ED)

'A Pelican'(ED)

A18. B16.

'The False Guide to Unending Mazes'(19).

But first he has to be washed in the waters of the source(A).

Water is universally associated in mythology with birth and with initiation - the crossing of thresholds. It represents the remnants of the chaotic waters of primordial creation which became the salt-sea of the Earth(20). It

represents, also, the amniotic waters of birth, and it is "the vehicle of the Goddess"(21) who is the Mother.

Using images and words which evoke the cool, soothing, nurturing properties of water, Hughes brings his protagonist to the threshold of rebirth. This baptism, however, is more than a ritual washing-away of the old self, or a cleansing of the sinner as in a Christian baptism. By the use of words such as "enfolds" and "balm", and the long, soothing vowel-sounds of each line, Hughes suggests the gentle healing process in which his protagonist is a helpless participant. Bandaged, blindfold and gagged, like an Egyptian mummy, the hero undergoes a slow dissolution in which the "body's puckering hurts" and the soul's "hard-cornered grief" slowly melt to a fluid state, such as is paralleled in Nature by the cellular chaos which precedes germination.

The helplessness of the protagonist and his enclosure within the "winding waters" of the baptismal sea suggest his surrender to a state of consciousness like that which Jung describes when he refers to baptism as immersion in the seas of the collective subconscious(MC.199). The collective subconscious differs from the personal subconscious which is "sinful and impure" and is washed away by the baptismal waters: it is, rather, the "constructive and destructive powers of the unconscious"(MC.201) which are shared by all humans and which Jung sees expressed

in the mythological teachings, characteristic of most mystery religions, which reveal the secret knowledge concerning the origin of all things and the way to salvation.
(MC.190-200).

Discussing the Christian and the Alchemical views of baptism, Jung concludes that in both it is seen as a ritual during which those who are adequately purified, prepared, and guided, cross a spiritual threshold(MC.199-200/235-239). The *Cave Birds* protagonist has been brought to a condition in which he now

fulfills these requirements, but beyond this point are still further tests and puzzles.

Despite the baptist's soothing and healing powers, this bird-being is, as Baskin suggests in the title to his picture, no true guide. Baskin's pelican is a curious bird. Its beak appears to be stuck together with tar, its serpentine neck is filled with bandage-like strips, and its feet are those of a raptor not an aquatic bird. It is a confusing mixture which indicates the confusing nature of a bird whose false guidance leads to "unending mazes", which are, perhaps, the mazes of the subconscious mind. Certainly, true guidance and true wholeness have yet to be achieved.

'Only a little sleep, a little slumber'

A 19.

Reduced to total dependency on the mercy (help) of the eagles, he begins to feel the first stirrings. (of humanity again)(A).

This poem was one which was added to the sequence at a late stage, and for which Baskin subsequently provided a drawing. It appears only in the A sequence, but was read at the Ilkley Festival, and the version published in the Faber edition was included in the BBC broadcast.

In the broadcast, all but the last line of the poem were read chorally, the final statement being made by the hero's voice alone so that it was obvious that it was he to whom the earlier lines were addressed. Such an identification of the poem's voices is only suggested in the published versions of the poem by the enclosure of the final line in inverted commas. It was not indicated at all in earlier versions which, in any case, are very different (Photocopy IX), and in which a definite duality in the protagonist's nature is still apparent, the subject of the poem's action being alternately "I" and "you". Despite this, it seems most

'Only a Little Sleep'(ED).

I fasted hoping to coerce the god of eagles
Memory left me on the 3rd day
On the 10th my heart threatened to leave me
On the 15th something awful happened to my brain
When they cut your brain with a knife
Hell dropped off like a polyp
A crumb of fungus
Set the walls screaming at you

I think the soul is a nest

But it has your life in its beak.

likely that such duality is intended in the final version of the poem, since the ultimate aim of the whole cleansing and healing process is to achieve a balanced unity, not to destroy one aspect of the personality in favour of any other.

When read to oneself from the printed page, the poem has a meditative tone which suggests the protagonist's own tentative probing of this new aspect of himself, this new experience. Such tentativeness is in keeping, too, with the description of the new creature, its shyness and silence, and its relationship to the being from which it has emerged (it is part of his brain, and its 'nest' is among his bones). As the tiny spark of humanity which is all that is left of the former personality, it is fragile and vulnerable, like the fledgling in Baskin's illustration.

In describing the separation of this being from the remnants of the old arrogant and selfish one, Hughes' imagery captures, exactly, the ambiguous relationship between the two. What remains of the old is "a polyp", something which is either a malign growth to be "snipped off" and discarded, or a tiny aquatic animal from which whole colonies may grow. It is, also, "a crumb of fungus", "a pulp of mouldy tinder", both of which have connotations of unpleasantness through the words "fungus" and "mouldy", but which have, also, great generative power, since fungus is a simple plant which reproduces with great ease and, as tinder, it is used to kindle fires. Having kindled the initial spark, however, tinder, like the protagonist's old personality, will "flare, fluttering, black-out like a firework". Thus, in his imagery, Hughes captures the paradox of the birth of the phoenix, which rises from its parent's ashes and which, in Alchemy, is the symbol of the newly risen soul. And his final line "I am the last of my kind", sums up both the rarity of this 'bird' and its fledgling vulnerability.

'A green mother'(B);(Faber).

'A Sunrise Owl'(Scolar Press).

'A Loyal Mother'(A).

A 20. B 17.

'Kindly father of lies and forgiveness'(22).

He is offered an easy option, by the eagle-owl(A).

He is offered (many) options by the eagle-owl(B.B.C. Broadcast).

At this stage in the *Cave Birds* sequence, Hughes' acknowledged debt to the *Bardo Thodol* becomes most apparent. His new creature, having been separated from its material body, now wanders in a strange world like a soul wandering in the Bardo.

Just as the Bardo-wandering soul is offered re-birth of various kinds by manifested deities, so Hughes' fledgling is shown different "heavens" from which he may choose. The purpose of the *Bardo Thodol* is to prepare the soul to recognise and to avoid re-birth into the lower planes of existence which are governed by Earthly passions and obsessions: the soul is taught to choose, instead, a liberated buddha state. Similarly, Hughes' protagonist must recognise that his struggles are not yet over, and he must reject the easily achieved heavens of Earthly bliss and paradisial ecstasy if he is to reach the heaven of the eagles.

Despite the fact that Hughes' introductions for this poem refer to an eagle-owl and Baskin's illustration title calls the bird a *father* of forgiveness, the bird-being which now appears is female, motherly and benign. She is Blodeuwedd the flower goddess who is also an owl, and her "busy hive of heavens" is that of the Earth Goddess, Mother Earth, whose "grave is her breast" and whose "angels" are of the trees and flowers. She offers the almost total acceptance and care of a mother; a return to the security of childhood; a continual dreamlike existence of careless bliss. Yet, there is an underlying irony in this offer - an irony which is exemplified by the worm, "A forgiving God",

which is more usually recognised as a corpse-gnawer. In its heaven, certainly, "little of you will be rejected" but, as in other Earthly heavens, you will become part of the "everliving", having "endless life" in an endless cycle of regeneration. This is just such a state, on the lower planes of existence, from which the *Bardo Thodol* seeks to provide release. It is a blind, vegetative state on the wheel of life from which there can be no progress and no hope of enlightenment.

Closely linked in the poem with these natural heavens are "the heavens of your persuasion", the heavens of "The city of religions". This connection is important, for it indicates strongly Hughes' own views on the organised religions of the world. From the beginning, this poem parodies the kind of forgiveness, acceptance, comfort, and promises of everlasting life, which are fundamental to these religions, and to Christianity in particular. Like hotels in a "holiday city", Mankind's religions can offer comforting havens from the harsh realities of life and death, and rituals and dogma which obviate the need to think and decide for oneself. They, like the heavens offered in the poem, promise riches in the 'Kingdom of Heaven' which will be the "aftertaste of death".

The words and pattern of the second line of the poem provide the first hint of Hughes' parody, recalling the biblical quotation, "In my father's house are many mansions"(23). In the fifth and sixth stanzas, however, the connection is made more specific. By using the word "candle" as an adjective linked to "prayers" Hughes suggests the ethereal, illuminating quality of prayer, but he immediately destroys this spiritual felicity with the word "congealed". The "angel", the "star" which could have soared with the prayers, congeals and falls as if Earth-bound by the formal rituals of rule-bound, rationally ordained, worldly prayer.

The Goddess, like the fatherly gods of the world's major religions, has a cruel, retributive side to her nature, but although her association with death

is made clear in the poem, only her motherly, loving aspect is revealed. Baskin's drawing shows her as an owl, a plump, benign-looking, dark-eyed, bird of the night, whose raptorial claws are well hidden beneath her fluffed-out feathers. Her eagle nature is concealed, but other factors may also have modified this bird's appearance. Comparison of this drawing with the drawings for two earlier poems, 'The plaintiff', and (especially) 'The gatekeeper', shows the softening which has occurred in the eagle-owl's appearance as the protagonist has progressed on his journey. In the teachings of the *Bardo Thodol*, where the manifestations which appear to the wandering soul are its own projections, such a softening would reflect the protagonist's increasing acceptance of the female aspects of his nature and a merging of the dichotomies which characterised his world.

'As I came, I saw a wood'

A 21.B 18.

Much as he would like to take this beautiful option, he cannot(A).

As with several of the poems which were added to the original *Cave Birds* sequence, this poem allows us to observe the current situation through the protagonist's eyes and to share his reactions. So, we see with him the kind of heavens which the green mother is offering.

Like many questing knights, the protagonist comes to a dark wood, unknown territory which is traditionally fraught with danger and the risk of enchantment. It is significant that what attracts his attention first is the trees. Unlike the mythical Tree of Life which connects the realms of the Underworld, the Middle World, and Heaven, these trees merely clutch at the heavens and their starkness reminds the protagonist of "savages", unenlightened people, "clutching at the sky". In his newly aware state (the phrase "I could see" is

emphasised by repetition and by the isolation of the lines in which it occurs) he sees the self-absorption of the dancers, and the superficial signs of their sanctity and obedience - the "glow" of their fur and their "holy steps". He sees, also, the festive, ritual nature of the dancers' religious ecstasy, and his own position of choice at the "crossroads of all the heavens".

The timelessness of this experience, its dreamlike quality, and the degree to which the protagonist is absorbed by it, is suggested in the poem by the sibilant sounds, the sinuous, continuous rhythm of the protagonist's account, and the almost total lack of end stops to the printed lines. At the moment of choice, the rhythm is halted by the hard consonants which imitate the jarring "voice" of the bell, breaking the hypnotic spell and recalling the protagonist to the realities of his present journey. To achieve wholeness and enlightenment he must reject this "beautiful option" and, in Eliot's words, "go by the way in which there is no ecstasy"(24).

The final two lines of the poem restate the spiritual nature of the protagonist's quest. In many religions, as in Alchemy, "flesh and blood" correspond to the "inward and hidden fire"(MC.15f) of the god or goddess, which is ritually and (usually) symbolically ingested by the worshippers in order to absorb the holy spirit. So, the path to which the protagonist is summoned by the bell is the difficult one of selfless communion with the deity, rather than that of self-absorbed ecstasy from which there is no escape or progress. The animals, as the protagonist observed, were absorbed in a dance which "never stopped or left anything old or reached anything new". They will remain, physically and spiritually, in the dark wood. Similarly, in Baskin's illustration, only the heads of the dancing birds are visible and their bodies remain hidden in the engulfing blackness.

'A riddle

'Incomparable Marriage'(A);(Scolar Press).

'A Monkey Eating Eagle'(Scolar Press).

A22. B19.

'Mother of judgment - the tongue of truth gives'(25).

The Monkey-Eating Eagle claims to be his daughter in the heaven of eagles. Whether he likes it or not, he now has to marry her (and)(His fate, it seems, is to) become the child in her womb(A).

Once again the protagonist has arrived at the threshold between death and life; at the interface between the Underworld and the natural world "of wind and of sun, of rock and water". Again, he must pass the threshold guardian's test before he may proceed. Like the two-headed gatekeeper which was encountered earlier, the Monkey-Eating Eagle of this poem has a double nature, but its duality is expressed in the paradoxes of its riddle rather than by its physical appearance.

Using a style which resembles the traditional riddle form of Old English verse, Hughes presents the paradox of the eagle's nature in two line stanzas each of which embodies an opposition. These brief statements, following the peremptory bluntness of the opening question, convey the primitive, arresting power of the eagle. The pattern of its riddle brings to an end the fluid, dreamlike mood of the previous poems which had already faltered at the notes of the summoning bell. The question, and the questioner whose clues to the riddle compound the enigma, block the protagonist's progress as effectively as Baskin's eagle fills the frame of its picture.

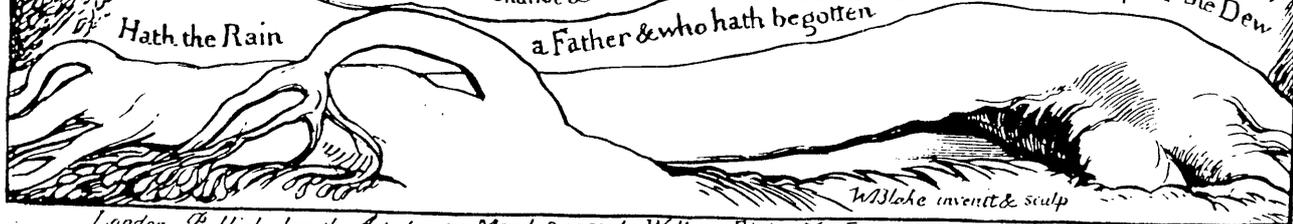
Both the situation and the question have well known parallels in Greek mythology, as they do, also, in the Book of Job. Oedipus, on the borders of his birth place is confronted by the man-eating sphinx and her riddle; Ulysses, trapped in the dark womb-like cave of cannibalistic Polyphemos, gains egress by a careful answer to its question; and Job, before his release from torment (a re-

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge



Then the Lord answered Job out of the Whirlwind

Who maketh the Clouds his Chariot & walketh on the Wings of the Wind
Hath the Rain a Father & who hath begotten the Drops of the Dew



W Blake invent & sculp

London. Published as the Act directs March 8: 1825 by William Blake N: 3 Fountain Court Strand

Print

Plate 13. From William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, (1825).

creation which Blake depicts for him in Plate 14 (see illustration opposite page xxx) is confronted by God with a long series of rhetorical questions. Even the questing birds in Attar's allegorical poem must answer the noble chamberlain's questions before the door to the Simurgh is opened for them. In each case the questions concern the nature, purpose and importance of Man. They resemble those questions which Hughes' Wodwo asks itself (W.183): "What am I?", "What am I doing here?", "What shall I be called?". And the answers require a self-knowledge which, in the spiritual context, is a necessary prerequisite for knowledge of God. Common to all spiritual quests is the necessity to "Know thyself" for, as Mohammed wrote, "He who knows himself knows the Lord"(26).

An essential part of self-knowledge is the recognition of the physical mortality and spiritual endurance which comprise the dual, mortal and immortal, aspects of human existence. Oedipus recognises the enigma of the sphinx as physically mutable and mortal Man; Ulysses' answer to Polyphemos' question, although presented in the story as a trick, involves humility and a denial of his physical self - he is "Nobody"; Job must reject his pride and selfhood and, as Blake's illustration(Plate 13) implies, must "humbly recognise God's supremacy and acknowledge that he is in God's image, not contrariwise, as before"(27); and Attar's birds, also, come to recognise their own non-existence apart from the Simurgh(28). In all these stories self-knowledge is essential before the heroes can complete their journeys.

The answer to the riddle which now tests the *Cave Birds* protagonist demands a similar recognition of his own duality and his relationship to the questioner. The content of the riddle retraces the protagonist's journey, which the questioner has shared, although her experience of it has been very different. The very nature of this female bird's participation, however, demonstrates that she and he are complementary halves of a unit (as in the earlier poem,

‘Actaeon’), and the changing balance between male and female is restated. It is clear that this eagle has been both victim (like the Plaintiff) and then victor (like the Vulture in ‘She seemed so considerate’), and her riddle is solved only by the recognition that she is the essential female element in the protagonist’s life, representative of the Goddess, and inextricably linked to him as his daughter, his bride, and, now, his mother. As she tells him in the version of the poem published by Scholar Press, she is his ‘creator’; and in a draft version:

I am what you have brought, neither more nor less.
 I am what you are worth...
 I am the collection of your parts

As an eagle, symbol of the sun, the questioner is as much "a bird of light" as was the owl in ‘The plaintiff’, but the light which she now brings to the protagonist’s darkness has grown stronger. She is to be his "saviour mother"(Scholar Press version) whose love will "cast out the love evil/ That gorged only itself"(Scholar Press). She will accomplish his rebirth.

In an "incomparable marriage", the she-eagle will recombine the divided elements of the protagonist’s personality and a new integrated being will be born. The world which this new creature will enter is the harsh natural world which constantly changes but is fundamentally unchangeable, so, despite (or perhaps because of) his new awareness, he comes "to cry". There is, however, an element of promise in the gods’ concern with him: he is a chosen one.

The eagle’s alternative title, ‘Mother of Inevitables’, whilst conveying the inexorable nature of her will, also suggests her relationship to the magical iron-feathered she-eagle, ‘Mother of Animals’, which gives birth to the shamans of the Yakut people of Siberia(29). With this in mind, it is worth noting that the Monkey-Eating Eagle appears again as a threshold guardian in Hughes’ nightmarish story *The Threshold* (published 1979 in a limited edition). In this

story the guardian is an enigmatic old man, "grey and huddled and hairy and filthy" like Hughes' tramps (cf. the "goblin aboriginal" of 'Here is the Cathedral'(M.98) and the wild "creature"/"person" of 'A Knock at the Door'(M.129)). His nose is "hooked, hawklike" and his eye "like an alert owl's" or like that of "a monkey-eating eagle", but he appears, also, as "a shaggy half-human figure, like a wolf on its hind-legs standing on a high conical hill, beating a drum and turning in a slow circle singing"(30). He, like the eagle - owl/protagonist of 'A riddle', is both guardian and shaman, and a saviour of souls.

'The scapegoat'

'The Scapegoat Culprit'(B).

'The Culprit'(A).

'The Sacrifice'(Scolar Press).

'Stud Cockerel Hunted into the Desert'(Scolar Press).

A23. B20.

'Scapegoat vanities and earthly illusions'(31).

His marriage, the opposite of a physical marriage, is celebrated by driving out of him a Cockerel, as a scapegoat, a sacrifice to Eagles(A).

In this poem and the next ('After there was nothing there was woman') Hughes depicts the biological essence of man and of woman. At the same time he presents two vivid pictures of the kind of exclusive and divisive self-absorption of which the protagonist has been accused.

As Baskin's etching shows, the scapegoat or culprit of the first poem is the same proud cockerel, "Lord of the Midden", whose "imbecile" pride was demonstrated in 'The accused'. He is, also, the "love creature that gorges only itself" (a phrase which appears in almost every version of the poem except the

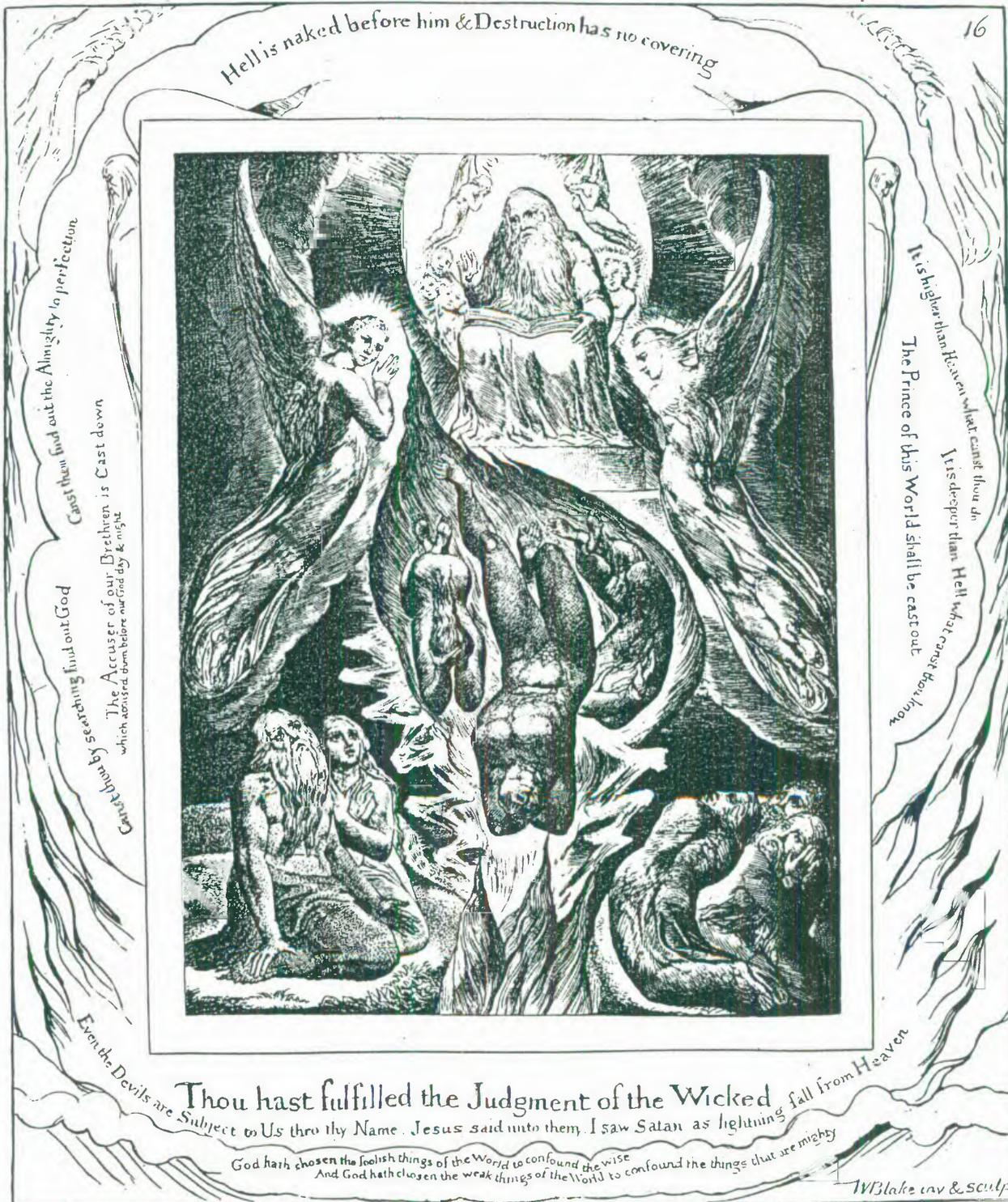
one published in the Faber edition) and it is this selfhood which the Monkey-Eating Eagle intends to drive out.

Once again, there is a parallel in Blake's illustrations for story of Job. Plate 16 (opposite) is embellished with the texts, "The Prince of this World shall be cast out" and "Even devils are subject to Us thro' thy Name", and shows God casting Satan into the flames. Blake's unique interpretation of the biblical text shows two smaller 'devils' also being cast down, and these have been identified as "the obstructive selfhoods of Job and his wife"(W.15). God's judgment condemns the self-righteous to Hell and, in explanatory notes for a lost picture of the Last Judgment, Blake wrote, "In Hell all is Self Righteousness"(32), and, "Whenever any Individual Rejects Error and embraces Truth, a Last Judgment passes on that Individual"(33). Outside the sacrificial fires, Job and his wife watch this spectacle fearlessly, their position and attitudes demonstrating their new-found awareness and spiritual strength.

A scapegoat is a traditional sacrifice required by the gods, and Hughes' scapegoat/cockerel will take with it all the selfish appetites of the flesh, the "vanities and earthly illusions", which must be cast out of the protagonist before he can make a new spiritual beginning. This cockerel, although helplessly driven by lust, greed, superstition and foolish pride, is yet a "beautiful thing". His "wealth" is his seed, his "sweetness" the "hot weakness" of sexual passion, and his opalescent beauty is but skin deep, yet he embodies energies which are essential to life. "Posterity", which inherits his debts, can exist only because of the biological urges which rule his life. He embodies the paradox which Blake summed up in two of his 'Proverbs of Hell':

The Pride of the Peacock is the glory of God.
The lust of the goat is the bounty of God.

(MHH.8:2-3).



London. Published by J. Johnson, 42, Strand, direct March 8. 1825 by J. Kneller, Corner of St. Dunstons Place, Fitzroy Square

Plate 16. From William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, (1825).

Hughes' cockerel is "the joker" in the "confederate pack". Like The Fool in Tarot card readings he is a symbol of Man's folly, frivolity, rashness and naivety, and of the Dionysian elements in Man. However, just as the Tarot Fool is linked by Cabalists with "aleph", the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and "the beginning of all"(34), so the scapegoat is responsible for new life, both biologically, and symbolically¹.

The complexity of Hughes' imagery in this poem is a reflection of the complexity of Man. Through it, he manages to convey not only the powerful sensual pleasures of sexual desire and the barely contained tangle of superstitions and false beliefs which lie beneath the "panoply of skin", but also the intricate workings of heredity by which Man's "sins" may be visited on his children, "an I.O.U. signed by posterity" which includes, perhaps, Man's inheritance of the original sin of the biblical parents, Adam and Eve.

Ultimately, in this poem, Hughes mocks the belief that immortality can be ensured by succumbing to the dictates of the body and its sexuality. Such a course is profligate spending of valuable energy, a "slaking of thistles", and as false and full of irony as Hughes' description of this cockerel as "the lord of immortality".

So, despite his beauty, the cockerel is predominantly a creature of darkness. In Baskin's etching, the voluptuous and exotic bird stands just on the edge of the light. In the poem, too, the sunlight touches him only in "chill draughts" and, having gambled his body and lost, he finally becomes nothing but "a smear on the light". This is the small obstacle to the life-giving energies of the sun which the Monkey-Eating Eagle now removes.

¹The Major Arcana of the Tarot has been interpreted as representation of Man's spiritual journey(41). The Fool (symbolising Man) is an un-numbered card which can take its place anywhere in the sequence and its position influences the interpretation of the cards around it; thus, they "defer" to it.

'After there was nothing there was woman'

A24. B27.

At moments it seems (?) as if he were increasingly human, but somehow as if unborn, as if he were (still) in(side) the womb of some woman (female) who is herself of dubious reality(A).

In many ways this poem is complementary to the previous one, constituting the second half of a pair which deals with similarities and opposites. Instead of a comically active male who foolishly squanders his sexual energies, we are shown a passive female, basking in her natural reproductive function. The cockerel is an empty carcass, "frilled" and bejewelled, and linked with the sun: the woman is naked, full of new life, and linked with nature, the sea, and (by association) the moon. In their self-absorption, however, the two are alike: as they are, also, in the instrumental roles which they play in the protagonist's rebirth. If the cockerel is a foolish and sinful Adam, then this woman is a sensuous and feminine Eve.

The woman, like the cockerel, is a beautiful creature. Her delight in the "winding and unwinding" rhythms of Nature which she finds within her, her glowing acceptance of her function, and her gentle incomprehension and "soldierly bearing" in the face of events over which she has no control, all mitigate the vanity and self-love which are apparent in her urge to caress and decorate her body.

The mood which pervades the poem conveys not only the woman's reverential attitude to her body, but also the awesome wonder and complexity of the creative process of which she is ("but only just") a part. Another of Blake's 'Proverbs of Hell', "The nakedness of woman is the work of God"(MHH.8:5), seems very apt. And Hughes, too, makes a connection between this woman and some higher powers. The predominance of natural imagery in the poem and the description of the woman's origin, suggest her relationship to the Mother

Goddess, vulture headed Hathor, and to Hecate, the Moon Goddess whose symbol is a dog. In addition, the "vulture's gullet", the "droppings of the wild dog", and the "long toil of the earthworms" are all part of the regenerative pattern of Nature, the cycle of life and death which has provided Hughes with a consistent and unifying metaphor for the *Cave Birds* protagonist's spiritual transformation.

The woman's connection with the Monkey Eating Eagle is established in the introductory note to the poem, and the protagonist's feeling that she is "of dubious reality" is consistent with the strange "marriage" of identities which is taking place. It is a marriage in which the cockerel, the woman, the eagle, and the protagonist all take part and by which, as is explicitly stated in some early drafts of the poem, the protagonist is "stripped...of his clay", his "soils"(ED), and reborn in a purified state.

Baskin's etching of the woman conveys well the mingling of identities which takes place in the transforming marriage. Her head, feet, and feathers are those of a bird, but her full belly and breasts are made very obvious, emphasizing the tiny, "ant-like head" and the "soldierly-bearing" of a gravid woman.

'The guide'

'A Scarecrow Swift'(Scholar Press).

'The (One) Guide'(ED).

A25. B22.

'The True Guide'(35).

(At the same time) And it seems as if his journey (progress advance) through the heaven of eagles were only just beginning(A).

Stripped of its earthy soils, the hero's spirit re-emerges into the world like a new creature (the Scholar Press version begins: "The Chick ruptures its shell then stops dazzled"). From this newborn state it can grow to achieve great things,

yet it needs guidance and protection. So, a new bird-being appears. It starts where the new creature stops, in the dazzling light of its new world; it comes "from what is left"(ED); and it comes to change the protagonist's Earth-bound state and to guide him to "the heaven of the eagles".

In folklore, the swift (like the swallow) is a sacred bird connected with the soul(36). For Hughes, it has always been a symbol of freedom and energy, an expression of primitive forces, a "goblin savage"(SS.28) - herald of the summer. This association with summer and the sun gives it sacred significance. Hughes calls it "my little Apollo"(SS.28), and in 'The Swift Comes the Swift'(M.164) it becomes a symbol for a fallen creature which in resurrection

casts aside the two-arm two-leg article
The pain instrument
Flesh and soft entrails and nerves and is off...

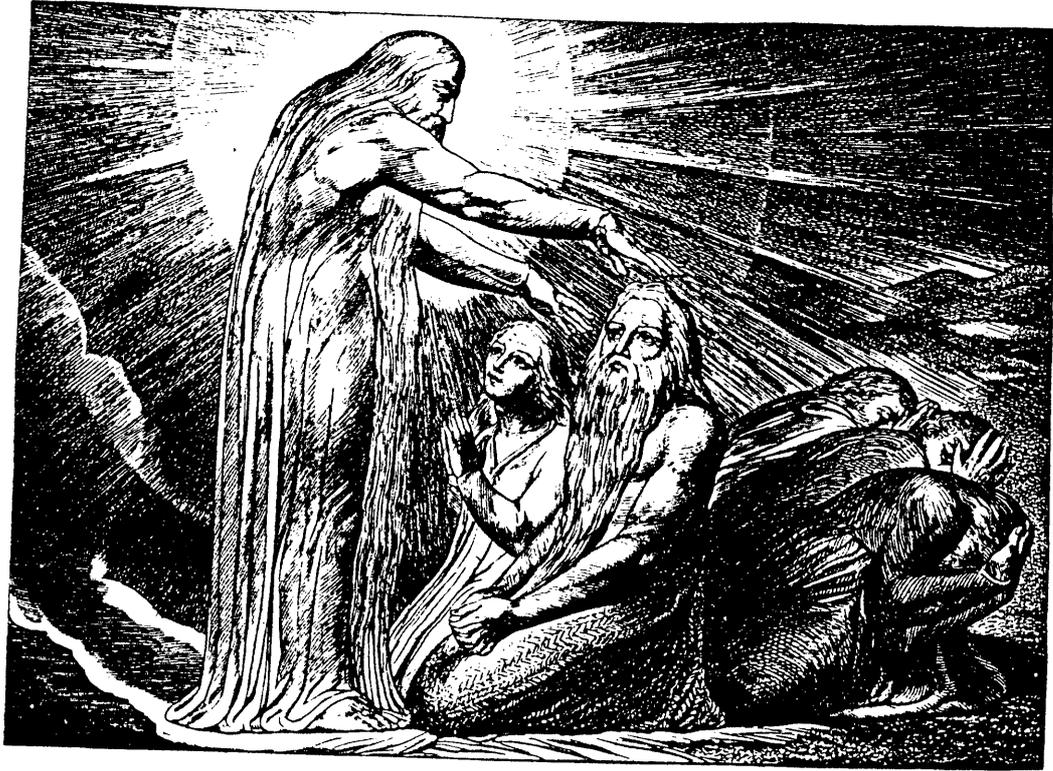
It is a bird which joins Heaven and Earth, shearing "between life and death" like a meteorite "puncturing the veils of the world".

In 'The guide', the speed and energy of the swift is less violently evoked than in Hughes' other poems, but it is suggested by the "tumbling worlds" over which the bird flies, by the scouring winds which empty the clinging protagonist, and in the sense of movement and release which the imagery of the poem generates. Most apparent, however, is the swift's link with the spiritual world to which it is "the true guide"(Baskin's title). It is like a "magnetic" needle, pointing the way to the Northern realms where lies the world axis and Man's earliest mythical Heaven, and which is the home of the Sun-Eagle, mythological mother of the Yakut shamans.

The need for a true guide is acknowledged in both shamanic and gnostic beliefs. Shamanic guides teach the necessary skill of flight between Heaven and Earth so that the shaman can intercede between gods and humans:

He bringeth down to the Grave & bringeth up 17
 we know that when he shall appear we shall be like him for we shall see him as He is

When I beheld the Heavens the work of thy hands the Moon & Stars which thou hast ordained. then I say. What is Man that thou art mindful of him? & the Son of Man that thou visitest him?



I have heard thee with the hearing of the Ear but now my Eye seeth thee

He that hath seen me

If you had known me ye would have known my Father also and from henceforth ye know him & have seen him

Believe me that I am in the Father & the Father in me He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father & I will love him & will be with him & will send the Spirit of my Father upon him & he shall love me & the Father shall love him & we will be with him & will be with him

hath seen my Father also I & my Father are One

At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father & you in me & I in you because I said I go unto the Father

And the Father shall give you another Comforter which he may abide with you for ever & even the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot see nor receive

WBlake unv & sculp

London Published as the Act directs March 8 1825 by William Blake N^o 3 Fountain Court Street

Proof

Plate 17. From William Blake, *Illustrations of the Book of Job*, (1825).

gnostic guides, such as Mohammed and Christ, show man the path, "The Way" to Heaven.

Blake, too, at this stage in the story of Job, depicts in Plate 17(opposite) a spiritual guide. This illustration shows God blessing Job and his wife, but Blake has filled the lower borders of his picture with Christ's words proclaiming the identity of God and Christ, and His guidance towards Man's union with both:

I and my Father are one.
If you had known me ye would have known my Father also...

He that loveth me shall be loved of my Father and I will love him and manifest myself to him. And my Father will love him and we will come unto him and make our abode in him .

In Hughes' poem, as in these other cases, the guide's help is effective only after Man has attained a certain degree of spiritual freedom. Now that the Earthly and physical restraints have been thrown off, the protagonist's spirit can soar free. It is guided through winds which, like pentecostal fires or the fearsome tornado of Karma described in the *Bardo Thodol*(37), cleanse, scour and empty him so that the creator's re-vivifying breath may flow gently in. The true guide, like Mercury, leads his followers to enlightenment and resurrection, and the wind is the alchemical wind which carries the "one thing" the pure alchemical gold, "in its belly"(38).

Still, in this poem, the unifying metaphor of Nature's birth/death cycles is present. The scarecrow, mentioned in the Scholar Press title, was once an image of the crucified fertility god(39), and its cross-shape symbolises the death and resurrection of the god who gives all natural things life (just as the Christian cross symbolises the death of Christ who is known as "Our Saviour"). The cross, however, is also an alchemical symbol representing the combination of the four

elements - air, fire, earth and water; the four qualities - hot, dry, wet and cold; and the four directions - north, south, east, and west.

Baskin's swift is symbolically cross-shaped, its wings are spread for flight, and its firm stance suggests strength and reliability. Its form is also strongly reminiscent of the many winged gods of mythology who are symbolised by the Ansaté cross in which the extremities are split like the legs of birds or humans. The most notable of these gods, in relation to Hughes' poem, are Isis, whose wing-beats "transmitted the breath of life to the dead Osiris"(40), and the Persian sun-god, Ahura Mazda.