

XIII

REMAINS OF ELMET

"I swallowed an alarm clock"(ROE.20)

One further important aspect of *Remains of Elmet* has yet to be examined, and that is Hughes' own participation in the sequence. Not only does he create the imaginative rituals of the poetry and manipulate the energies so as to effect healing and re-integration, but he specifically includes himself in this process. In so doing, Hughes deliberately subjects himself to the energies, and to the ritual of re-integration which he attempts. Figuratively and psychologically he returns to his formative years and re-lives the events and situations to which he was exposed, thus facilitating a healing catharsis.

In *Remains of Elmet*, for the first time since 'Wodwo'(W.183), Hughes also publicly and very personally examines the question "What am I?". Up to this time, he has dealt with this problem in the general terms of its meaning for Mankind, and his adoption of the role of poet/shaman for our society has been mostly implicit. Only with the *Cave Birds* sequence did he state any kind of deliberate reforming intention, and even then it was couched in the indirect metaphorical form of the re-education of Socrates. Now, in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes examines, as Wodwo did, "roots / roots roots roots"(W.183) and, in the process of clarifying his feeling of being unique and different, his feeling that "I seem to have been given the freedom / of this place", he makes explicit his prophetic-visionary purpose. In this sequence, it is Hughes as perceived individual who sees "Paradise" in the Canal waters(ROE.74); Hughes for whom the fish - the "seed of the wild god" - flowers(ROE.77); and Hughes whose flung stones allow the sunbeams to enter the "submarine twilight" of the valley(ROE.79). As in the visionary works of Blake, Ezekiel and John, he

describes the Call and the visions which have led him to write this prophetic, visionary sequence of poems.

Many of the concerns expressed in 'Wodwo' reappear in those Elmet poems which deal directly with Hughes' own experiences, but the questing, tentative nature of the creature is gone. Now, Hughes knows his place in the world, knows his "shape", and has found his identity. He no longer questions his compulsion to explore the natural world in his poetry, for, so to speak, "turning leaves over", inspecting the "secret interior" of frogs, and for "picking bits of bark off this rotten stump". He has discovered why "me and doing that have coincided very queerly"(W.183). The reflection of the real world which he sees when he enters the subconscious water-world of his imagination is still "very clear", but he no longer hangs suspended "in mid-air" as did the wodwo. In the interval of years between writing 'Wodwo' and the Elmet sequence, and, in particular, by working through the carefully controlled rituals of *Cave Birds*, he has learned the art of shamanic flight and can fly to the source and return with

something badly needed, a cure, an answer, some sort of divine intervention in the community's affairs.

(1).

He has learned, too, the skill of using poems as

power-charms, tools and practical agents in the business of gaining desired ends.

(2).

Most importantly, he has achieved something he once described as essential for poetic development, the ability to move

inwards into imagination and beyond that into spirit, using perhaps no more external material than before and maybe even less but deepening it and making it operate in the many different inner dimensions until it opens up perhaps the religious or holy basis of the whole thing.

(3).

For Hughes, as for Wodwo, it was the attraction of water which drew him into the other-world of the imagination and the subconscious energies - the water which in Hughes home valley was present as the polluted Calder and the stagnant "gleam-black", serpentine Canal (cf. previous commentary on 'Willow Herb'). The traditional world-wide mythological and folkloric association of rivers and serpents with natural life-forces and with the spirit world makes these polluted waters of the Calder Valley potentially symbolic. But Hughes' use of this symbolism is characteristically founded in an imaginative evocation of reality which is given visual support by photographs(ROE.72-78) that show the "mirror"-like(ROE.76) surface of the water and the "upside-down"(W.183) world of Hughes and the wodwo very clearly.

Since childhood, Hughes' imagination has drawn him, like Alice, through the "heavy mirror"(ROE.76) of the water's surface into another, magical world - the "drowning black"(ROE.74) underworld of the canal. There, Nature's life-energies flourish as they have since life began, breeding strange monsters - loach like "wild leopards"(ROE.74) - in a "Paradise" through which, it seems, Hughes began his journey from innocence to experience.

'The Canal's Drowning Black'(ROE.74) re-creates the powerful sense of other-worldness and fascination which Hughes felt as a schoolboy "peeping" into the depths of the canal. Through his description of the "torpid ginger-bearded, secretive" loach, he conveys the slow, silent, ageless homogeneity of the drowned world. The tiny watching eyes of the fish, and their anemone-beards, are seen as part of an "underwater cliff", and their slow, snake-like movements flow with the water. By contrast, the boy's world is harsh, ugly and sick,

Blackened with the acid rain fall-out
From Manchester's rotten lung.

and overshadowed, literally and metaphorically, by the "deadfall"(ROE.82) of the Methodist church. With a Blake-like reversal of values, this Christian edifice is seen like a figure in a Black Mass, as a "cowled, Satanic Majesty" which oversees Hughes' disastrous childish attempt to bring some of the underwater life into his dying world. But the crescent moons of the fish, which should, symbolically, have heralded new growth and fertility in the child's world, "failed", and, as Hughes lobs them back into the canal, he throws each of them "high through the air" as if desperately attempting to hang them in his own world's sky.

Underlying this vivid childhood scene, the suggestion of temptation in Paradise and the subsequent fall from innocence is very strong. The boy teeters on the "slime-brink" of the canal, fascinated by his own god-like power to make the fishy anemone-beards flower with the stamp of his foot. He is fascinated too, by the eyes which make him the centre of attention by watching his every move, and by the conflict between his knowledge and his imagination, which makes the sinuous creatures in the black depths below him seem "five inches huge". Eventually, overcome by his desires, he succumbs to temptation and uses his superior power and knowledge to coax these primitive creatures into his net, and, so, into his world. There is, however, no sense of sin involved. The child's actions are linked in the poem's imagery with the naive, mischievous tricks of the Chinese Monkey god, and the death of the fish serves to demonstrate to him the enormous difficulty of trying to move between the two worlds. These fish, too, with their "little cupid mouths", are emissaries of the Goddess, sent, like Cupid himself, to teach the child the power of desire, the foolishness of pride, and the need for patience and control. The final ritual of returning the "pouting, failed, paled new moons" of the loach "one by one" to "Paradise" suggests,

Hughes' acknowledgement of the Goddess's power and his wry acceptance of this lesson.

Whatever Hughes learned from this childhood experience, his belief that fish and their watery world connected him directly with the realm of Nature, and with the subconscious energies, has remained very strong. And, just as the cupid-lipped loach in 'The Canal's Drowning Black' aroused his desire, so the first trout that he ever saw(4) had special meaning for him. 'The Long Tunnel Ceiling'(ROE.76) describes this first encounter, and introducing the poem in a BBC broadcast in 1965, Hughes spoke of Trout as "the authentic aboriginal in that polluted valley" of the Calder, and "the holiest creature out there in its free unspoiled sacred world". Explaining these views, he said:

I was too young to capture small ones in hillside streams so trout came to have magical meaning for me which I never managed to get over(5).

Consequently, the trout which leapt so suddenly into his dark "cavern of air and water" under the busy canal bridge seemed god-like and sacred, a "seed of the wild god...flowering" just for him,

An ingot!
Holy of holies! A treasure!

Erupting from the black mirror world of the "dark loach" into Hughes noisy "cell" beneath the main road, this great trout briefly shattered the interface between Hughes' real and imaginary worlds, just as it broke the circle made by the bridge arch and its reflection. The poem's imagery captures the cataclysmic breaking and re-making of Hughes' trembling tunnel, and the strange confusions which occur with reflections so that the canal waters appear "cradled" in the imaged ceiling and a rising trout appears as a falling brick. It captures, too, the careless beauty of the great fish, a "free lord" of these two worlds, and the shock, amazement and awe of the boy, whose imagination is fired with visions of

the trout's moorland home and the "shake-up of heaven and the hills" which has brought this "tigerish, dark, breathing lily" to him.

Ultimately, in the poem, the trout becomes a symbol of the Universal Energies, which Hughes sees waiting, almost hidden, "between the tyres, under the tortured axles" of the industrial world of Elmet to redress the disturbed natural balance; a warning of the power which the "wild god" has, to bring the structures of this world crashing down like a collapsing bridge; an intimation of the coming apocalypse which the boy thought "at last...had started". Above all, for Hughes, the trout represents a creature which has the ability to move at will between worlds and, like a shaman's animal guides, to take him imaginatively with it. His apprehension that this "holiest" of the creatures of Nature's unspoiled "sacred world" appeared especially for him, reinforces this and indicates, also, the source of Hughes' belief that he has a special role to play in our society.

Because of these early experiences, fishing, like poetry, has been Hughes' lifelong passion, and he acknowledges the connection between these two activities to be very close. In a BBC broadcast in 1965(6) Hughes described both poetry and fishing as the "pursuit of something hidden". Fishing, he said, "satisfies a need and arouses a passion", giving expression to "feelings, instincts and energies" which civilization has "bottled up": the "pursuit of poems" serves a similar purpose. Both activities are rituals which deal directly with the natural energies and, as such, he believes that both contain an "element of danger". Hughes' feelings when dealing with these energies are expressed most strongly in his poems about fish and fishing, especially in *River*. He evokes the tense hunting atmosphere in which "the hunter is also the hunted"(7), and conveys his fear of the primitive "darkness beneath night's darkness"('Pike'L.56) in the unknown depths of water and mind, and his sense of entering another, very different world.

"Go fishing / Join water, wade into unbeing"(R.42) he writes in *River*, where his entry and return from the elemental other-world has become most accomplished but no less fraught with danger. The waters he fishes hide terrifying monsters, "killers"('Pike'L.56) and "apparitions from tombs"('Earth Numb'M.95), and the river, itself, is "alive and malevolent", roping his ankles like "a drowned woman", and rushing past him like a "headlong army...mixed with planets, electrical storms and darkness" which tears "the spirit from my mind's edge and from under"('Stealing Trout'SP.88). At times, too, the river is "evil", a "grave" where the "strange evil of unknown fish minds" lies in wait for him(R.76,62). These fish which lurk beneath the "smoothing tons of dead element" are one with it, so that when one bites "the river grabs me...stiffens alive...the whole river hauls"('Earth Numb'M.95) and the struggle between Man and fish becomes a struggle with the elements:

A piling voltage hums, jamming me stiff-
 Something terrified and terrifying
 Gleam-surges to and fro through me
 From the river to the sky, from the sky into the river
 Uprooting dark bedrock, shatters it in air,
 Cartwheels across me, slices thudding through me
 As if I were the current-

(‘Earth Numb’M.95).

Having faced and overcome the fears and dangers of the elemental struggle, Hughes, momentarily, becomes part of the timeless elemental world. This change brings new insights and new perspectives, so, in ‘Stealing Trout on a May Morning’(SP.88), when a similar experience occurs, the fisherman looks back on himself and his world and sees both fixed in time like a scene "in a painting".

Always, in his encounter with the elements, the reward Hughes seeks is renewal - a shamanic, alchemical, re-creation such as occurs in ‘Go Fishing’(R.42). There, the poem is both descriptive and directive: "Go fishing", Hughes tells us, "Join water, wade into unbeing". We, like Hughes, must enter

the timeless water-world, be "assumed into the womb", healed, "supplanted by mud and leaves and pebbles", "dissolved", "dismembered", and made part of the cosmic flux - "everything circling and flowing and hover-still". Thus, we may be re-born "new and nameless" into the urgent world of "time" and "people". Again, in this process, the human form is exchanged for that of fish, is supplanted

By sudden rainbow-monster structures
That materialise in suspension gulping
And dematerialise under pressure of the eye.

(‘River’R.42).

Initially, Hughes’ boyhood fascination with the underwater realm, and his imaginative excursions into this elemental world, concerned only himself. Describing these experiences in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes makes us aware of the boy’s feeling that he has a special relationship with Nature. Yet, in the first of these poems - ‘The Canal’s Drowning Black’, ‘The Long Tunnel Ceiling’, and ‘Under the World’s Wild Rims’ - there is no suggestion that he was aware of any implications in this for society in general. Only in the broader context of the poetic sequence, and from the perspective of the mature poet, do the boy’s actions and feelings have special significance and suggest that Hughes finds the source of his visionary, prophetic, shamanic role in these early events. The beautiful poem, ‘Two’, is the first to openly suggest Hughes’ shamanic identity but it does so only to describe the failure of his powers when his older brother, "the guide" and hero of his childhood, left home to join the wartime R.A.F. Such was the impact of this separation on Hughes that the shamanic

feather fell from his head.
The drum stopped in his hand.
The song died in his mouth.

(‘Two’ROE.80).

‘Two’ is one of the most powerful and evocative poems in the Elmet sequence, but without information concerning the events from which it sprang its

inclusion in the sequence can be puzzling. Answering my queries about it, Hughes wrote:

'Two' is simply about my brother and myself. He was ten years older than me and made my early life a kind of paradise...[sic] which was ended abruptly by the war. He joined the RAF, and after the war he came to Australia, where he still lives. The closing of Paradise is a big event....

(8).

Certainly, the images of the poem depict a paradise on Earth, a paradise overflowing with light, colour and beauty. But there are mythological allusions, too, which belie Hughes' claim that the poem is "simply" about himself and his brother. The world we are shown is a world held in the "cupped hand" of the Dawn-Goddess, Eos, and the two figures step into it like her twin star-god sons, Hesperus and Phosphorus, who are also Venus and Jupiter who "year in and year out / contend for the crown / of morning star and of evening star"(R.118).

In classical mythology, Hesperus, the Morning Star, is the Star of Life, and Phosphorus (Lucifer) is the Evening Star which leads in the Moon. Between these twin aspects of the Star-son a perpetual war is waged for the favour of the Moon-Goddess. Discussing this myth in *The White Goddess*(9), Robert Graves cites a number of different versions, including a Celtic one in which Gwythyr, Son of Greidyawl(Son of Scorcher), and his rival Gwyn "fight every May Day until the Judgment" for Creiddylad, daughter of Ludd Llaw Ereint(Silver Hand). The "scorched talons of crows", which Hughes' two star-beings brought when they "dropped" like birds "from the woods that hung in the sky", may well link them with Gwythyr and Gwyn. Similarly, the image may suggest other paired and warring Celtic heroes, for the crow, like its relative the raven, is the oracular bird of many Celtic gods and goddesses, including the hag, Cerridwen, and Bran, the God of England.

The heavenly origin of Hughes' two beings is suggested in the poem by the way "the sun poured out of their feet", and the "streams spoke oracles of abundance" at their coming. But there is ambiguity as to the ownership of the "scorched talons", and the description also fits the black, leathery, wrinkled feet of real crows, such as those which Hughes, acting "as a retriever"(PIM.16) of the birds and animals shot by his older brother on the moors, must frequently have handled. So, merged with the mythological allusions, there is a realistic picture of two poachers stepping from a wooded skyline down the dewy dawn-lit hillside and carrying the "swinging bodies of hares", "stolen grouse", and snipe in their hands. Paralleling this interweaving of myth and reality in the poem, the deserted, worn, stone steps leading to and from the sky in Fay Godwin's accompanying photograph allow us the imaginative freedom to fill them with the images prompted by the poem.

If the events of 'Two' describe, as Hughes has said, "the closing of Paradise" for him, then his choice of 'Mount Zion' as the poem which immediately follows 'Two' in the sequence indicates something of the nature of the war which now "opened" in his life. It was a war against the all-pervasive influence of this "cowled, Satanic Majesty" which overshadowed the valley, threatening to destroy all imagination and joy; a war between the inner and outer worlds of Mankind, of which the World War which took his brother from him was but an extension. This is the lifelong conflict which Hughes has sought to end, not only for himself but, more recently, for society too, trying, through his poetry to counteract the growing sterility the war has caused.

Fortunately, Hughes' shamanic powers did not die. As experience replaced innocence, and "life grew more complicated"(PIM.16), Hughes began to channel his hunting instincts into writing poetry. At first he did not recognise

that this was happening. In *Poetry in the Making*, describing these changes in his early life, he wrote:

It was years before I wrote what you could call an animal poem and several more years before it occurred to me that my writing poems might be partly a continuation of my earlier pursuit. Now I have no doubt.

(PIM.17).

As Hughes' certainty about this strengthened, he came to see the hunting of poems not only as a way of immersing himself in the Universal Energies, but also as means by which such energies might be returned to the world. He was convinced, too, of the power of the imaginative arts to both destroy and heal. Throughout his working life he has presented these views many times and, in particular, his discussion of *Crow* with Egbert Faas(1971), his two essays on 'Myth and Education'(10), and his recent "Panegyric and Ode", 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly'(11), express them forcefully.

In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes' beliefs, and his poetic hunting skills, are sufficiently developed to enable him to use the imaginative energies to re-create his childhood experiences whilst, at the same time, he suggests their significance in relation to his present healing and energising purposes. So, we become aware of the mature poet's idea that the first magical appearance of the Trout in his childhood world had the extraordinary, personal significance of a sign from the "wild god" of his future role. Similarly, the flung stones of childhood vandalism, described in 'Under the World's Wild Rims'(ROE.79), become the first acts of Hughes' continuing collaboration with Nature in the attempt to enlighten this "worn-out" twilight world.

It is a measure of Hughes' skill that such retrospective interpretations of his early feelings and actions do not interfere with his ability to re-create his initial spontaneity. In 'Under the World's Wild Rims', for example, we share the boy's impressions of the weird, "desecrated", dust-filled landscape

through which he walks to school. Compared to the "world's wild rims", this was a strange world, deathly and unnatural, strewn with "steel objects" that seemed "magical" and "futuristic" in their unfamiliarity, and leaking a "warm horror", so that it both repelled and fascinated him. Instinctively the boy responded to these conflicting emotions with a campaign of stealthy and pleasurable destruction, smashing, "one by one", the regimented, guardian rows of "glass skylights" that seemed to watch him.

That the resulting benefits to Nature were not, at the time, intended, is made plain in the text, where it is clearly the destructive power of "five hundred stones" which gave the boy his "purpose". In the final stanza, however, the boy's purpose and the skylights which prompted it are both linked with the results, and the whole movement of the poem culminates in the fertile image of sun on flowers. Thus, Hughes suggests his retrospective appreciation of the subconscious workings of Nature within the boy. And, by paralleling the boy's destructive actions with those of horned vandal-warriors, an image by which he characterises the infiltrating weeds, he reiterates his adult views on the inevitable and destructive resurgence of suppressed energies.

Hughes, as a boy, responded to Nature's promptings and became the wild god's unwitting tool. Now, as a mature poet, he deliberately takes up Nature's cause and, substituting imagination for stones, he attempts to break through the rational structures that we erect, like the "green skylights" of those Calder Valley factories, to guard our precarious state of order and darkness from any disruptive beams of energy from the Source.

Unlike the closing of *Paradise*, the passage from innocence to experience is gradual. In *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes does not detail his journey to maturity, that is not his purpose, but he does include the significant factors which have shaped his role of visionary prophet and shaman. So, in the poems that

follow 'Two', we find that the terrifying, pervasive influence of the chapel religion on the "jibbing"(ROE.82) boy is tempered by the love and pride inspired in him by the old people of the valley, by the land itself, and by the example of the Brontes (Emily in particular) who had shared his love of the "dark Paradise"(ROE.96) of Nature.

The old people of 'Crown Point Pensioners'(ROE.89), and fiercely independent Yorkshiremen like Billy Holt, are, like Hughes' uncle in the dedicatory poem of the series(ROE.7), his people - his "roots". In their memories, their "yarning", as in the "archaeology of the mouth" which Hughes' uncle brought him, there lies "the prize of a lifetime"(ROE.7); a "last inheritance"(ROE.7) which hangs on the fragility of breath as air is "hijacked in the larynx / to fly a dream"(ROE.7), and "vowels furl downwind, on air like silk"(ROE.89). Hughes is painfully aware that "any moment now" the "frayed, fraying hair-fineness"(ROE.7) of this thread may break and their song will be gone.

Meanwhile, "what has escaped the demolisher" are the "indigenous memories", the last fragments of the "dreams" of the old world. These memories are the inheritance which is "furthered" in the throats of the old people. But, "attuned" to each other though they are, it comes from "inside their masks" as if from "puppets". With this curious image, and by the metaphor of harping musicians singing "of a lost kingdom", Hughes seems to convey a vision of court minstrels - those whom Robert Graves called "gleemen", and who unknowingly transmitted fragments of ancient bardic lore in their music(12). Listening to their "mesmerising music", Hughes is stirred (as they are) by the "wild melody, wilful improvisation", and he hears "the authentic tones / the reverberations" of ancestors who drew their energy from the land around them. Hughes' own attunement to the ancient music is apparent in the rhythms and mood of his

poetry, through which he conveys with tenderness and pride the beauty of these old people, "each one bowed at his dried bony profile, as at a harp"(ROE.89). Matching his music to his subject, Hughes makes 'For Billy Holt'(ROE.90) a taciturn but humorous portrayal of the strengths and weaknesses of his people - their stoic, self-sufficient endurance in their unwelcoming "homeland"; and 'Heptonstall'(ROE.92) is his lament for them and their aged disintegrating world.

Through these elders, through his attunement to the raw elemental freedom of the moors, and through his affinity with those, like the Brontes, who shared his passions, Hughes first learned to listen and respond to the music within himself which connected him with his roots and with Nature. By these means, he counteracted the destructive aspects of his early environment. Unlike the puppet singers, however, Hughes became aware of his ability to hear and transmit this music, and, alerted by his visions and by watching the death throes of the Calder Valley, he came to believe in its importance to Mankind, and of the dangers of seeking to repress this valuable link with the energies of the Source.

In his work, Hughes has constantly explored these beliefs and has expressed them with growing conviction, seeking to enlighten others to the 'truths' he apprehends. In 'Tick Tock Tick Tock'(ROE.120), he looks back on his earlier life from the standpoint of the mature poet, and sees himself as the crocodile in *Peter Pan*(13), a primitive, amphibious creature embodying the natural energies and carrying the message of time and change to the nescient 'children' of the Calder Valley.

The ticking of the clock moves relentlessly through the poem like the crocodile, portending danger and disaster, but an "everlasting" "summer" of childhood pervades the Calder Valley, making it, like Peter Pan's Never Never Land, a place where no-one ever grows up. Earlier in the Elmet sequence, Hughes has suggested the blindness of the people, the misdirection of their

energies and their child-like capacity for play: now, he brings all these qualities together in the conceit of the school playground and the story of Peter Pan. There is no need to posit an actual childhood game to explain this conceit, as Scigaj does in his recently published book, and there has been no such game commonly played by English children⁽¹⁴⁾ although the story of Peter Pan was familiar to most children of Hughes' generation through a tradition of Christmas performances. In the light of the rest of the sequence, the playground across which Hughes crawled as the crocodile can be seen as the Calder Valley itself, in which the primitive energies have existed "from prehistory": and the school is the 'school' of life¹.

Set against the relentless passage of time, *Remains of Elmet* has shown us, already, a world of human foolishness, an unenlightened world of "imbecile innocence" (to borrow an apt phrase from *Cave Birds*), which "incinerates itself happily / from a hundred mill chimneys"(ROE.120). These people of Elmet, like Blake's sleepers of Ulro, have enslaved themselves so thoroughly to the demands of war, materialism and false religion that they are unaware of any reality beyond their daily lives: and even in these they are deluded. Hughes has shown us the reality of their lives - the harsh environment, the slavery, the decay - but, to them, summer seems to follow summer in endless procession, and the land and the old people seem, as they often do the children, "unalterable". Only the red wings of the butterflies (which in folklore are believed to be souls and are associated with witches, priestesses of the Goddess) beating like "pulsing wounds" around them suggest some underlying horror.

Unlike those who "acted" Peter Pan (the word suggests the falsity of their role), Hughes, because of the different perspectives his closeness to Nature

¹"Macadam" is still a commonly used word in Yorkshire for tar-sealed surfaces, but its etymology and its connection with "school playground" in the poem suggest Man's ancient lineage.

offered him, saw another reality: he saw the impending apocalypse, and sought to warn them of it. But, because he embodied some of the energies these people had been taught to fear and suppress, he seemed dangerous and threatening. So, the image of Peter Pan's crocodile with its embodiment of primitive energies, the rhythmical warning it carried to those whom it approached, and its aura of danger, perfectly describes Hughes' situation from both his own perspective and theirs. It should be noted, too, that the reaction of the Never Never Land inhabitants to the crocodile is remarkably similar to that of some of Hughes' critics and readers to seemingly dangerous "violence" of his poetry.

The interpretation of 'Tick Tock Tick Tock' that I have given here differs markedly from the psychological analysis offered by Scigaj, who believes the poem to be Hughes' attempt to "redeem and transcend" his own "exploitative attitude towards the environment"(15). In order to support such a view, Scigaj requires of Hughes a tortuous double-blind game in which, although in the poem he plainly declares that he was the crocodile which "swallowed an alarm clock", and that "somebody else acted Peter Pan", he was, in fact, Peter pretending to be the crocodile (by mimicking the clock's tick) in order to confront his own darkness, personified in the story by Captain Hook. Scigaj's analysis requires us to believe that Hughes identifies with the destructive elements at work in the Calder Valley and feels some personal guilt for its fate, something which is nowhere apparent in this sequence. It also equates "the ageless realm of Neverland [sic]"(16) with "the Sacred". Such an identification is difficult to support from the text, where the imagery of profane time (the tick of the clock, the "pendulum", the recurrent seasons) establishes the connection between Peter Pan, the valley and the school playground, and where we are told that it was the "everlasting play" of the people that caused the pollution and death.

Nor does Scigaj's interpretation take account of the position of the poem in the Elmet sequence, where it is carefully placed so that the slow build-up of tension within it, culminating in a powerful symbol of primitive and predatory natural energy, prepares us for the apocalyptic climax described in 'Cock-Crows'(ROE.121), which immediately follows.

'Tick Tock Tick Tock', in the synchronic way of this poetic sequence, reiterates the events which have led to this apocalypse, but it also conveys Hughes' interpretation of his own prophetic and shamanic role. As elsewhere in *Remains of Elmet*, the implications of this poem have a scope which extends beyond the confines of the Calder Valley to embrace us all, for Hughes' warning of impending disaster is brought to us, too. He has repeatedly warned us of our errors which, like those of the people of Elmet, are of arrogance and blindness, "braggart-browed complacency" ('Egghead'HIR.35), and of refusal and suppression of the natural energies. With the inevitability with which the ticking clock of Peter Pan's crocodile marks the approach of danger, these errors will (Hughes believes) lead us to disaster.

In *Remains of Elmet* Hughes' warnings are repeated most strongly. He uses this poetic and photographic re-creation of the fate of the Calder Valley not only as an example, but also as a powerful imaginative tool with which to stimulate us to awareness. At the same time, by describing for us certain events of his childhood he, as it were, establishes his credentials for this task. Hughes, however, is not merely a prophet of doom. In adopting the persona of the crocodile, Hughes shares the destructive and creative energies associated with this animal in mythology and folklore where, like its relatives the serpents and dragons, it is a symbol of fecundity and power. The crocodile is linked, too, with Leviathan who is "king over all the children of pride"(Job.XLI:34) and with "foresight and knowledge"(17). And the old belief that crocodile eggs were

magically hatched from the river mud by the power of the sun associates the beast with the natural alchemical power by means of which water, earth and sun are joined in the processes of creation.

Thus, with typical care and precision Hughes has chosen as a symbol of his own role a creature which represents the powers of the Goddess here on Earth. Being amphibious, it moves with shamanic ease between water and land, linking the two worlds to which we belong - the watery world from which we came in prehistoric times and which also (for Hughes) represents the unconscious energies, and our present land-based, reason-dominated world. Because of such shamanic powers, Hughes' prophecies of disaster are not untempered with hope. In his role of poet/shaman/chemist he not only poetically transforms the death of the Calder Valley society into a spiritual rebirth ('Heptonstall Cemetery' ROE.122), he also brings to us some transforming imaginative energies which might allow us to attain our own enlightenment and spiritual release.

Such enlightenment, however, as shown in *Cave Birds* and in the final poem of *Remains of Elmet*, will only be achieved when we recognise and accept our participation in the Universal Energies and our equality with all other living things in this respect; when we examine our roots as Hughes has done and finally understand, as he (like Blake) does, that for true knowledge our senses must be opened to the world around us.

In the reality of our world, in the eternal cycles of Nature where finite and infinite combine, lies the truth. And the truth is, as Hughes' book *What Is The Truth?*(18) so beautifully explains, that God, the supreme expression of the spirit, is in every living thing: that, in William Blake's words "every thing that lives is Holy" (MHH.27:chorus). So, as he has constantly done in all his work, and particularly in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes brings us back to the physical

world in order to show us the Universal Energies at the source of everything and to demonstrate the impossibility of existence without them. Beneath our feet, as beneath his, "joined with earth and engraved in rock"(ROE.125), lie the lessons of our mother - Nature.

XIVRIVER"The liturgy of the earth's tidings"(R.122)

In *River*, Hughes turns again to Nature for his inspiration, and, choosing the watery interface where he has been most aware of her powers since childhood, he immerses himself and his readers in the primordial energies which abound there. Again, he undertakes the hunting activities which, in the natural and the poetic worlds, have always been his means of communication with the energies, and, in the river waters of this sequence, he literally and metaphorically finds the Source of life. In *River*, as in *Remains of Elmet*, Hughes' vision of cosmic unity is presented through the actual. In the physical reality of Nature he sees the "perfect Whole", as Blake did, in "Minute Particulars, Organized"(Jer.91:20-21), and it is these "particulars" which he recreates accurately and evocatively in his poems. His awareness of "minute particulars" extends, also, to the words, images and symbols, that he chooses, and to the presentation of his work, where illustrations play an integral part. In *River*, as in all Hughes' most recent work, illustrations add visual stimuli which complement the auditory and imaginative powers of his poems and "extend implications, deepen tragedy, heighten insights", just as Leonard Baskin describes in his discourse on the illustrator's task¹.

Hughes' vision of the world, and the way in which he presents it, is holistic. In this respect, as Scigaj has ably demonstrated, it closely resembles the world-view of many Oriental philosophies, and of Taoism in particular(1). Yet,

¹The frequency with which Baskin's art illustrates Hughes' work argues for a concurrence of thought and purpose between them regarding the illustrator's role. Baskin writes that "Book illustration is meaningful, splendid, useful, apt and bright when it performs as a partner, paralleling the text; the illustrations should extend implications, deepen tragedy, heighten insights. The illustrations should stand as works, without the text; they should comment on the text, argue with it, elevate it and ultimately be an extension of it"(38).

in his concern for the Oriental influences he finds in Hughes' work, Scigaj overlooks the very Englishness of the world which Hughes' poetry describes. Despite the universal applicability of Hughes' beliefs and ideas, the concrete reality in which he grounds his imagery is overwhelmingly that of the English countryside. In addition, his poetic techniques and his ideas clearly owe much to the long history of English poetry and poets, and the most constant shaping influence on his work has been his English/Celtic background. New ideas, environments and experiences have added new dimensions to beliefs which have remained remarkably consistent over the years, but Hughes' work continually demonstrates the deep and persistent influence of his own "Anglo-Saxon-Norse-Celtic"(2) heritage.

Hughes' Goddess clearly belongs to the pre-Christian "deities of our instinct and ancestral memory", where, he believes, "our real mental life has its roots, where the paths to and from our genuine imagination run"(3). In all his varied representations of her, she typifies the description given by Anne Ross (in, *Pagan Celtic Britain*(4)) of "the basic Celtic goddess type"(5). She is

mother, warrior, hag, virgin, conveyor of fertility, of strong sexual appetite...giver of prosperity to the land, protectress of the flocks and herds.

(6).

Her presence gives the natural world which Hughes describes mythical and sacred dimensions, but it brings it, also, disruptive primitive and pagan energies, and because of this the uncompromising realism of Hughes' picture of Nature often seems excessively and disturbingly explicit. Yet, the constant and inseparable presence of life and death, the perpetual "travail of raptures and rendings"(R.122) which inform Hughes' perception of our mutable world (especially in the *Moortown Elegies*, which were published in the same year as *Remains of Elmet*), convey the combination of beauty and horror in Nature which evinces the presence of the Goddess.

River, in particular, shows the inspirational influence of Hughes' own Celtic "divine ancestor"(7), Brigantia ('High One'), a powerful goddess widely associated with rivers and with healing and fertile waters. Her territory spread far beyond Elmet to the whole of the North of England, and was probably even wider, since her name relates her to the Old Irish goddess, Brigid (later St.Bride), who was worshipped all over the British Isles(8). Appropriately, Brigid is not only a goddess of rivers and wells, she is also described in the Celtic Irish sagas as "a woman of poetry, and the poets worshipped her"(9). Her presence eddies and flows through *River*, enduring and changeable as the river-waters themselves which, for the Celts, were a

physical personification of the goddess, mirroring her own supernatural forces - strength, the powers of destruction, fertility.

(10).

She is fickle and subtle, sensuous and evil, young and old, two-faced like Brigid, whose description in the sagas asserts that "one side of her face was ugly, but the other side was very comely"(11). At times she may be "a beautiful idle woman" dreaming of a "love-potion" to seduce her lover to "copulation and death"(R.88), or else, an "evil" witch creating "blood-dark", "sick-bed darkness" with her "hemlock and nettle, and alder and oak"(R.76). She may be a "brown musically-moving beauty", a lithe daughter "remorselessly" fleeing her distraught and bleeding Earth-father(R.106), or a welcoming "grandmotherly" spirit, whose reassuring presence nevertheless exudes "a fishy nostalgia" for some sultry and exotic past(R.102) (the word 'fishy' beautifully captures the slightly suspect sweetness of the grandmother as well as her connection with the river).

Hughes' Goddess in *River* takes many forms. As the land and the elements personified she becomes a snowy "juicy bride", joined in a sensual, sexual embrace with the river(R.14); she is a mother, whose breasts are the hills where flowing springs form "the shining paps that nurse the river"(R.30); or she is

a goddess, whose son, a sacrificed god "fallen from heaven, lies across / the lap of his mother" as in a *pieta*. She is present, too, as the river creatures, linked to them by Celtic and other mythologies, but always embodied in animals, birds, and insects which are part of the English countryside: the "merry mink"²(R.32); the riddling white heron(R.20) and the "abortion doctor" cormorant(R.90); the hermaphrodite eel; and the long-legged, predatory insects - Damselfly, "blood-mote mosquito"(R.90) and gnat, and the spiders which lurk, watchful and industrious, in several of the poems(ROE.56,26,96,120). The Goddess is amongst the flowers, too, her nature expressed in the "too fleshy perfume" of the hawthorn(R.20), and in the heavy "nightfall pall of Balsam"(R.102); in the exuberance of primroses and "wild, stumpy daffodils"(R.22); and in the threat of the honeysuckle's "fangs"(R.68).

In *River*, as in all Hughes' other work, the Goddess's presence is all pervasive, but sharing equal prominence with her in this sequence are the fish - Salmon and Trout - which "worship the source, bowed and fervent"(R.118). These are the shamanic guides which move at will through the fluid, mercurial interface between this world and the Otherworld of the imagination, drawing Hughes with them. They are the familiars of the Goddess, gaining their life and energy from her waters, absorbing her magical and sinister powers, and sharing her duplicity. They, too, were revered by the Celts, because of their kinship with the five sacred salmon of Celtic mythology who once fed on the fruit of the nine hazels of wisdom, "of inspiration and of the knowledge of poetry", that grew over their "well beneath the sea"(12).

Hughes clearly shares the Celtic reverence for these fish, which he describes as "holy" and magical. Like the Celts, he links them closely with

²This mink shares its ancestry with Hughes' Otter (R.L46), with the weasel "demons"(ROE.63) in *Remains of Elmet*, and with the mysterious "dark other" whose "pad-clusters", like the mink's "stars"(R.32), dot the river margins at dawn(R.116).

inspiration and poetry. For him, however, it is not eating the fish which "brings all knowledge and all poetry" (as the Celts believed(13)), but the ritual pursuit of them, the hunt, undertaken with a bagful of "lures and hunter's medicine enough / for a year in the Pleistocene"(R.38).

Hunting, whether for fish or for poetry, is Hughes' passion, and the means by which he effects the "time-warped"(R.50) movement between one 'reality' and another, such as he describes, for example, in 'Go Fishing'(R.42). This is the "ancient thirst"(R.56) which draws him to the "brink of water", where Celtic poets thought "poetry was revealed to them"(14). In *River*, water is "the generator", "the power line", "a chiasm of birth", a "medicinal mercury creature"(R.16), and Hughes soaks up its refreshing energy

through every membrane
As if the whole body were a craving mouth,
As if a hunted ghost were drinking - sud-flecks
Grass-bits and omens
Fixed in the glass.

('River Barrow'R.56).

The "river-fetch"(R.108) exerts a hypnotic attraction which can whirl him into the vortex like

the epileptic's strobe,

The yell of the Muezzin
Or the "Bismillah!"
That spins the dancer in

(R.108).

It can lull him with its "smooth healing" peace, and leave him "half-unearthed"(R.56). Yet, it is the encounters with the fish, real or poetic, which activate Hughes' primitive hunting energies. It is these encounters which revive the "telepathic"(R.38) link between hunter and hunted ("eerie how you know when it's coming"(R.48)), and provide a new, energising exposure to the dangerous, scalp-prickling, necessary, primordial and primeval powers.

In the watery abyss, the fish are "rainbow monster-structures"(R.42); the "black and crimson"(R.10) "King salmon"(R.84) is a "death-patched hero"(R.110); and the "August salmon" with its "bleeding gills", "red-black body" and "dragonized head" is "a god, on earth for the first time / with the clock of love and death in his body"(R.64). There are mythical dimensions to these creatures, too, suggestive of sacrificed gods, and in Hughes' descriptions of them there are echoes of Blake's vision of Leviathan:

his forehead was divided into streaks of green and purple like those on a tyger's forehead: soon we saw his mouth and red gills hang just above the raging foam, tinging the black deep with beams of blood, advancing towards us with all the fury of a spiritual existence.

(‘A Memorable Fancy’MHH.18:28-33).

So, each encounter with fish becomes a rehearsal of the mythical confrontation with the marine-monster Tiamat/Leviathan, the serpent of chaos and creation: a new acknowledgement of the destructive/creative powers which pervade our world, and which must repeatedly be faced and reconciled by each of us. Beneath the "water mirror"(R.56) which draws Hughes to its edge with its "solid mystery", in the "sliding place"(R.56) where imagination and reality, subconscious and conscious, meet, lurk submarine monsters. Their "torpedo concentration", "mouth-aimed intent" and "savagery" await him in a menacing "stillness"(R.62), disturbed only by their pulsing gills. Hughes' awareness of these watchful predators, and his references to prehistoric and mythological eras ("Pleistocene"(R.38), "Palaeolithic"(R.50), "Milesian"(R.44)), create an atmosphere filled with primitive terrors into which he ventures with trepidation, a "pilgrim for fish"(R.80), confronting and conquering his fears like a questing hero, and returning, ultimately, to create poetic order from a chaos of sensations and thoughts.

Typically, the fish which Hughes hunts in *River* and elsewhere - Salmon, Trout and Pike, and even the predatory luminescent deep-sea fish,

Photostomias, of which he wrote in *Moortown*(M.107-9) - do have a factual connection with prehistoric geological eras. All, until very recently, were included in the biological Order, Salmoniformes, from which all present bony fish are thought to have evolved³. All differ little in form from their fossil ancestors, which provide the first evidence of the existence of marine vertebrates. It is believed, too, that from such marine vertebrates as these, terrestrial vertebrates, such as we, evolved(15). So, Hughes calls these fish, with some justification, "my fellow-aliens from prehistory"(R.46), and "miraculous fossils"(R.80). And it is equally typical of the care and precision of Hughes' work that his choice of the latter epithet should convey more than the 'miracle' of these creatures' lineage, being linked, as it is in 'Gulkana'(R.80), with the eternal, the mythical and the holy.

In *River*, the "miraculous" aspects of the fish have very little to do with their importance to science. Rather, they stem from Hughes' own special reverence for the fish, and the connections which they facilitate for him between his inner and outer worlds. By re-enacting his encounters with the fish Hughes remakes these connections, and, in so doing, creates his poems. He also attempts to share his experience with others by involving them imaginatively in the process and, thereby, transmitting to them some of the fishes' power. In effect, the fish, like other aquatic creatures in Hughes' work, become powerful and functional symbols of hope. They provide a natural example of reconciled energies and they facilitate such a reconciliation in Mankind. In his poetry, Hughes exploits their biological, geological and mythological significance to give them the imaginative life and energy they need for this purpose.

³Since the early 1970's Salmoniformes with luminescent organs, including Photostomias, have been classified as a separate order, Stomiiformes.(39).

The extent of the power which Hughes ascribes to fish can be judged by examining the *Moortown* poems, 'Photostomias'(1,2 and 3)(M.107-109), whilst keeping in mind his beliefs in the nature and imminence of the primordial energies. Photostomias are "small, predatory, luminous fish of the great deeps", creatures of the "Gulf", and in them Hughes finds the perfect natural symbol for reconciled contradictory energies. Each fish is, literally, a light-bearer of the dark abyss, a grotesque creature of horror and of beauty, which Hughes links with "the tiger in his robe of flame"(M.108). Like Blake's tiger, and Hughes'('Tiger Psalm'M.150), it is an embodiment of contraries. Like the tiger, it is part of the natural order, an exquisite balance of form and function; it eats and is eaten - is "a feast charged with lights, / searching for guests"(M.107) - but death in its jaws is "apotheosis", resorption into the divine cosmic order. So, like the tiger, it "blesses with a fang"(M.151), kills and "does not kill but opens a path / neither of Life nor of Death"(M.151) but to a vision of paradoxical unity through which we may glimpse the perfect whole.

With punning accuracy, Hughes calls Photostomias, "the radiant host"(M.107): communion with them may enlighten our own dark, spiritual depths, just as they light the watery depths of our planet. Each is "Jehovah", "a decalogue / a rainbow"(M.109), a sign and a promise of some greater, divine order, and, like the salmon in *River*, each of these "creatures of light"(R.72) may be seen as a manifestation of the polymorphous Hermes/Mercury, whose guiding, spiritual light constantly illuminates Hughes' most recent work.

Photostomias, as Hughes makes clear, are not unique in the guidance and promise they offer. Not only do their close relatives, Salmon and Trout, share their "holy" and sinister powers and impart their own blessing, enlightenment and apotheosis (as the "massed" salmon do in 'That Morning'R.72), but such qualities are present, also, in Nature's more common

and seemingly ordinary creatures. Strange and rare as Photostomias may appear in their inhospitable environment, they are no more miraculous a manifestation of "the organising and creative energy itself"(16) than any other living thing. They are

no further
From belief's numb finger
Than the drab-jacketed
Glow-worm beetle, in a spooky lane,
On a wet evening.
The Peacock butterfly, pulsing
On a September thistle-top
Is just as surely a hole
In what was likely.

(M.108).

Each life form is equally a "miraculous" crystallization of cosmic energy, a "star hardened" miracle of survival, like the tiny, hardy, heather (cf. 'Heather' in *Remains of Elmet*): each is, also, part of the perpetual cycles of death and rebirth, and we may glimpse beneath its "created glory"(17) the death and horror which are a necessary part of its existence in this "fallen World" (which is what Hughes calls our world in *River*(R.72)). Because of this, Hughes turns constantly to Nature in order to demonstrate the necessary and harmonious interaction of contrary energies in Earthly existence. In particular, however, it is the birth of beauty from horror, the relationship between renewal and sacrifice, *mana* and death, and the creation of spiritual gold from earthly dross, which fascinates him and which lies at the heart of his beliefs and, hence, his work.

Beneath the wonder of natural life, Hughes is aware, always, of the necessity and inevitability of death. Our own awareness of this (whether conscious or subconscious) may cause us some fear and horror, but Hughes believes that we are aware of something more - a divine horror which is, in Lorca's words, "beyond death"(18) - and it is this he discusses in 'The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly'(19). As well as in Nature, Hughes discovers this divine

horror, also, in great art and music, and, attempting to define it, he calls it "a secretion from the gulf itself", an exudation of the "ineffable, infinite affliction of being" which connects, "as it seems, everything to everything, and everything to the source of itself"(20). This is Lorca's *Duende* which lies at "the core of life, like the black ultimate resource of the organism"(21), and it is *mana* - the healing "ectoplasmic essence" for which payment must be made through suffering, but which Hughes describes as, "more than metaphorically, redemption incarnate"(22).

In many ways, Hughes' discussion of the source of inspiration in his friend Baskin's work, applies equally to his own. His quest for understanding of our world and our position in it is, also, the "quest for *mana*", and the forms which this has taken in Hughes' work over the years conform to his own assessment of epic as "the story of *mana*"(23). Epic, according to Hughes, displays recognisable patterns which parallel the "saga" of "the search for and finding of *mana*", and these recur in

three historically familiar forms, with religious quest as the most civilised form, and heroic epic as the barbaric form, and the shaman's dream of his flight as the prototypical and, as it were, biological form,....

(24).

Since *Wodwo*, Hughes poetic questing has conformed to these patterns of epic, and, whatever the truth or validity of Hughes' beliefs, his certainty that some great, healing, cosmic force exists can, after *Cave Birds*, no longer be doubted. This force is the source of renewal which he tries to reach by deliberately exposing himself to the "sinister beauty"(25) of Nature both in his life and in his work, and it is this sinister beauty which pervades *Remains of Elmet* and *River*.

River combines all the "historically familiar forms" of epic of which Hughes wrote. Elements of religious quest, heroic epic and shamanic flight are all readily apparent. This is the "river-epic"(R.28) in which Hughes sings "the

liturgy of the earth's tidings"(R.22), and which is, ultimately, a creation of beauty and hope - an optimistic assertion of everlasting healing and renewal in a cosmos where "only birth matters"(R.124). In his river-epic, Hughes seeks the Source in as many ways as he can. His evocation of the Goddess and her realm, his use of mythology (the Celtic mythology of his heritage, in particular), his care and concern for the musical elements of his work, and his persistent efforts to activate all our senses, are essential to his task. Besides these, there are elements of religious devotion, heroic quest, shamanic flight, alchemical transmutation, and the activation of the most primitive human energies, all enmeshed in the cosmic patterns which govern our existence. All of these elements become part of a flux of energies which mingle, like the organic elements of Nature, to create the river-epic, and it needs only a close examination of a few poems to appreciate the skill with which Hughes achieves this.

Fundamental to the healing purpose of the river-epic, is the representation of water as the source of life itself. This not only reflects Mankind's most primitive cosmogonic beliefs, as expressed in mythology and religion, it is also a currently accepted scientific 'fact'. In 'Flesh of Light'(R.16), Hughes uses cosmic and alchemical imagery to describe the river's origin and purpose, creating from its shining, reflective surface and its fluid, sinuous flow, a materialisation (a "flesh") of elemental and spiritual light. The water, which is a "smelting" from the cosmic "core", is also the "medicinal mercury creature", the mythical, "fallen", cosmic snake of chaos and renewal that the Alchemists adopted as a symbol of the alchemical process of enlightenment and re-birth.

Using imagery which combines light and energy with their natural and material manifestations on Earth, Hughes conveys the pure light/energy character of water. From the "core-flash" (suggesting the 'Big Bang' creation of the universe) and the resulting atomic dance, comes the fluid "power-line" that

carries this energy to Earth and brings the dry "bones" life. Remaining faithful to scientific concepts of energy transfer, Hughes suggests the conversion of light to electricity, the precipitation of rain, and the biological utilisation of light and water to produce energy, but his imagery is far from coldly scientific. Amidst the initial chaos of creation he pictures something alive and beautiful that "crawls and glimmers among the heather-topped stones", then "brims out" in abundance "for cattle to wade".

The abundance spills over into Hughes' next image, which is as dense with meanings as the dark, warm bodies of the cattle are "dense" with the life-giving energy they imbibe. Lifting their streaming muzzles from the water, the cattle "unspool" it as if unwinding the thread of life, and Hughes' use of the word "glair", its association with egg-albumen and its paronomasia with 'glare' (meaning 'dazzling light'), convey the importance of the role that cattle play in the transmission of the life-energies. It is this fecundity of association, as much as the power and beauty of the cattle image, that suggest the presence of the Goddess whose mythological representation as a Cow is ancient and widespread.

There is a religious aspect to the creative powers of the water, too, introduced into the poem by the use of words like "chrism", "anoints" and "aura", words which are more usually associated with religious ceremonies but which, here, convey the spiritual nature of the "medicinal mercury creature" and give greater meaning to the "blossoming" it engenders. Similarly, by choosing the word "blossoming" Hughes not only suggests the creation of something beautiful, he also creates resonances with his use of this word in earlier poems where he links it with symbols of *mana*: his tiger, for example, is The "Beast in Blossom" (M.151); and the Earthly light-bearers in 'Photostomias' are

Blossoms
 Pushing from under blossoms -
 From the one wound's depth
 Of congealments and healing.

(M.108).

So, the blossoming of the sea in 'Flesh of Light' is an image which conjures more than the evolutionary blossoming of Earth following its creation: it conveys, also, a promise of healing, re-creation and continuance.

Finally, there is an aspect to the poem which is consistent with its primary position in the sequence in the American, Harper & Row, edition(26), and which is shared by 'That Morning Before Christmas'(R.8), the poem holding primary position in the English edition of *River*. It is an aspect which is closely connected with Hughes' alchemical/shamanic purposes in *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*, and it has much to do (as will be explained) with religious faith in the power of sacred rituals to transcend the material dimension of their origin and renew Mankind's link with the divine. In both 'Flesh of Light' and 'That Morning Before Christmas', Hughes uses poetic ritual to re-enact creation. In the first poem, Hughes begins by describing creation on a cosmic level, then moves to the delicate potential of Earthly life - the "unfolding baby fists" of the ferns, and the eye-like fish-eggs in the "throbbing aura" of the river water⁴. Except for the poet, Mankind plays no part in these events. The second poem, however, describes a ritual in which human beings act a god-like part, performing "solemn", "precarious obstetrics" which will ensure an abundance of salmon. Thus, they participate in the creation of life on Earth, an event which Eliade describes as "the central mystery of the world"(27). Other of Eliade's views may, perhaps, give us insight into Hughes' likely purpose in beginning his poetic

⁴This image recalls the Alchemists' symbolic use of fish-eyes to represent the spiritual *scintilla* in the depths of the dark impure substance (MC.51)

sequence with such ritual re-creations, for there is much in *The Sacred and the Profane* that is relevant to Hughes' work in general, and to *River* in particular.

Hughes' view of Nature as a living organism, and his belief in the knowledge and enlightenment it can show us, accord well with the view of the world Eliade attributes to "religious man" (the term is used in its broadest sense as applying to one who acknowledges some superhuman, omnipotent, omnipresent power). "For religious man", Eliade writes

Nature is never only "natural"; it is always fraught with religious value....the different modalities of the sacred [are manifested] in the very structure of the world and of cosmic phenomena.

The earth...presents itself as universal mother and nurse. The cosmic rhythms manifest order, harmony, permanence, fecundity. The cosmos as a whole is an organism at once *real, living* and *sacred*[sic]; it simultaneously reveals the modalities of being and of sacrality.

(28).

The similarity of these views to Hughes' beliefs is clear. What is not so clear, perhaps, is the resemblance between the epic of the river's year which Hughes presents in *River*, and the annual festivals and rituals which Eliade describes as being practiced by religious man in order to re-actualize primordial, mythological and sacred time and ensure the continuance of the world.

Sacred time, Eliade stresses, is cyclical and reversible, and he observes that "for religious man of archaic cultures" not only is the world annually renewed, but it is resanctified:

with each new year it recovers[sic] its original sanctity, the sanctity that it possessed when it came from the Creator's hand.

(29).

Through religious ritual, Mankind attempts to re-establish cosmic time and to briefly enter the eternal dimension, communicate with the divine, and share its powers. Annual religious festivals, therefore, are more than a ritual performance

of "acts and gestures" which "imitate the paradigmatic models established by the gods and mythical ancestors", they are a ritual recovery of primordial time by means of which people ensure that the world is renewed and resanctified.

In the two poems with which Hughes has, variously, begun his *River* sequence there are recognisable parallels with this ritual re-creation of the world and of life on Earth. 'That Morning Before Christmas', in particular, resembles one of the most widespread of annual religious festivals (and one which is discussed by Eliade in the above terms), that of the ritual cultivation of important food by means of which Mankind ensures the fertility of the land. The slow penetration of the sun's warmth into the "brand new stillness" of the dead and frozen world; the rhythmic, precise, and painstaking actions of the men collecting the "vital broth"; the solemnity and beauty of the poem's atmosphere and music; and the way the events and the poem are marked with the prints of the fox (a symbol of fecund life-energies of particular significance to Hughes since 'The Thought-Fox'(HIR.14)); all these things suggest the ritual and spiritual nature of the events described.

As Hughes' river-epic progresses through its annual cycle, other ritual re-actualizations of cosmic time occur: the mating of the gods, in 'Japanese River Tales'(R.14), for example; the "resurrection", in 'Under the Hill of Centurions'(R.36); the battle with the marine monster, in 'Gulkana'(R.80); and the sacrificial death of the god-"hero", in 'October Salmon'(R.110). Hughes, therefore, appears to ritually re-enact the primordial, mythical paradigms in the *River* sequence and, in so doing, he confronts the inherent dangers which exposure to the primordial energies involves. Through such encounters, through his own involvement in the events the poems describe, and through his creative striving, he voluntarily makes the payments which the life-energies, the *mana*, demand. And, just as the river waters channel the source energies "to the

roots"(R.16) of the Earthly sea and bring about its "blossoming", so the flow of Hughes' poetic sequence seems designed to channel the life-energies of the sacred rituals into the sea of the human imagination to create another, more spiritual blossoming.

From whatever aspect of Hughes' thought one approaches *River*, it is soon apparent that the waters are for him, as they have always been for religious man, the ultimate source of life, energy and renewal. The natural rhythms of the river's year provide him with a unifying theme and a rich source of natural imagery, and by linking these rhythmic patterns to events in the cosmic year, and weaving into them allusions to common religious and mythological epics, he achieves a broader, healing, purpose and makes this work an extension of the shamanic/alchemical task he undertook in *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*. It seems unlikely, therefore, that the sequence resulted simply from Peter Keen's "desire to photograph a river, source to mouth, through an entire twelve-month cycle" (as Scigaj claims(30)); especially since the Elmet poems concerning Hughes' encounters with fish in the waters of the Calder Valley seem to clearly prefigure the move in *River* towards direct poetic exploration of the aquatic interface between physical and metaphysical worlds. In effect, the waters in *River* become the cosmic Centre of Hughes' world: through them he enters dimensions which extend beyond the physical and the temporal and, in these moments of altered perception, it is fish which are his most powerful shamanic and imaginative guides.

In *River* it is clear, too, that Hughes' previous poetic ventures into the metaphysical world have given him confidence in his beliefs and powers. Now, he moves directly to the source of his inspiration, wholly committing himself to an epic journey in which the cosmic rhythms of Nature draw him deeply into the world of pure energy and spirit. By carefully shaping the *River* sequence around

these cosmic rhythms he facilitates intimate contact with the energies from which his poems flow: he achieves, also, a protective ritual framework which allows the poet to share in the regenerative energies he evokes, at a time when he is less distanced from their dangers than ever before.

Such religious and ritual aspects in this sequence suggest that it is a mistake to identify Hughes too closely with its fisherman persona, for, although he frequently reflects Hughes' own difficulties, emotions and concerns, this persona is essentially an epic hero - a sensitive pilgrim who provides the human perspective in the river scene, and with whom the reader, as well as the poet, can identify.

Like the questing Everyman hero of *Cave Birds*, Hughes' new fisherman-poet-persona is initially hampered by his analytical mind, his limited perspectives, and his closed senses. Fundamental to his quest for unity with Nature is his need to reconcile the disparate aspects of his being. He is, however, aware of his difficulties, and aware, too, of his own primitive hunting instincts and the way in which these link him with the elemental energies. Throughout his quest, the fish, and especially the salmon, are his totem creatures: their ability to return unerringly to the source of their existence parallels his own epic quest for the source of truth and knowledge. So, he holds them in special reverence, empathising with their suffering and struggles, and seeing in them the "epic poise"(R.114) and the acceptance of sacrifice which he, too, must learn in order to be part of the "machinery of heaven". Seeking their knowledge and guidance, he hunts for them as if they held the Grail or the Philosophers' Stone.

Just as the annual return of wild salmon and trout to the river is governed by the machinery of Heaven, so Mankind, too, is subject to the natural rhythms. Despite Scigaj's claims(31), the poet-persona is not distanced from Nature in the early poems but is demonstrably affected by its powers: nor do his

struggles for direct communion with the energies end with the moment of spiritual communion which occurs in 'That Morning'(R.72). Like the salmon, his physical energy increases as the sun's power strengthens, then fades as the year moves towards its close: and, like the salmon, his journey, his struggles and the sacrifice, must be constantly repeated.

The poet-persona's responses to Nature begin in the opening poem of the Faber edition. At the first melting penetration of the sun's life-energies into the frozen mid-winter world of 'The Morning Before Christmas'(R.8-12) his whole body responds. His "every cell" is "dazzle-stamped" by the sharp beauty of his vision of the creation of a new-wrought, Golden world. He suffers, too, the "painful", anaesthetised numbness and death which attend the birth of the "ticking egg"(R.18) in 'New Year'. Spring softens his shadow(R.22), as it softens the contours of the world with new growth; and, tree-like, he shares "the fraternity of survival" and the "hope of new leaf"(R.24) that springtime brings.

As the pulse of Nature quickens, so the poet-persona's imaginative responses to the burgeoning world become more varied, and his link with the fish grows stronger. Looking down into the "melted chocolate"(R.28) of the river, he experiences a change in perspective, seeing his own world as if through the salmon's "lidless eyes". Under the expansive influence of the sun, the "refrozen dot-prints"(R.12) of the midwinter fox give way to the "stars" of the "jolly goblin" mink - a primitive "black bagful of hunter's medicine"(R.32) crackling with life, and suddenly the river swarms with fertile creatures which are "possessed" (like "swine, bees and women"(R.34)) by the uncontrollable procreative energies of the Goddess.

At first, in 'Salmon-taking Times'(R.34), the persona stands "clear" of this flood of creatures, wisely acknowledging, and acquiescing to, the Goddess's power. Later, wooed by the river's gentler mood, he tries to share in its magic.

Like a clumsy bridegroom, he crumples the river's "gossamer bridal veils" and destroys the delicate "membranes": and, in so doing, he achieves a "religious moment" of creative union between his own physical and spiritual worlds. This important moment of wholeness and communion with Nature is reflected in the structure, as well as the content, of the poem. With great skill, Hughes brings together the conflicting elements of the creative act that the Celts symbolised in the half-faces of Brigantia. The tumultuous, unswerving, carnal urgings of the early lines give way to a mood of sensuous, fragile delight; the demonic power turns to tenderness; and, finally, the destruction of the protective membranes that separate one individual from another, one reality from another, leads to the moment of spiritual communion, beauty and promise that completes the poem.

The protagonist, by contrast with his own brief and clumsy communion with the Source, sees the ease with which the fishy bridegrooms play their part in Nature's pattern. They weave their lives joyously and unquestioningly into the fabric of the world,

All singing and
Toiling together,
Wreathing their metals
Into the warp and weft of the lit water -

(‘Under the Hill of Centurions’R.36).

Similarly, he ironically compares his own lumbering, alien presence in the river with the consummate skill of the Cormorant, which can dissolve at will into the fluid matrix and become one with the energies there(‘A Cormorant’R.38).

Throughout the first few months of the year, a period of submerged but steady gestation and growth, the poet-persona shares the current of life in the river. By April, the "deep labour"(‘Stump Pool in April’R.40) is almost over, and the time has come for the new-made spirits (constantly suggested in the sequence through images of ghostly doubles) "to alter" - "to fly". Nursed by the elements, a

new river, with "sinewy bulgings" and "gluey splittings" that resemble a snake sloughing its skin, tries "to rise out of the river"(R.40); and, now, the poet-persona resolves('Go Fishing'R.42) to "loosen" his spirit self (his ghost) into the river's elemental "mesh" of water and light, where the eternal flux, "circling and flowing and hover-still", can heal and renew him.

As yet, his spirit is immature, and the longed-for melding of human energies with those of the Source is fraught with the difficulties of divesting his ghostly self of its unwieldy, and often ludicrous, physical "clobber"(R.46) (as the mock-heroic tale of the 'Milesian Encounter on the Sligachan'(R.44-50) confirms). Nonetheless, there are moments of disembodiment, when the sheer power of the waters, the "superabundance of spirit"(R.46), makes the persona feel "a little bit giddy / ghostly"(R.46), and when the "weird"(R.48) sensations of the hunt alter his normal perception of the world.

Still, for the time being, the hero's direct encounters with the elemental spirit of the river are brief and elusive, and it slips away from him "into the afterworld" like the loved, but lost, "darkfish", 'Ophelia'(R.52). Drawn to the waters by this spirit, seduced by the honeyed, timeless, mercurial magic of the river, and immune to the literal blood-sacrifice of midge-bites that the Goddess demands (even whilst pouring over him her honeysuckled plenty), he haunts the river-bank like a "hunted ghost" from an ancient tomb('River Barrow'R.56). Meanwhile, the cosmic dance of the Sun and Moon continues, and the elements spill their Heavenly treasure of "spirit and blood" onto the "slag of the world"('West Dart'R.58). In this Earthly paradise of liquid light, this inverted Heaven which the elements create, the observer sees an entranced host of fish, "strangers"(R.60), who pursue their destiny with holy and selfless fervour as the river's "sunken calendar unfurls"(R.64).

Watching the fish transfixed in the sun-dappled dawn-stillness of the summer river, the poet-persona is aware of the elemental Otherworld that they inhabit('Strangers'R.60). Briefly, he perceives his own familiar "homebody" world as "merely" decorating their "heaven", yet he is aware, too, of being separated from them: far from being able to share their blissful "samadhi", his intrusion disturbs the spiritual unity, "wobbles their firmament" and destroys his own vision of the "holy ones", shrinking and refocusing his perceptions to the material dimension. The fish, however, have "got him"('After Moonless Midnight'R.62). The magical fascination they exert holds him "deeper / with blind invisible hands". So, he is attuned to the waiting power in the river and sees, in the mature, over-ripe, beauty of the god-like salmon, the pathos of its sacrificial "execution and death", which is part of the harvest yet to come('An August Salmon'R.64).

At the height of summer, at the heart of the *River* cycle, the mellow, golden fruitfulness of the river scene is tinged with a "darkening"('The Vintage of River is Unending'R.66) that presages the Bacchanalian overflow of Nature's luxuriant power. In Celtic Britain, this climax of summer was marked by the orgiastic fertility rites of Lughnasad, the August festival of the god, Lugh Lamfhada('of the long arm'), who was smith, harper, poet, hero and sorcerer(32). It was also the festival-time of pastoral gods, such as the horned god, Cocius, of Northern Britain (related to Cernunnos), the Celtic Mercury ("protector of herds and flocks"(33)), Pan, and Dionysus.

'Night Arrival of Seatrout'(R.68) is Hughes' own celebration of the August harvest festival. In it, the Goddess and her Celtic horned consort are almost palpably present, rioting through the massive richness of tossing oakwoods, surrounded by the threatening sensuality of full-blossomed herbs. In the central image of the poem, something strange, dangerous, and beautiful

erupts from the Underworld through the "river's hole", its nature-spirit identity conveyed by the confusing conflation of its description with that of the "upside-down buried heaven" of the river. Hughes' skill, here, in evoking an entity which is imaginatively apprehended through a few vivid attributes, yet which remains undefined, is masterly, and somehow, "something" which symbolizes everything enters the reader's mind. "Dripping stars", like a river-animal shaking off water, it "snarls, moon-mouthed and shivers", then, as the lobworms couple⁵ and Earth covertly rejoices, the image crystallizes into that of a god/shaman "out in hard corn",

Running and leaping
With a bat in his drum

(R.68).

Hughes, in this poem, enacts his own, parallel, shamanic ritual, using his poetic powers to link our imaginative and rational worlds. He stirs our senses with drumming and singing rhythms, mixing repeated heavy beats (such as those which begin the lines of the first stanza) with the emphatic rhythmical energy of words like "plunging", "tossing", "shattering", "running", and "leaping". At the same time, he threads the drumming music with the sounds of alliteration, sibilance, and assonance, to create an atmosphere in which we sense the combined beauty and horror of the "Honeysuckle hanging her fangs"; feel the weird and frightening disturbance of "the dark mist", as the "oak's mass / comes plunging" through it "tossing dark antlers"; and appreciate, in the "snarls and shivers", "stars", "saliva", and the secret "singing", the hissing undercurrent of devious serpentine energy which accompanies this sudden intrusion of imagination into our rational world.

⁵This image appropriately suggests the twined snakes on Mercury's caduceus.

Having evoked this powerful and dangerous spirit in his sequence, Hughes now brings the Sun god, in Kingfisher form, to control it ('Kingfisher' R.70). In addition, he uses powerful shamanic and alchemical symbols, poetically wielding the shaman's magical crystal and using the alchemical process of crystallization to control the spirit-bird's movements. So, the kingfisher vanishes from the poem "into vibrations", only to re-appear in "a shower of prisms" with its "beak full of ingots", and to vanish and re-appear again, a

Spark, sapphire, refracted
From beyond water....

The capitalising of the word 'God' in 'The Kingfisher', also suggests the Heavenly, spiritual nature of its presence, as opposed to the pagan earthiness of the horned "god"(uncapitalised) of the previous poem. And Hughes clearly marries Heavenly and Earthly energies together in this poem, embodying them in a creature which has a known and understandable presence in the river scene, but which, nevertheless, has mythological associations (with the halcyon of Greek mythology, for example) that make it a suitable symbol of divine promise. It is important, too, that Hughes' kingfisher, this "rainbow" of promise through which "God / marries a pit / of fishy mire", is described as "an angler", thereby confirming the symbolic importance of the fisherman figure in Hughes' work (particularly in *River*), and identifying the heroic role which Hughes allots him.

In *River*, Hughes likens the fisherman to a Japanese Noh dancer, in whose performance, spirit and mind, Heaven and Earth, are linked ('Eighty and Still Fishing for Salmon' R.100). Both execute a "dance" of primitive simplicity which brings them into perfect harmony with Nature. Similarly, in old age and in art, when body and spirit "are lost" and the man seems lifeless and "indifferent" behind his "ritual mask", then, he is closest to Nature. Rooted, like an "old

rowan", in the elemental world, he remains "loyal to inbuilt bearings, touch of weather", and so, reaches unity with the "vacant swirl" of the cosmos.

Long before old age, however, the fisherman-persona in *River* achieves moments of unity in which Heaven and Earth are joined and he experiences the perfect elemental harmony of "the end" of his "journey". Such a moment is described in 'That Morning'(R.72), when, at a point in the sequence when Nature's energies have burst through the fragile membrane separating them from the rational human world, a divine apotheosis occurs: mediated by the "power of salmon", the "golden, imperishable", spiritual body is separated from "its doubting thought", and human beings become part of the divine energies,

alive in a river of light
Among creatures of light, creatures of light.

The slow rhythms of the poem; the dizzying image of the world "capsizing slowly", with which it begins; the "dazzle" of golden light in which the visionary experience takes place; and the biblical language in which Hughes describes the "sign"; all mark this as a moment of divine "blessing" and revelation - a moment in which selfhood and materialism are relinquished, and "we" (by the use of the plural Hughes includes us all in his vision) enter the eternal, elemental, cosmic dimension. This is a supreme religious moment of enlightenment and healing. It is the expression of *mana*. Significantly, the photograph which accompanies this poem, showing "a hawk-moth...on a meadow thistle" (a creature of the night caught in a glow of sunlight(R.127, note 73)), almost exactly illustrates Hughes' earlier symbol of *mana* in 'Photostomias'(M.108) - "The Peacock butterfly, pulsing / on a September thistle-top". For the poet-persona, and for us, the revelatory nature of this experience lies not only in the enlightenment which takes place, and in the apprehension of the divine light within each individual, but also, since no actual

physical death occurs, in the promise such a "sign" conveys of the spiritual rebirth this divine light may bring at the end of our mortal journey.

In 'River'(R.74), the title poem of the sequence, this symbolic moment of communion and promise between Man and God is repeated in the image of the sacrificed and risen god which dominates the poem. This is the central symbol of Christianity: it is central, too, in the Norse mythology which Hughes identifies as part of his heritage, and in many mythologies and religions which are based on the natural, vegetative cycles of death and rebirth. Now, the cosmic "river of light" in which the creatures of the previous poem bathed becomes the Earthly manifestation of the sacrificed god. Embodied in the waters which issue "from heaven", he is literally "broken" and "scattered" in our physical world, and his energy is blocked and restrained by human contrivance, so that, often, he hangs from constructed dam-doors like Odin "hung by the heels" at the door of the Underworld of his mother, Earth. Literally, water will split dry tombs and will rise in floods amidst lightning that rends the veils of clouds and rain, "swallowing" up death and corruption. Then, through the physical cycles of evaporation and precipitation, it will "wash itself of all deaths", so remaining "inviolable" and "immortal". In this, and in the "spirit brightness" of water, is the god's promise of perpetual renewal. And the Biblical symbolism of the split tombs, the "sign in the sky", and the "rending of veils", conveys, too, the promise of resurrection, "in a time after times", at the end of our physical and temporal world.

"So the river is a god" whose agony will bring redemption, and the horror of his sacrifice will blossom into beauty. Just as Hughes describes Leonard Baskin's 'Hanged Man' as "a chrysalis. A giant larva"(R.20), from which will emerge the symbolic Dragonfly ("the agony wholly redeemed, healed - and

transformed into its opposite, by *mana*"), so his own sacrificed god, the river, accomplishes the same miraculous metamorphosis and transforms death into life.

Metamorphosis in dragonflies and other such creatures takes time. Between the death of the old form and the birth of the new, there lies a period of darkness and seeming chaos in which tissues dissolve and reform, and the cellular matter of the individual is, as it were, cleansed, purified and transmuted. Similarly, in the epic journey of the hero, the moment of enlightenment in which the healing power of *mana* suffuses his whole being does not end the story: his task, like that of the shaman, of Christ, of Job, and of other visionary prophets and epic heroes, must be completed by returning with this healing power to the darkness of the sick world and confronting the evils therein.

This pattern of enlightenment followed by a return to darkness is present, too, in Nature's cycles and in the cosmic year. Following the summer solstice, which marks the peak of the sun's expansive influence on Earth, the energies turn inward, and the sun's power, trapped within the cells of living organisms, nurtures the seeds of a future generation. Metaphorically, the solar divinities of many mythologies repeat this pattern, entering the darkness of the Underworld to await release and re-birth.

The epic hero of *River*, also, returns from the river of light to wade in a dark, Earthly, "tree-caverned river" ('Last Night' R.76), but now, his awareness of evil colours all his perceptions, and he seems to move through a "dying" Underworld river of "blood", where even the fish seem evil. Now, he becomes aware of the sickness of humanity as it impinges on the river scene, recording in 'Gulkana' (R.78-84), for the first time in the sequence, the "supermarket refuse, dogs, wrecked pick-ups" that mark the presence of people in the landscape. It is as if Man, like the sacrificed god, has fallen from his heavenly paradise: as if, with enlightenment, has come knowledge of good and evil. So, the Golden world

which the protagonist saw in the opening poem of *River*, and which has, so far, retained its beauty and innocence for him, is changed and appears like a strange new land.

The Alaskan setting of 'Gulkana'(34), is, indeed, strange to the protagonist. But the evils that beset the Indian village - the "stagnation", the "cultural vasectomy", the sterility - are common to Mankind, as *Remains of Elmet* has eloquently shown. Now, even in the familiar English river of 'October Salmon'(R.110-114), the protagonist sees the tragic beauty of the salmon set amidst "bicycle wheels, car-tyres, bottles / and sunk sheets of corrugated iron", and all the debris of human profligacy and waste. He sees, too, the alienation and cruelty of the children.

Nevertheless, the Gulkana has a special place in the hero's epic journey, for it is the river in which he enters the terrifying bardo-state of illusion; a state described in sacred Buddhist texts as that which follows the experience of "luminosity"(35), and in which are encountered demons which are projections of the human mind. Prompted by the undercurrent of archaic power in the Gulkana, the protagonist begins to recognise something within himself that he keeps "trying to deny". Slowly, linking sensation and thought, imagination and rationality, he comes to acknowledge the duality within him, explaining the nagging "illusion" which dogs his steps by personifying it as his daemon:

...one inside me,
A bodiless twin, some disinherited being
And doppelganger other, unliving,
Everliving, a larva from prehistory
Whose journey this was,

('Gulkana' p.80).

This terrifying projection is of the wild, untamed part of himself that he constantly rejects and fears, and now, he imagines its barely suppressed power as the jealous hatred of a ghostly double. Significantly, the protagonist confronts his

inner self in the ethereal, alchemical and spiritual brilliance of "mercury light" (a light which is beautifully captured in the photograph on page 85), but the experience still fills him with "lucid panic"(R.80). Wading a strange river, in a landscape which seems to shift and subside "in perpetual seismic tremor"(R.78), he turns, as he has before, to the salmon, seeking their wisdom and guidance. But they, too, seem "possessed" by demons, and in their eyes he no longer sees the divine spark, the *scintilla* of hope and renewal, but something "small, crazed, snake-like"(R.82), something chilling and remote. The only certainties in this place are death and dissolution. This is the "revelation", the "burden", that the poet-persona records, "word by word", when he re-awakens in his own familiar world of noise, machines, and "incomprehension"(R.84).

Following 'Gulkana', Hughes exerts all his musical and poetic skill to heal the fragmentation which has occurred. The poem, 'In the Dark Violin of the Valley'(R.86), fills the valley "grave" with magical music, and its vibrations and its flow re-connect the disparate elements of the world as if sewing them together. The imagery recalls that of 'Spring-Dusk', in *Remains of Elmet*(ROE.66), where the drumming "witchdoctor" snipe use a "needle of moon" to sew Heaven and Earth together. Now, it is the movements of a disembodied violinist that suggest a suturing surgeon: with the bow as his needle, and the music as his uniting thread, he probes, penetrates, and heals the body of Earth. The reader, also, is soothed, and emotions which were disturbed by the disruptive energies of 'Gulkana' are drawn, by the smooth, compelling movement of Hughes' lines, into a newly created atmosphere of harmoniously balanced tensions.

Despite the healing music, Hughes' poet-persona still journeys through a strangely altered world. No longer is he naively enthralled by the rich honeyed mystery of the river as he was in 'River Barrow': instead, he sees the intemperate, voluptuousness of the Goddess, who entices him to "copulation and

death"('Low Water'R.88). No longer is the Cormorant admired as a "deep sea diver", expertly "dissolving himself / into fish, so dissolving fish naturally / into himself"('A Cormorant'R.38): now, it is 'A Rival'(R.90), a "dinosaur massacre machine", "cancer in the lymph, uncontrollable", "an abortion doctor" violating the pool and leaving it "mutilated,/...dumb and ruined".

The threatening atmosphere of decadence and evil, which the persona feels all around him, is matched by the decaying summer richness of the natural world as the Earth moves toward the Autumn equinox, and night and day become of equal duration. The sun's power is at low ebb, "the fuel / nearly all gone"(R.92), and darkness begins to engulf it (the photograph on page 89 is richly evocative of this). By Michaelmas('August Evening'R.92-94), the "biological blaze" of the August "burn-out"(R.88) has "charred" the daytime world to a scene of cooling skeletal brittleness, and presently, the moon, "crisp" and new, begins to work its eerie magic.

The Michaelmas festival, which the "sea-tribes" of Hughes' poem (both fish and human) celebrate, is a Christian festival dedicated to the archangel Michael, who cast the Devil out of Heaven. The atmosphere which the protagonist describes in 'August Evening', however, is both religious and pagan. The influence of the moon and of the "terrible" powers of darkness (always especially feared by the Celts at the equinoxes when light and darkness struggle, as it seems, for supremacy) pervade the poem, but balancing their energies is the "religious purpose" of the fish, who forgo the "carnival" to "cobble the long pod of winter" that holds the seeds of future life. The spirit which inspires them, and which briefly creates the "white pathway" on which they and the protagonist ("I share it a little") are held in the "stilled flow" of the "unending" creative energies, is as much that of the pagan psychopomp Lugh/Mercury, who dominated the Celtic harvest festivals, as that of the Christian, Michael, who replaced him. This

is suggested, too, in the photograph on page 93, where the mercurial glow of the sun just penetrates the mist above the blackened, eerie land, enhancing the imagery, atmosphere, and meaning of this poem.

The same solar "mercurial light"(R.98) illuminates the creatures in the poems that immediately follow 'August Evening'. It colours the Damsselfly's "miracle -play" of love and death, from which she emerges "dripping the sun's incandescence"; and it lights the god-like "homage" and sacrifice of the "September salmon"(R.98), heroically and "famously home from sea"⁶ to add his creative "daub" to the mercurial "palate" of transmuting energies.

As the winter approaches and the poet-persona's world moves further into darkness, he becomes more conscious of the imminence of death and the subsequent return to an elemental state. He sees it in the mating of the Damsselfly and in the purposeful gathering of sea-trout, and he sees it in the indifference and remoteness of the ancient fisherman(R.100). At the same time, he is aware of a deep undercurrent of life in the river, and this duality is expressed in the paradoxical character of the river in 'September'(R.102), and in the double nature of the eel('An Eel'R.104) - a primitive creature which knows, and regularly returns to, its source. The hermaphrodite eel, in its duality, its knowledge, and its cyclical journeying around the Earth to the spawning grounds of the Sargasso, strongly evokes the image of the cosmic snake, Uroborus. Duality and knowledge is suggested, too, by calling it "the nun of water", which suits its "love", its "patience", and its annual pilgrimage to the source of its existence, and also invokes the Ancient Egyptian deity, Nun (Nu), symbol of chaos and the primordial ocean, and Source of "all things and all beings"(36). So, the promise of renewal persists, until, in 'Fairy Flood'(R.106), the cosmic snake

⁶This phrase most appropriately echoes the well known lines from R.L.Stevenson's 'Requiem' which became his epitaph: "Here he lies where he longed to be; / Home is the sailor, home from the sea, / And the hunter home from the hill", Stevenson,R.L. 'Requiem',l.xxi,*Underwoods*.

becomes the river itself the "earth-serpent with all its hoards"⁷, casting the land, like an old skin". Like Nun's flood waters bringing the annual return of chaos to the Nile Valley, the fairy flood carries everything "towards the sea". The land "crumbles" and "melts" into emptiness, and the river's "jubilant" energies break chaotically free.

Surrounded by such dark and riotous energies, the poet-persona (the "riverwatcher"(R.108) of the poem's title) feels in danger of being swept along, like a "holy fool", by the ecstatic allurements he glimpses. To protect himself, "to keep his head clear of the river-fetch", he utters a prayer - a poetic charm - willing himself to concentrate and to cling "with dry difficulty" to whatever shreds of reality he can find. The immersion he fears is that of ecstatic self-absorption, such as the "Bismillah" inspired dancer enjoys. As with the false heavens of ecstasy offered by the "Green Mother" in *Cave Birds*, succumbing to this temptation would entail forgoing the selfless spiritual task and accepting, instead, perpetual existence in the self-serving, vegetative cycles of regeneration. Such a choice would involve a negation of the rational mind in favour of the spirit and soul: a choice which would perpetuate the divisions in Man rather than heal them⁸.

Like the "October Salmon"(R.110-114), the protagonist survives the flood. Looking, now, at this fellow creature with which he so strongly empathises, he sees the pathos of its "death-patched" beauty, and

⁷The paronomasia between 'hoards' and 'hordes' includes the sea-tribes of the earlier poem in the river's treasure.

⁸Scigaj's interpretation of this poem takes the opposite view and leaves not only the protagonist but Hughes himself trapped in the vegetative world(40).

The epic poise
 That holds him so steady in his wounds, so loyal to his doom, so patient
 In the machinery of heaven.

Watching the salmon, he is filled with the wonder and love which is expressed in this poem, and he perceives, also, the divine order in Nature. Like the "intricate and sinister" pattern(R.128:Note 115) of the dewy spider's web on page 115, the cosmic web links everything together and everything to its source: the wonder and the horror are ever present, "inscribed" there, as it were, from the very beginning. "That is how it is"⁹, and, as the poet-persona understands and acknowledges this, there comes acceptance of his own place in the pattern.

The regenerative cycle of the river is now almost complete. Like entwined Uroboric serpents, the "river's twists", in 'Visitation'(R.116), bite "each other's tails" and, "fleetingly", a star (the heavenly sign of guidance and hope) illuminates the presence of a "dark other", whose "visitation" brings a new creature out of the river. Like, yet unlike, the river which bears it, this creature emerges in a new and extraordinary dawn, leaving the signs of its presence in the Earth-mud. It is, at once, a living river-creature and an "eerie flower" of promise from the Tree of Life.

A suggestion of the conception, annunciation and birth of the Holy Child underlies the symbolism of 'Visitation', but Hughes grounds events firmly in the world of Nature. The presence of the river; the ghost of his Otter(L.46), whistling and crying through the poem and leaving its "pad-clusters" in the river mud; as well as the frost-etched star-cluster of the winter cow-parsley, which lights the darkness on the page opposite the poem(R.117); all forcefully evoke the natural setting, so that the star's promise encompasses, and is demonstrated through, the world of Nature.

⁹The protagonist's words recall those of The Book of Common Prayer(*passim*): "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. World without end. Amen."

Not only does 'Visitation' express, again, Hughes' concurrence with Blake that "everything that lives is Holy"(MHH.27:chorus), it embodies, also, his belief that *mana* is manifested in created objects and, especially, in the works of Nature. Hughes seeks to illustrate this in his own poetic creation by using natural imagery which imaginatively merges spirit with matter, symbolism with reality, and Heaven with Earth. He also entwines his images in such a way that the "dark other", the stars, the strange river-creature, and the Tree of Life, are almost indistinguishable from the river itself. Thus, he mimics the inter-relation and flux of the cosmic energies, and achieves, through his poem, a glimpse of unity and continuance, wherein lies hope.

In 'Torridge'(R.118), Hughes continues to draw the threads of his world together. The cosmic year is nearly over, the river's annual cycle almost complete, and, as Nature's energies move towards their lowest winter ebb, Hughes begins a poetic reconciliation of contraries which will unify the disparate elements of his sequence, connect them with the cosmic Source, and complete the pattern. Flowers of "garlic" and "iris", both species associated with the Goddess, the moon and death(37), are linked with the "heron" which (as in 'Whiteness'R.20) symbolises the risen Sun-god and the regeneration of life and light. The growth, pollination, withering and death of these flowers traces the annual seasonal pattern. "Venus and Jupiter", "morning star" and "evening star", fish souls and fish bodies, Adam and Eve, April and December - all these fit into the pattern, but such apparently contrary states and separate identities are peripheral to the "stillness" and constancy of the Source from which they come. Seemingly different, these elements are all connected like the strands of the cosmic web, or like the pictured "ice crystals and miniature chasms" made by water "freezing and thawing" at the river's edge(R.128:Note 119). Each is part of the universal and everlasting flux of energies that Hughes symbolises in the river.

The final poem of the *River* sequence, 'Salmon Eggs'(R.120-124), is, as usual, of special importance. It is Hughes' "liturgy of the earth's tidings" - his final, clear statement of the presence on Earth of *mana*, the divine, "nameless", ineffable Source. In it we hear, as we heard earlier, the music of the river - the throb of "the aorta"(R.86) that carries "the spirit and blood" of Earth endlessly. Now, the music is like the "toilings of psalm" that accompany holy communion with the Source of all.

Repeating the pattern of *Cave Birds* and *Remains of Elmet*, this final poem marks both an end and a beginning. We have reached the end of a year in the river's life, and the end of a poetic sequence. The poet-persona, too, has reached the end of his epic journey: he has heard Earth's tidings, and his understanding of the presence of *mana* in Nature is demonstrated in this final poem. Yet, these endings are no more than a still point in the "teeming" continuum of the cosmos: from this stillness new growth will come, as it does from the salmon eggs which now rest in the "swaddling" flow of the river-waters.

In its winter dormancy, the Earth itself is egg-like, resting in the albuminous "haze" of its atmosphere and nurtured by a "veined yolk of sun". Its quiescence is reflected in the meditative mood of the poet-persona, and in the long reflective lines of the poem's opening stanzas, their frequent vowel sounds, pauses, repetitions and internal rhymes:

The salmon were just down there-
Shuddering together, touching each other,
Emptying themselves for each other-

Now beneath flood-murmur
They curve away deathwards.

January haze,
With a veined yolk of sun. In bone-damp cold
I lean and watch the water, listening to water
Till my eyes forget me

And the piled flow supplants me,...

In the numbing cold, the protagonist's mind fills with images of spawning salmon in sacrificial ecstasy, and his senses expand to the sights and sounds of the river until he loses self-awareness and the flow "supplants" him. His perceptions cleansed, as it were, by this flow, his imagination "blooms", like the river "mud", to show him the "ponderous" and "everlasting" flux of energies at work in the "sliding" river. He is aware, around him, of the "minute particulars"(MHH.14:17-19) of Nature - the wriggling catkins and the careful spider - but he sees, too, the infinite and the sacred elements of the "perfect whole".

The wholeness of Hughes' vision is embedded in the language of this poem, where the essence of these waters which unite life and death, temporal and eternal, sacred and profane, is compressed into oxymorons like "mastodon ephemera", which combines nurture and destruction ('mastos' = 'breast'; 'odous', 'odontos' = 'tooth'); "ponderous light"; "bull-dozing"; "exhumations and delirious advents"; "more vital than death...more grave than life"; "burst crypts"; "harrowing, crowned". There is constant punning, too, by means of which physical and metaphysical concepts are linked. The phrase "ponderous light", for example, conveys the weight and the brightness of the river water, and also connotes weight, thought, mind, light, and enlightenment. The inter-relationship between physical reality and the metaphysical, which such punning embodies, is the fundamental message of Hughes' work, and it is summed up in the closing line of the *River* sequence, where "mind condenses on old haws", like the "dew that condensed of the breath of the Word"(HIR.37) at the moment of creation. Illustrating this message, is Peter Keen's photograph of lit dew on a single hawthorn fruit, which is centrally placed in the final poem. Not only is it a magnificent picture of condensed light, but it reflects, also, the wholeness which both Hughes and his protagonist have achieved. In it, life-giving light and water swathe a plump fruit of the hawthorn, which is sacred to the Goddess, thus joining her Lunar energies with those of the Sun and uniting Earth and Heaven,

Nature and Spirit, darkness and light, death and birth. Above all, at the conclusion of this river epic, the inner and outer worlds of Mankind are reconciled, Earth's tidings are heeded, and the protagonist's mind "condenses" its knowledge by turning Earthwards to the fruits of Nature.

As a fitting conclusion to the *River* sequence, Keen's photograph of the unscarred beauty of the River Exe(R.128:Note 125) beautifully demonstrates that people can work in harmony with Nature, and the lit pathway of its waters leads the imagination hopefully forward into an unknown world.

CONCLUSION

Hughes' life-journey and the quest for wholeness and renewal, which is reflected in his work, has brought him far. Yet, the centrality of the biographical matrix from which his poetry is created has remained unchanged, and his early beliefs have been demonstrably strengthened and confirmed by his experiences and his work. The Universal Energies manifested in Nature have constantly been the source of his inspiration, and Nature, whose eternal rhythms and cycles link the finite and the infinite, has been his guide and his teacher. Through his dealings with her, and, in particular, through his imaginative investigation of, and open-ness to, her powers, Hughes has gradually made the same epic journey towards enlightenment and wholeness as is made by the questing hero. And, like others who have undertaken this quest, the end of his journey has been to return to where he began, to the immediacy and actuality of the energies of the Source in Nature, but with a new understanding of the essential unity of all.

In the development of Hughes' poetry over the years, it is possible to trace the traditional route to enlightenment taken by the Everyman/Hero figure which Hughes has latterly adopted as a persona in his poetic sequences. The early poems often display an egocentricity and arrogance akin to that of the Hawk in 'Hawk Roosting'(L.26). Gradually, however, the poet and the poetry become less complacent, more self-conscious and aware, and the pattern moves through the puzzled questioning of 'Wodwo'(W.183), into the darkness, chaos and horror of the surreal world of *Crow*, and the Goddess-dominated torment of *Gaudete*, and on, to the Mercurial spiritual guidance afforded in *Cave Birds*. More recently, the love and concern exhibited in *Remains of Elmet* suggests the return of the hero to the sick world with his healing energies, and the beauty and the celebratory tone of the poems in *River* reflect the achievement of unity,

harmony, and understanding, which are the goal of the questing soul. Appropriately, Hughes' most recent book, *Flowers and Insects*, is a paean to Nature's infinite and omnipotent powers, a celebration of the presence of *mana* on Earth.

Since childhood, Hughes has been drawn to the natural world, and, through it, he was early aware of some transcendental power, but, unlike the 'Romantic' poets, his awareness has been uncompromisingly realistic, encompassing both the beauty and the horror. Yet Hughes' early work reflects a lack of real involvement with the Energies. Whilst he was aware of, and deprecated, the divisions people had made, and still make, in this world, he had not yet freed himself of this same human sickness. So, he plundered Nature's treasures to enrich and enliven his work, using his own energy, and Nature's, as his hawk does in 'Hawk Roosting'(L.26), to survey the Earth from a superior position, revolve it all beneath his gaze, and stoop on whatever prey he had chosen for his poetic task. In the opening lines of *Lupercal*, Hughes expresses just such an arrogant, egocentric, human view of the world when he writes of

All things being done or undone
As my hands adore or abandon-

'Things Present'(L.9).

Hughes, at this early stage in his artistic career, was vociferous in his condemnation of society's faults and Mankind's failings, as his published articles show. But, like his Cave Birds protagonist in the early poems of that sequence, he excluded himself from blame for this state of affairs, not seeing, for example, that the trophies of these first poetic hunting expeditions were, too often, symbolically akin to the bloody calves' heads which decorate the counters in 'The scream'(CB.7), and that he, too, was exploiting Nature.

At times, in Hughes' early poems, we do glimpse some deeper level of communication with the Energies, some indication that the poet's work is the result of more than just an awareness of the manifestation of the Energies in Nature and the imaginative ability to convey this to his reader. Such glimpses constitute an imaginative re-creation of the poet's personal involvement with the Energies, and they occur when, as in 'The Thought-Fox'(HIR.14), for example, the poem forges a link between the poet's inner and his outer world. By breaking down the divisions and submitting to the flow of the Energies, the poet achieves a relationship with the Source energies which allows him to re-create his experience, rather than simply describe or record it, and the personal involvement and openness which this requires of him allows the reader access to his inner world. Such poems stand out for the reader, as they do for Hughes, who has chosen 'The Thought-Fox', for example, for many readings and as the important opening poem of his *Selected Poems*. It is this involvement and honesty which have become more apparent in Hughes' work over the years, and which, consequently, make his poetry a testament of his continuous struggle to contact and unite with the healing energies of the Source.

Events in Hughes' life brought him intimate knowledge of the destructive power of the natural energies. Like Prometheus, like Job, and like his own *Cave Birds* protagonist, he was made aware of his own subjection to more powerful forces, and, in his poetry, his voice became less arrogant and controlled, more questioning and uncertain. Yet, it remained powerful, because he chose to use his poetry to explore and to attempt to resolve the uncontrollable and threatening situation in which he found himself. He used it, in effect, as a "biological healing process"(1), as a means of negotiating with the Energies and of seeking unity with the Source in order to achieve renewed balance and harmony. In this endeavour, the gradual development of Hughes' use of myth as a framework within which to explore and, to some extent, control the Energies,

shows him moving away from distancing devices and alienating personas, such as Crow and Lumb, towards the adoption of an Everyman/Hero figure with which both he and the reader can readily identify. Increasingly, this figure becomes Hughes' means of putting himself through a process which will entail personal change and growth; of making the sacrifice necessary for a return to the Source and the attainment of *mana*.

Hughes' endeavours, in this respect, reflect the teaching of all gnostic texts. All maintain the importance of re-union with the Source for healing and renewal. All confirm that there is no easy way that this can be achieved: the only way is through repeated sacrifice, suffering, humility and love. This is the path that the epic heroes tread, and this is the path Hughes chooses for himself. Despite the clear influence of Eastern philosophies in some of Hughes' poetry, however, his path is not the Eastern mystic's path of retreat inwards, away from reality, but the very Western path of confrontation with the Energies, a confrontation which is, however, presented in Hughes' poetry as an inward journey.

Each of the poetic sequences dealt with in this thesis can be seen as a single, completed, epic journey, but it is in Hughes' poetry as a whole that we see the process of change which he undergoes in his personal journey to the Source. In particular, the poetic sequences which have been examined here show the increasing freedom with which Hughes immerses himself in the flux of Energies, and the diminishing degree to which he is reliant on protective devices in order to do this. From close reliance on a traditional ritual such as Alchemy, which is seen in *Cave Birds*, Hughes' use of myth and ritual has become progressively more flexible and less prescriptive, until, in *River*, it can no longer be found as a framework which is independent of the cycles of Nature, but is, instead, an integral part of the flux of energies which prevails in our world and which Hughes

shows to be the ever-present energies of the Source. This is the lesson Hughes has learned from Nature, and his poetry reveals the path he has taken to reach this understanding.

Another important aspect of Hughes' adoption of an Everyman/Hero protagonist or persona in his work is the relevance of this figure to Hughes' conception of his own poetic task. Again, Hughes' poetry shows the persistence of his early belief that he has a special and unusual relationship with Nature, and that this gives him privileged access to the Energies. Together with his visionary and poetic skills, such beliefs have convinced Hughes that he is, like his *Cave Birds* protagonist, an "appointed"(CB.54) being, and that his poetic task is essentially that of the ancient poets and shamans. His stated intention has always been to use his poetry as a means of negotiating with the Energies and of channelling them into our world in order to bring us healing and enlightenment. Seeing the epic hero as a shamanic archetype, able to fly to the Source to bring back healing energies, Hughes has adopted this figure in his work in order to fulfill altruistic, as well as purely personal, goals.

In the body of Hughes' work, one can trace the increasing use of an Everyman/Hero protagonist and of the patterns of the epic journey. The changing nature of this figure, and the eventual merging of its identity with that of a persona whose characteristics are almost indistinguishable from those of the poet himself, however, is most apparent in Hughes' later works. Early in his career, Hughes pursued his altruistic purposes by imaginative and pedagogic means. Whilst attempting to transmit the Source energies through the imaginative power of his poetry, he also propounded his views on fundamental philosophical, spiritual and artistic issues in rationally argued articles and talks. *Orghast* marked a change towards a more direct, less rational, communication of Energies and ideas to his audience through their imaginative involvement in a

shared, epic experience. In addition, Hughes began to use the epic journey as pattern for the ritual, religious task of returning to the Source and re-enacting the cosmic mysteries in order to resacralise our world. Thus, we became participants in Hughes' rituals.

The great skill with which Hughes has developed and refined these methods of bringing about enlightenment and change can be seen in the poetic sequences examined in this thesis. In *River*, Hughes seems to achieve the union with the Source which he has been seeking, and the poems form a flux between opposites, uniting them in theme and in actuality and recreating the eternal regenerative cycles of Nature in their form and in their content. Hughes, as the persona in this sequence, participates in this fluid unity, but the extent to which he is able to bring about such a degree of wholeness and renewal in the world of his reader is questionable. Despite the evocative power of the poetic works through which we share Hughes' shamanic journey, despite the sacrifices which he makes for us, and the insights which he shares with us, one fundamental truth of the ancient teachings bars our way: each of us, in the end, must make this journey for ourselves. Hughes may know the path and may direct us towards the Truth, but the trials we encounter, the suffering we must endure, and the choices we must make along the way, are, and must essentially be, our own. Meanwhile, the imaginative power of Hughes' work can create momentary links with the Energies for us, and bring healing light and music into our darkened world.