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**»History & Reason in the Work of Ted Hughes«**

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Ted Hughes's impressive recent work of research *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* has been welcomed with mixed feelings. The reason for the fits of hardly indifferent cold-shouldering this thesis of his has raised may very well be due to some misunderstandings. For indeed, the ideas he develops in that work are the very same which have won him outstanding poetic success. What was found powerfully thought in poetry is now found more difficult to stomach when translated into plain English. And it is all the more so, perhaps, because it touches such dear issues as Shakespeare, or Reformed Christianity. It would obviously be ridiculously presumptuous to boast an easy solution, but a foreign observer may hope to make some helpful contribution to the debate. An impartial reader, a devil's advocate pleading alternately for one and the other of the parties concerned, might have a chance to cast some useful light on some key notions of Hughes's philosophical theory. The first apple of discord concerns Adam, indeed, since it is Hughes's opinions on Christianity. A clear-sighted effort to try and explain his Anti-Christian views must lead to taking into account his approach to rationalism, and to show how those two notions are, rather paradoxically, related. This amounts to an idiosyncratic vision of history, since Hughes, to put it *cum grano salis*, considers Christianity and rationalism as a dark period of the religious history of mankind, to be overcome as soon as possible. In the history of art and literature, this for him corresponds to tragedy, from ancient Greece to Shakespeare's England, of which the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been giving an apocalyptic off-stage happening version.

One of the reasons why Ted Hughes's theories may seem obscure, is that his great culture allows him to constantly shift from one scientific field to another, of which nothing proves that they obey the same laws. Without warning, his texts may jump from literary criticism to psychology, then to sociology, the history of ideas or of religions, anatomy, theology, without the slightest trace of hesitation. So, for example, it is apparently obvious for him that the mythic structures at work in Shakespeare's plays and poems are also the

sociological leaven transforming the England and the world of his time. »Presumably this is how he brought the oceanic currents of the psychological history of the Western world to turn the wheel of his little mill on the Thames« (1992b, 175). But after all, there is nothing to wonder at. The medium through which the mind of a man can mirror »the psychological history of the Western World« is the Jungian notion of the collective subconscious, of which the personal subconscious, according to the Swiss psychologist, is like a superficial layer. That is the reason why Hughes considers the personal history of the Bard, such as he knows it, as likely to be an echo of the general psychological history of his time. However, what is essential to Hughes's view, is that Shakespeare is the English poet of the Reformation – he is allegedly from a catholic family converted to Protestantism. What Hughes calls »the Tragic Equation« is for him a mythic expression of the psychological drama then being staged in the conscience, and most of all in the subconscious, of Queen Elizabeth I's subjects. »Shakespeare had unearthed here the psycho-biological law of the Reformation, in a usable form that captured its energies and anticipated its conclusions« (1992b, 175). Whatever the value historians would possibly grant to such a view of things, for Hughes, the rejection of the Goddess which is at the origin of the Tragic Equation occurs at a precise moment in History, which he calls »The Shakespearean moment« (1992b, 213), and is the act of a »puritan« hero – »Immediately, the Divine Love (or her equivalent) becomes too much for the hero's Puritanized, fearful ego-vision, which thereupon splits her into two parts« (1992b, 215). »Double vision«, for Hughes, is typical of the puritan outlook, »the puritan eye«, which in fact it defines. The historical projection the poet makes of his Equation enables him to hint that what he is questioning is not so much Christianity itself as Protestantism. Previously, he had already drawn a line between Protestantism and Catholicism:

Christianity in suppressing the devil, in fact suppresses imagination and suppresses vital natural life. Not so much in Roman Catholicism where he's got a place. But in the Protestant Church the devil is so suppressed that he is hardly recognizable at all finally. He's been completely extinguished... and, of course, he leaks out in every direction as a very evil, wicked and uncontrolled and unsuspected presence (1971, 65-6).

It is not self-evident, *a priori*, that the devil has a place in Catholicism that it does not have in Protestantism. But some light is cast on the question later, when Hughes makes a first equation between the devil, woman and nature. And he reproaches Protestantism with suppressing the cult of Mary, Mother of God:

When the mystical ecstatic adoration of the Divine Beloved streamed into eleventh- and twelfth-century Europe from the Sufi poet-saints of Islam, it was appropriated, as a matter of

course, for Mary, who had become the beneficiary of all the innate Goddess worship of the masses that had survived into the Christianized world. The Puritan reformers of the sixteenth century did not have to search the Old Testament to stir their indignation against what came with the Goddess (1992b, 11).

Now, it is apparently well-established that the pagan cults devoted to feminine deities have tended to be syncretically reinvested into the cult of Mary at the time of christianisation<sup>1</sup>. However, there remains some uneasiness about taking at face value this very powerful argument of Hughes's thesis. In fact, for both Hughes and Jung, there is an equivalence between the concepts of woman or mother, soul (that is the Jungian notion of *anima*<sup>2</sup>), nature and the subconscious. This is a perfect illustration of what Roland Barthes wrote concerning the mythic concept – »In fact, the knowledge contained in mythic concepts is a confused knowledge, made of soft, boundless associations«<sup>3</sup>. Here is, for example, a slightly puzzling declaration Hughes made concerning »bad« literature:

And so Christian folklore and mythology, of which, you know, there is an enormous mass, tends to have this moral bias which really destroys it as imaginative literature and which has the effects of producing the kind of man who wants to be a Christian saint, ideally, or a puritan extremist, ideally. It's no accident that puritanism, and the puritanical outlook, runs absolutely parallel to the materialist, scientific outlook, because both oppose the whole world of nature, which is of course what we have to live in, what we are part of, what we grow out of. In other words these stories put us into a world that does not really exist, except within a very narrowly puritan society (1971, 69).

For Hughes, what »destroys« Christian mythology as »imaginative literature«, is rather the fact that it destroys imagination, that is to say the Mother, the Goddess, the soul, nature, the subconscious, mankind, etc.. And it is not so much Christian literature, Hughes says, as »ideally, a puritan extremism«, or the »puritanical outlook«. What it is indictable for is that, through woman and the mother which it demonizes by repressing her, it opposes this part of man that Jungian psychology calls the subconscious and which is

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<sup>1</sup> A rapid documentation is enough to confirm what common sense made rather easy to guess. So, for example, in his study of the cult of the Mother Goddess, E. O. James wrote: »Therefore, in an age in which the Goddess cult was so deeply laid the Mother of the Redeemer hardly could escape being assigned a position which in many respects corresponded to that of the Magna Mater in the pagan world, particularly in those areas in which she had been predominant« (1959, 202).

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance: »L'anima est féminine ; elle est uniquement une formation de la psyché masculine et elle est une figure qui compense le conscient masculin« (Jung 1933, 186). And also: »La 'mère', première incarnation de l'archétype – anima, personnifie même l'inconscient tout entier« (1944, 546). Again: »Cette mère est semblable à l'air qui est, lui aussi, partout. Or l'air est esprit: la mère du monde est esprit, une *anima mundi* (589).

<sup>3</sup> »En fait, le savoir contenu dans le concept mythique est un savoir confus, formé d'associations molles, illimitées« (Barthes 1957, 204).

something like the fabric, or rather the anatomical tissue<sup>4</sup> which links man to nature. This leads to the idea of an error, a crime, mentioned again and again by Hughes. Reformed Christianity is accused of being what bereaves Man of his vital element – »what we have to live in« – which is also an essential part of his Self – »what we are part of« – or even his fundamental roots – »what we grow out of«. That is the motherly god of the natural world which Crow cannot part from in »Crow and Mama« (1986, 17) and »Oedipus Crow« (1986, 43).

This exemplifies how the map of Hughes's world shows the mark, as of a tectonic gap, of a tendency to dualism. If there is one deeply engraved and compulsively active archetype in Hughes's thinking, it is the bipolarity of his vision of the world, making an intellectual rut in which the wheels of his theoretical cart can roll most efficiently. One must honestly admit, however, that Christianity is not a dualism. Reading the Gospels again without too much prejudice is enough to see that this is not a theology of exclusion, but rather a religion of Alliance. More, there is not one single Christian, whether Protestant or not for that matter, who could unhesitatingly declare that Christianity, whether it is Reformed or not, fundamentally amounts to a rejection of Divine Love. And one has to admit that this is what Hughes is saying, though in a rather prudent sort of way, in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* – ». . . that 'sin' behind the Tragic Equation – that rejection (and death) not of God (to begin with) but of the totality of Divine Love« (287)<sup>5</sup>.

But that really amounts to a misunderstanding of the terms. And, to explain Hughes's position more clearly, another main point of articulation of Hughes's philosophical theory should deserve a closer scrutiny. His lumping together Christianity and rationalism may sound extremely surprising at first, at least to a post-revolutionary Frenchman if to nobody else. »It's no accident that Puritanism, and the puritanical outlook, runs absolutely parallel to the materialist, scientific outlook« (Hughes 1971, 69). This Blakean wish »To cast off Bacon, Locke & Newton from Albions covering« (Blake 1810, 111), this notion that, all in all, Darwin and Moses serve the same master, may be surprising even today, when one thinks of how badly science and religion go on together in some Anglo-Saxon schools, and in some other places too. This is no new idea, however<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, there seems to be a

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<sup>4</sup> I am indebted for this to Leonard Scigaj, who very percievngly introduced the word *Velcro* into Hughesian studies: »The poetry of Ted Hughes is the ecological and psychological Velcro that reattaches us to vital natural rhythms and expresses the necessary balance between the needs of the self and the limits of nature« (Scigaj 1992, 4).

<sup>5</sup> See also pages 375, 393, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Among many other examples, it may be worth noting that this is an opinion endorsed by Sacher-Masoch: »C'est le christianisme, dont le cruel emblème la Croix, a pour moi quelque chose d'effroyable, qui le premier a introduit un élément étranger et hostile au sein de la nature et de ses

whole tradition of thinking which tends to see in the Reformation a first step towards freethinking. To a degree, the emphasis on personal revelation leaves the Protestant alone with his Book and his God, no doubt depriving him of a whole bag of old superstitions. But these superstitions provided a form, allowed a place, to the pulsional activities of the mind. And this is where an agreement with Hughes's theses becomes reasonably possible again. What he then blames Reformed Christianity with, is that it no longer allows any room for the travail of the subconscious. Poetry could then become a frontier zone between the conscious and the subconscious, where a negotiation could be made: »To accept the energy, and find methods of turning it to good, of keeping it under control-rituals, the machinery of religion. The old method is the only one« (Hughes 1970b, 200-201). The idea is a transposing to poetry of the acceptance of psychology Jung has promoted. The analysis of modern times as being a period of unrest because it lacks the means of negotiation with what he calls »libido«, that is to say the »energy« of the subconscious, is typically Jungian. Hughes also borrows from Jung the notion that the two world wars and totalitarianisms are a symptom of this discontent. That the Reformation represents the regrettable turn the Western World has taken in modern times is also in Jung<sup>7</sup>. It is also the subject of Freud's books, *Western Civilization and its Discontent*. Be it as it may, it is remarkable that this aspect of Hughes's thinking, his rejecting Christianity, while being obviously visceral and emotional, paradoxically dons a reasoning mask, if not the mask of reason. It is very likely that his attitude as an anti-Christian imprecator will leave a lasting mark on his fame. And sometimes it seems Hughes's statements could almost have been those of Nietzsche, whose following apophthegm the poet laureate would probably not deny: »Definition of Protestantism: hemiplegia of Christianity – and of reason...«<sup>8</sup>.

There remains, as it were consequently, to try and look more closely into Hughes's point of view concerning rationalism itself. It has been underlined that rationalism is not only equated to Christianity – »absolutely parallel to« – but is also the butt of similar, or possibly even more virulent imprecations. Concerning rationalism, Hughes has very graphic

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innocents instincts. Le combat de l'esprit contre le monde sensible est l'évangile des modernes. Je ne veux pas y prendre part« (1870, 135-6).

<sup>7</sup> »Lorsque l'ère gothique, dressée d'un seul élan vers le ciel, mais reposant sur une base géographique et sur une conception du monde étroitement circonscrites, s'effondra, ébranlée par la catastrophe spirituelle de la Réforme, l'ascension verticale de l'esprit européen fut enrayée par l'expansion horizontale de la conscience moderne« (Jung 1952, 35).

<sup>8</sup> »Définition du protestantisme: hémiplégie du christianisme – et de la raison...« (Nietzsche 1888, 18).

declarations indeed, depicting infernal monsters à la Milton, in a manner reminiscent of the fiercest propagandists. Here is a sample – »The Scientific Spirit has bitten so many of us in the nape, and pumped us full of its eggs, the ferocious virus of abstraction« (Hughes 1962, 167). No comment is needed, except perhaps that that is more redolent of ideological hatred than of ordinary sanity. Another article hatches another specimen of these flowers of detestation, with the fantasy of abject teeming:

It is like the old-fashioned dynasties of the gods. Christianity deposes Mother Nature and begets, on her prostrate body, Science, which proceeds to destroy Nature, but which in turn, on its half-destroyed mother's body, begets the Computer, a god more powerful than its Father or its Grandfather, who reinstates Nature, its Mother and Grandmother and Great-Grandmother, as the holy of holies, mother of all the gods (Hughes 1970a, 187).

Apart from its colourfulness, this passage offers, as a vignette, a forerunning vision of the Tragic Equation as it was to be developed in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*: (A) deposing of the Goddess (*viz.* Nature), (A') crime (rape and incest) committed against this same Goddess, (B) restoration of the Mother Goddess (or »Theophany«). The text just quoted was issued in 1970, shortly before the *Orghast* experiment, and it also foreshadows the cosmology which was to be developed there. The way Hughes's vision of the world is then taking shape is interesting in two respects at least. Firstly, dualism is expressed as follows. On one hand, there is the Mother, nature, who is the Holy of Holies, and also the alpha and the Omega, what *is* at the origin and at the end. On the other hand, there is Christianity, *alias* Science, *alias* the Computer, a whole series of entities that generate one another like Russian dolls. On one hand is the One, on the other the Many. On one hand the Undivided, on the other, Division. Secondly, this cosmological blueprint is a diegetic, dynamic, temporal, in a word historical expression of Hughes's theoretical vision.

And this temporal unravelling of an idea allows a better understanding of Hughes's vision of History, which seems to be less the fruit of a long study of this particular subject, at least as it is usually taught, than a projection onto History of a more generally relevant myth. Many clues tend to indicate that for Hughes there was a different world before the symbolic law of linguistic dissociation. There was for him a different world before the Reformation, just as there was a different world before Christianity. Now, this should be related to another of Hughes's philosophical indebtedness, namely his subscribing – though not without any amendment or codicil – to T. S. Eliot's »dissociation of sensibility«. Attentive readers of Ted Hughes must have been feeling this for quite a while, but now the debt is partly settled, since the phrase is quoted in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of*

*Complete Being* (Hughes 1992b, 107). A short detour by T. S. Eliot's text confirms that he and Hughes are indeed speaking of the same thing<sup>9</sup>:

The difference is not a simple difference of degree. It is something which had happened to the mind of England between the time of Donne or Lord Herbert of Cherbury and the time of Tennyson and Browning ; it is the difference between the intellectual poet and the reflective poet. Tennyson and Browning are poets, and they think ; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odor of a rose. A thought to Donne was an experience ; it modified his sensibility (1921, 2024).

With Hughes as with Eliot, this means indeed a break between intellect and feeling, reason and imagination. But Eliot, as an Anglican convert, surely does not consider this divorce either as a consequence of Reformation, or as being inherent to Christianity. And in fact, with some scrupulousness and with all due reverence for the great man, Hughes gently reproaches him with not doing so, as if he considered that T. S. Eliot did not draw all the inferences from his discovery. Hughes does admire Eliot, whom he considers as an artist gifted with »inward development«, or, in other words, that metaphysical dimension which, according to him, makes the greatest poets, those he grants the title of shaman, pell-mell with W. B. Yeats, I. B. Singer and A. Hitler<sup>10</sup>. But one may feel something like a reservation, or a suspicion of insufficiency, which makes Hughes say that Eliot, in his metaphysical research, fails to develop »an original mythology« and merely »uncovers the Cross«<sup>11</sup>. To put it more justly, what Hughes says of Eliot is that his work is outdated and, along with Joyce's and Beckett's, belongs to a transitional period which is now over:

What Eliot and Joyce and I suppose Beckett are portraying is the state of belonging spiritually to the last phase of Christian civilisation, they suffer its disintegration. But there are now quite a few writers abroad who do not seem spiritually to belong to the Christian civilisation at all. In their world, Christianity is just another provisional myth of man's relation with the creator and the world of spirit. Their world is a continuation or a re-emergence of the pre-Christian world .

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<sup>9</sup> David Holbrook, though, absolutely refutes Hughes' acceptance of T. S. Eliot's concept: »Surely the 'dissociation of sensibility' was not intended by Eliot to refer to any 'loss of soul', but to a division between modes of sensibility, thought and feeling, and this has nothing to do with the problems of lust and murder which Hughes has been discussing« (Holbrook 1986, 10). Well, Hughes undeniably inflects this concept in the sense of his own thesis and he may not understand it in all respects exactly in the same terms as Eliot, but it seems really very difficult to maintain that »this has nothing to do with« it.

<sup>10</sup> See *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, pages 89, 90, *et alia*. Hughes quotes Eliot, along with Yeats, Hitler and Isaac Bashevis Singer, as examples of the great shaman of the first type: »Another would certainly be Eliot, a great literary shaman of the spiritual tradition of the West where it collided, in particular, with the ultimate demon of desacralization in the scientific materialism of the American economic miracle. His initiation dream is projected successively into *The Waste Land*, *The Hollow Men*, and *Ash Wednesday*« (1992b 89).

<sup>11</sup> »It may be an original mythology. Or you may uncover the Cross – as Eliot did« (Hughes 1970b, 204).

. . it is the world of the little pagan religions and cults, the primitive religions from which of course Christianity itself grew (Hughes 1970b, 205).

This vision of the history of poetical ideas has already been raised by Eliot in his canonical article on the Metaphysical Poets in which he locates the »dissociation of sensibility« in the 17<sup>th</sup> century – an mostly with Donne, who was a Catholic – later to mention his feeling of a progressively emerging »unification of sensibility«.

In the seventeenth century a dissociation set in, from which we have never recovered ; and this dissociation, as is natural, was aggravated by the influence of the most powerful poets of the century, Milton and Dryden.... The sentimental age began early in the eighteenth century, and continued. The poets revolted against the ratiocinative, the descriptive ; they thought and felt by fits, unbalanced ; they reflected. In one or two passages of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, in the second *Hyperion*, there are traces of a struggle toward unification of sensibility« (1921, 2025).

It is very interesting indeed that Eliot should spot out the traces of a tendency towards a unification of sensibility in the poetry of Shelley, the author of *Prometheus Unbound*. For it does appear that, with Hughes too, it is Prometheus who enables to phrase this myth of recovered plenitude, at the end of *Prometheus On His Crag*. Even though the words do not appear under the pen of the poet laureate, the detour by T. S. Eliot allows this definition of his *ars poetica* – Ted Hughes *is* the poet of the unification of sensibility. At least, that is his dearest wish and it is the goal his theory sets for his practice to reach. this project is probably what gives the poetic work of Ted Hughes its greatest originality, while inscribing it very specifically within tradition.

[But] Eliot was the prophet of a new world, and for better and for worse we belong to this one too. And this new world is not at all peculiar to these islands. It is the world which has already, in its soul, and throughout all its peoples, suffered the global holocaust, and must now, somehow, find in its own ashes the spiritual strength to resurrect itself (Hughes 1992a, 5).

However, this perspective is not Hughes's exclusive province and discovery either. And one of his French contemporaries, who has translated Shakespeare and who is very well read in British poetry, Yves Bonnefoy, wrote something which corroborates Hughes's idea, except on one point:

[Because] a split has occurred in the relation between society and its natural place which, although passionately denied by some of the first Romantics, could no longer fail to be lent some attention. Before and, so to speak, of all times in this Græco-Christian tradition which was finally so much one – Plato going along with christ, Pythagoras and Ptolemy building the universe required by *Genesis* – before, then, the words, the everyday words, were articulated to the divine Presence, in the great chain of Being, through the things of the world that were full

of a symbolic meaning, linked to a network of correspondences: .... – But in the 17th century and in the 18th the great chain falls apart (Bonney 1990, 207)<sup>12</sup> [xii](#).

Bonney is nearer to Eliot than to Hughes, in so far as he does not hold what he calls the »Græco-Christian tradition« responsible for the split. Whereas the Greeks and the Christians, Socrates and Christ, are for Hughes one and the same enemy. But, that question left aside, which may well be more superficial than it seems, both poets believe in a Golden Age of mankind, and both place the historic split Eliot called »dissociation of sensibility« at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, at the dawn of what historians sometimes call the modern era. »That is when reason closed to the presence, the unity, the thought of plenitude«<sup>13</sup>. Both wish to do away with that modernity. Both conceive their poetry as a quest for this lost plenitude, this metaphysical »Présence«, which should precisely be understood as being the very same thing which Hughes calls »Divine Love« (Hughes 1992b, 287).

This view of things finds both its origin and its confirmation in a criticism of modernity, which here means the present time, that is to say the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which is posterior to the two world wars, and which can be considered as the present outcome of the modern era. Hughes's intellectual attitude appears like an answer to Freud's analysis of this stage of history as a symptom of a discontent in civilization. Hughes theory and practice present themselves as an answer to the crisis the Western World has been struggling with<sup>14</sup>. In short, the troubles of Western man would allegedly derive from his too strict rationalism, that is to say his irreligiousness, which leave him at the beck and call of his subconscious forces, or, in other words, gods and devils who can all the more freely become as infernal as they wish to because modern man ignores them<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> »[Parce qu'] une rupture s'était produite dans le rapport de la société et de son lieu naturel qui, passionnément déniée par certains premiers Romantiques, ne pouvait plus ne pas être objet d'attention. Avant et pour ainsi dire de toujours dans cette tradition gréco-chrétienne qui finalement fut si une – Platon se prêtant au Christ, Pythagore et Ptolémée bâtissant l'univers dont avait besoin la *Genèse* – avant, donc, les mots, les mots de tous les jours, s'articulaient à la Présence divine, dans la grande chaîne de l'Être, par la voie de choses du monde chargées d'un sens symbolique, reliées par le réseau des correspondances: . . . – Mais au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle et au XVIII<sup>e</sup> la grande chaîne se casse« (Bonney 1990, 207).

<sup>13</sup> »C'est alors que la raison s'est fermée à la présence, à l'unité, à la pensée de la plénitude« (Bonney 1990, 296).

<sup>14</sup> Here again, Hughes seems to be indebted to Jung – »la rupture entre la croyance et le savoir est un symptôme de la dissociation de la conscience qui caractérise l'état mental perturbé de notre époque« (Jung 1957, 107).

<sup>15</sup> »L'homme moderne ne comprend pas à quel point son 'rationalisme' (qui a détruit sa faculté de réagir à des symboles et à des idées lumineuses) l'a mis à la merci de ce monde psychique souterrain. Il s'est libéré de la »superstition« (du moins il le croit) mais ce faisant, il a perdu ses valeurs spirituelles à un

In Hughes's poems, it is hardly absolutely necessary any more to recall some of the clearest examples by which this notion is voiced. In »Crow's Account of St George« (1986, 31-2), for instance, the scientific spirit is presented as leading to this schizophrenic result of »double vision«, the catastrophe of *enantiodromia*, by a direct link of cause and effect. To make things clear, here are the first and the last two lines of this exemplary poem:

He sees everything in the Universe  
Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer.  
...  
Drops the sword and runs dumb-faced from the house  
Where his wife and children lie in their blood.

Another example is the protagonist of »The Black Beast« (1986, 28). Crow goes as far as to destroy the earth – »Crow roasted the earth to a clinker« – in his blind search for evil, unable to see that evil is to be found nowhere but in himself. That poem is a *reductio ad absurdum* of what Hughes wrote elsewhere in a slightly less convincing prose, saying that the scientific spirit, of which photography is a sort of morbid extreme, amounts to blindness, worse, mental paralysis, in its obsessive rage to forbid imagination:

The scientific attitude, which is a crystallisation of the rational attitude, has to be passive in face of the facts if it is to record the facts accurately. The scientist has to be a mirror first. He has to be a mirror second too, because the slightest imaginative bias in his presentation of the facts invalidates his findings and reflect badly on his standing as a scientist... The result is something resembling mental paralysis. It can be seen in every corner of our life. It shows for instance in the passion for photography. Photography is a method of making a dead accurate image of the world without any act of imagination (1971, 56).

A similar caricature of empiricist scientism is offered by Crow's intestine prophecy – for it is inside Crow's body that everything exists or happen – »I WILL MEASURE IT ALL AND OWN IT ALL« (Hughes 1986, 23). The text tends to link the disaster of the two world wars to the development of science, or rather, of »the scientific spirit«, of which the atomic bomb is the apotheosis of the catastrophe. This notion, also developed by Jung, that the material or ideological *limes* which, until very recently, drew a line between the Eastern and Western blocs, was the most enormous symptom to be found of the dissociation modern man suffers from. The bomb, the fantasy of which literally haunts the *Crow*

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degré alarmant. Ses traditions morales et spirituelles se sont désintégrées et il paie cet effondrement d'un désarroi et d'une dissociation qui sévissent dans le monde entier« (Jung 1964, 161).

collection<sup>16</sup> [xvi](#), is an interesting image for the reason that it seems to produce irrefutable evidence of the limit reached in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by man's claim to the scientific mastership of the world. That is probably why physics is the only science which Hughes places on one pedestal with art – »The only respectable sanities undiscredited in all that would be physics and art« (1964, 173). Physics, he seems to be saying, is the only good science, since it is the only one that has to admit its own failure. The paradoxical thing is that, for that to be true, it should be understood in the Aristotelian sense of the term, and therefore include all the sciences properly speaking, namely all those which do not pertain to metaphysics. But what Hughes really questions is not so much science and the sciences as such, or the scientific attitude which consists in apprehending experience with reason alone, abstraction being made, so to speak, of all intuition and imagination whatsoever.

The word »rationality« is having a bad time. The Laws of Creation are the only literally rational things, and we don't yet know what they are. The nearest we can come to rational thinking is to stand respectfully, hat in hand, before this Creation, exceedingly alert for a new word (Hughes 1964, 172).

Unlike Bonnefoy, Hughes considers Plato and Socratic philosophy the very type of this attitude of abstraction which he accuses of being at the root of all the plagues of man. And this is so true that, with Hughes as with his disciples, the phrase »Socratic experience« (perhaps not without some half-conscious frowning at the »unnatural« manners it cannot fail to evoke), along with »Socratic spirit«, tends to become a set phrase to stigmatize abhorred rationalism. One poem must be quoted here, »The Perfect Forms« (Hughes 1960, 51), the title of which refers to Plato's Ideas, and which speaks of poor old Socrates in hardly charitable terms, going »Here is Socrates, born under Pisces, / Smiling, complacent as a phallus«. But there is more to this, for by then making Socrates the donkey that carries Christ, Hughes traces an historical continuity, or even an ideological filiation, between Socratic philosophy and Christianity – »Visage of Priapus: the undying tail-swinging / Stupidity of the donkey / That carries Christ«. In his mature years, the poet was to confirm an opinion which that poem of his second collection, published a little more than thirty years before, was bringing forward in prudently recondite terms. In *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* Hughes compares the Greece of Socrates to the England of Shakespeare and of the Reformation:

In both the Greek world and Shakespeare's the archaic reign of the Great Goddess was being put down, finally and decisively, by a pragmatic, sceptical, moralizing, desacralizing spirit: in

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, »Crow's Account of the Battle« (Hughes 1986, 26-7), »A Disaster« (33), »Truth Kills Everybody« (83), »Notes for a Little Play« (86).

Greece by the spirit of Socrates, and in England by the spirit of the ascendant, Puritan God of the individual conscience, the Age of Reason cloaked in the Reformation (85).

Asking for more convincing evidence or explanation would amount to falling into Socratic error, which God forbid ! But, more seriously, what counts most in this statement is that it makes it easier to understand what had been patent for quite a while, namely that, through the Reformation, it is Reason Hughes is aiming at – through Reformed Christianity, Rationalism. The logical link, as it was only normal to suppose and fear, is indeed freethinking and »the individual conscience«. Elsewhere in the same work, the historical dissociation at stake is clearly expressed, and it is indeed the split implied by rationalism – »[But], as history demonstrates, the onset of rationality institutes proceedings for a kind of divorce« (157). What lies at the origin of the Tragic Equation, and, to put it even more accurately, its motor and the source of its dialectic energy, is rationalism. The tragic *hubris* – »the tragic error, and the subsequent tragic crime« (403) – is rationalism, in so far as it means a divorce, a fundamental split. This is what, for Coleridge, causes a necessary antithesis between subject and object, intelligence and nature, the conscious and the unconscious<sup>17</sup> [xvii](#). As for Hughes, he tends to favour the words »rational« and »irrational« to identify the dual personality of the Shakespearean tragedy hero, which is also akin to the notion of *Doppelgänger*, of which, in his own work, the two Lumbs of *Gaudete* give a very explicit illustration. Those are the terms he uses to distinguish the two branches of the first part of the Equation, the two »brothers« being rational Adonis and irrational Tarquin (102) – »the irrational being and the rational are the two selves of the hero« (219). In the very first pages of his work, already, he makes things clear:

Both forms [of the equation], clearly, are dramatizations of the same event: the overthrow of the rational by the irrational, though this bald simplification hardly helps to explain the wealth of drama that Shakespeare draws from the conflict (8-9).

Hughes does not have the reputation of favouring simplicity. But it is nevertheless worth knowing where to place the concept of rationalism, such as Hughes uses it, in his theoretical landscape. It is an avatar of what is opposed to the Goddess, to nature, to imagination. It is one name for that pole which lies opposite to the plenitude of being, and in his dualism, that pole is alternately assimilated to Christianity, the scientific spirit,

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<sup>17</sup> »Now the sum of all that is merely OBJECTIVE we will henceforth call NATURE, confining the term to its passive and material sense, as comprising all the phænomena by which its existence is made known to us. On the other hand the sum of all that is SUBJECTIVE, we may comprehend in the name of the SELF or INTELLIGENCE. Both conceptions are in necessary antithesis. Intelligence is conceived of as exclusively representative, nature as exclusively represented; the one as conscious, the other as without consciousness« (Coleridge 1817, 174).

division, or Socratic thought. And the rational / irrational bipolarity reappears later, in his analysis of Greek tragedy:

The hypothesis that tragedy appears wherever primal Dionysiac forces, moving in the ecstatic wave of the Goddess mystery religion, encounter head on a secularizing, rational, pragmatic morality is, as I suggested earlier, as good as any other of accounting for the conflict between rational and irrational in Greek tragedy (374).

Only at first sight does this theory seem to coincide with Nietzsche's well-known definition of tragedy, even if, in the spirit, these two ideas are not without some similitudes. But indeed, for Nietzsche tragedy is an ideal to be recovered, whereas for Hughes it is a disease to be recovered from. While, for Hughes, Socrates is at the origin of tragedy, since his rationalism generates the split tragedy dramatises, for Nietzsche, he chimes its provisional ending<sup>18</sup> [xviii](#). For Hughes, the last of the great Greek tragedies comes after, not with, Euripides and there is precisely no conflict between the theoretical and the tragical visions of the world. For Hughes, the dialectic instinct of knowledge and scientific optimism are tragedy itself. Hughes does not expect from modern times a rebirth of tragedy, but, on the contrary, rather its healing up into theophany. This does certainly call for a longer debate, but it nevertheless seems clear that Hughes and Nietzsche agree at least on the desirable destiny of Socrates. Plato reports that Socrates used to mention a recurrent dream he used to make, telling him to become a poet and to learn music<sup>19</sup> [xix](#). And Nietzsche, who thought it was a very good idea, suggested a »musician Socrates« as a desirable aim for Western civilization to reach. And Socrates it is again, as the protagonist of *Cave Birds*, whom Hughes tries and dissolves in his alchemy of words, to purge him of his error, and perhaps eventually teach him, one day, to become a dancer to God.

Examining Hughes's sometimes rather violent rejection of both Christianity and rationalism, it became clear that those are two terms to designate one notion, in his idiosyncratic theory. The link between Christianity and rationalism, which might seem questionable, becomes a little clearer when it is considered that through Christianity Hughes is more precisely aiming at Reformed Christianity. The gap between these two

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<sup>18</sup> »Si la tragédie ancienne a été dévoyée par l'instinct dialectique du savoir et par l'optimisme scientifique, on pourrait conclure de ce fait à un conflit éternel entre la *conception théorique* et la *conception tragique* du monde: et l'on ne pourrait espérer une renaissance de la tragédie qu'au moment où l'esprit scientifique ayant atteint ses limites verrait ses prétentions à l'universalité anéanties par l'évidence de ces limites. Nous érigerions alors comme symbole de cette forme de civilisation la figure de *Socrate musicien*, au sens exposé plus haut« (Nietzsche 1872, 115).

<sup>19</sup> »Souvent, dans ma vie passée, j'ai eu la visite d'un même songe ; il apparaissait tantôt sous une forme, tantôt sous une autre, mais il disait toujours la même chose: 'Socrate, fais œuvre de poète et cultive la musique'« (Plato 1965, 108).

concepts is bridged by freethinking, and the individual conscience, the Reformation being thus seen as a regrettable misalliance of the Christian religion with the scientific spirit. But, beyond these ideological likes and dislikes, this shows how deeply dualistic Hughes's *Weltanschauung* is. His philosophy is an axiology, defining as two radical opposites Plenitude and Division, the Logos-God of interdiction and the Goddess of Complete Being. His vision of human history is a dramatic projection of a perpetually reiterated conflict between those two powers. In literature, this polemic is basically represented by tragedy. In his effort to express his views, Hughes does not speak alone, but within a concert of other thinkers and poets. His assessment of 20<sup>th</sup> century Western civilisation is strongly indebted to Jungian psychology, and his vision of literary history corroborates T. S. Eliot's, whose »dissociation of sensibility« he endorses and rewrites. However convincing or unconvincing Hughes may well be as a philosopher, a re-reading of his poetry in the light of his theory will show that his main point had already been made most efficiently there, though somewhat more subversively.

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