

Different Shades of Green: A Dark Green Counterculture in Ted Hughes's *Crow*

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Abstract

This essay argues that *Crow*, a collection of poems by Ted Hughes published in 1970, forms part of a countercultural movement that began to emerge in the 1960s and that continues to find new forms in the current century. In the form it takes in *Crow*, this movement protests against a relationship between humans and nature based on a primarily Christian world view combined with what it considers an exaggerated belief in science and technology. This combination and its relation to environmental crisis was first addressed by Lynn White in his classical article from 1967, "The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis". This analysis attempts to demonstrate that the *Crow* poems, written in the years immediately following the publication of White's article, express a similar set of ideas in poetic form. Hughes goes a step further than White, and envisions an alternative, spiritual rather than religious, framework for the nature-human relationship. This alternative is characterised as part of a counterculture described by Bron Taylor in *Dark Green Religion*. According to Taylor, dark green religion defines a variant of environmentalism based on a spiritual view of nature (similar but not identical to deep ecology). This essay suggests that Hughes's *Crow* is a version of this counterculture.

Keywords: Nature and religion, spirituality, Christianity, science and technology, environmentalism

Resumen

Este ensayo argumenta que *Crow*, una colección de poemas de Ted Hughes publicada en 1970, forma parte del movimiento contracultural que comenzó a surgir en la década de los 60 y que sigue encontrando nuevas formas en el siglo actual. En la forma que adopta en *Crow*, este movimiento protesta contra una relación entre hombre y naturaleza basada en una visión del mundo fundamentalmente Cristiana combinada con lo que considera una creencia exagerada en la ciencia y la tecnología. Fue Lynn White quien en su artículo de 1967, "Las raíces históricas de nuestra crisis ecológica", abordó por primera vez esta combinación y su relación con la crisis medioambiental. Este análisis intenta demostrar que los poemas de *Crow*, escritos en los años inmediatamente siguientes a la publicación del artículo de White, expresan ideas similares pero de forma poética. Hughes va más allá que White y concibe un marco alternativo, más espiritual que religioso, para la relación ser humano-naturaleza. Esta alternativa se caracteriza por ser parte de la contracultura descrita por Bron Taylor en *Dark Green Religion*. Según Taylor, "la religión de color verde oscuro" define una variante del ecologismo basada en una visión espiritual de la naturaleza (similar pero no idéntica a la *ecología profunda*). Este ensayo sugiere que los poemas de *Crow* de Hughes son una versión de esta contracultura.

Palabras clave: Naturaleza y religión, espiritualidad, Cristianismo, ciencia y tecnología, ecologismo

Introduction

In *Dark Green Religion* (2010), Bron Taylor identifies a particular environmental counterculture that emerged in the US in the 1960s. This movement, which continues to find support in the current century, regards nature not only as sacred and of inherent worth, but imbued with spiritual presence. It rejects the Western separation of the material from the spiritual realm and opposes the idea that humans are distinctly different from the rest of nature and therefore entitled to exploit natural resources at the expense of other organisms. Though its roots go back to indigenous and other older nature religions, this eco-spirituality emerged according to Taylor in a new and distinctive form related to other countercultures and environmental movements in the 1960s.

This essay argues that Ted Hughes's poetry collection *Crow*¹, published in 1970, is an early transatlantic expression of this dark green religious movement. *Crow* challenges the basic values and worldviews of Western religious and scientific traditions, primarily by exposing the Christian God as weak and illogical. The renegotiated relationship between humans and nature that is tentatively formulated towards the end of *Crow* comes from recognising nature as a spiritual presence and accepting the violence intrinsic to the principles of evolution. The essay suggests that the tension between nature as sacred and of inherent worth and at the same time violent and ruthless points to a contradictory conception of nature in Hughes's ecopoetics and in the green counterculture of the 1960s.

The basic points of critique of Western traditions expressed in *Crow* correspond closely to Lynn White's seminal argument about religion and the environment published in 1967, only three years before *Crow*. In addition to staging the dark green religion described by Taylor, this essay also proposes that *Crow* is a contemporary poetic expression of White's thesis; that Christianity and science and technology combined are behind the ecological crises brought to the public's attention around this time.

The essay begins by outlining Hughes's relation to British and American countercultures of the 1960s. The second part introduces the story of *Crow*, using White's argument to delineate its main objections to a Christian worldview. The substantial criticism and debate that has followed in the wake of White's article are not addressed in this essay, as the point of using White's argument as a reference point here is to highlight the contemporaneity of White's and Hughes's similar criticisms of Western values as enabling and justifying human exploitation of natural resources.² In the next section, the alternative to a Christian worldview that is suggested towards the end of *Crow* is characterised as a form of dark green religion. Part five compares this dark green spirituality to a bloody version of Darwinism in other *Crow* poems, and suggests that these contrasting and even conflicting views of nature point to an inherent

¹ In Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan, London: Faber and Faber, 2003. All references to *Crow* in this essay are to this volume.

² For an overview of immediate responses to White, see Jack Rogers.

contradiction in the nature concept in Hughes's ecopoetics and in the 1960s green countercultures.

Hughes and British and American countercultures in the 1960s

It is probably not a coincidence that White's argument regarding the relationship between religion and ecological degradation appeared in the same decade that saw the emergence of a dark green religious counterculture. Taylor notes that White's article appeared "at an auspicious cultural moment" of growing receptivity to alternative, non-Western world views, a period "characterized by growing receptivity to the religious beliefs and practices of indigenous and Asian peoples" and a simultaneous rejection of mainstream Western religions (11). According to Taylor, "[f]used with intensifying environmental alarm, this religion-related ferment provided fertile cultural ground for a robust debate about the relationships between people, religion, and nature" (11).

Other countercultural groups focused on the relationship between humans, nature and technology. Andrew Kirk notes that views on technology differed widely among green counterculturalists:

it would be a mistake to assume that all of those who considered themselves both counterculturalists and environmentalists thought or acted alike. Even among those who advocated the use of technology to solve environmental problems there was rarely a clear program of action or analysis. Often it seemed as if countercultural environmentalists occupied separate but parallel universes defined by whether they considered technology to be the problem or the solution. Thus the relationship between the counterculture and technology was always one of fundamental ambivalence. (Kirk 355-56)

Kirk differentiates countercultural environmentalists from other green activists by their view of the relationship between nature and humans as fundamentally flawed, rather than as one that could be improved by superficial adjustments:

Just as in the counterculture in general, counterculture environmentalists never constructed a unified philosophy that united like-minded individuals and organizations under one banner. They were instead a diverse group with a wide variety of perspectives, often pursuing opposed or mutually exclusive projects. Nevertheless, what differentiated counterculture environmentalists from other environmental activists in the 1960s and 1970s was a shared desire to use environmental research, new technologies, ecological thinking and environmental advocacy to shape a social revolution based on alternative lifestyles and communities, alternatives that would enable future generations to live in harmony with one another and the environment. (Kirk 355-356)

Crow expresses such a specific countercultural environmentalism by envisioning a fundamentally changed relationship between humans, technology, and the environment, based on a spiritual connection rather than on dominance and exploitation.

Kirk notes that debates on the relationship between humans and technology date back (at least) to the Industrial Revolution, and that the prevailing notion in the twentieth-century, "that through science and the march of progress humans could tame and control all elements of the natural world," was opposed already in the early twentieth century by John Muir, Aldo Leopold and others (356). After the Second World War, the debate gained momentum, not least as a result of the atomic bomb, which

caused people to reflect on “what it now meant that humans had the power to destroy the world” (Kirk 357). By the late 1950s and early 1960s, according to Kirk, “[f]ear shaped much of the conservationist alienation from the post-war world, fear that the prominence of the hard sciences, the expansion of the space race, and the explosion of consumer technology de-emphasized contact with the natural world” (358). When Rachel Carson described effects of human technologies on inner and outer natures in *Silent Spring* in 1962, attitudes were already changing. Carson warned that humanity might be heading towards ecological disaster, a notion picked up by White and Hughes and other 1960s environmentalists.

Hughes came into contact with American environmentalists and early countercultural developments when he visited the US in 1958–59. As noted by Carol Bere, these meetings immediately affected his work:

Hughes read the early Rachel Carson books, and later her seminal work, *Silent Spring* (1962), which soured his substantial involvement in campaigns to save rivers, combat agricultural and industrial pollution, and found environmental trusts in the United Kingdom. Hughes’s changed worldview also translated directly into his poetry. He continually engaged his major, preoccupying concerns: the relationship between the forces of nature and the inner lives of people; the most effective ways in which moral human beings can address evolving ecological dynamics; and, always, he questioned how the imaginative or poetic act could address these questions most effectively. (216)

Elizabeth Nelson notes that in the UK, 1966–1969, the three years immediately preceding the publication of *Crow* in 1970, were “the ‘great days’ of the English counterculture”(45). Differences between the American and the British context include that ecological concerns did not become widespread in the UK until after 1970, which supports the view of Hughes as a pioneering environmentalist in Britain. Another difference was that for British counterculturalists the nineteenth-century Romantics provided an important historical framework to which they could relate their new ideas (Nelson 9). This contextualising of a romantic, spiritual connection with nature is especially relevant in a literary, poetic tradition. For Hughes, the Romantics’ view of nature is both a source of inspiration and a target for critique.

The story of Crow

Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow tells the story of Crow, its protagonist. Each poem forms an episode in Crow’s life. The background story, provided by Hughes at various readings, is that God, exhausted after having created the world, falls asleep, and then has a nightmare. The nightmare looks at man, God’s finest creation, and asks: “Is this the best you can do?” God challenges the nightmare to do better, and the nightmare creates Crow.³

In the ensuing story, God attempts to civilise Crow and teach him Christian morals and values. This results in a number of spectacular failures and misunderstandings, which reveal the Christian God as ultimately weak and powerless, and the Christian separation of the physical from the spiritual as absurd and harmful to

³ For a detailed account of this background story, see for example Gifford 40.

both human and non-human nature. Instead of accepting a Christian worldview, Crow gradually comes to realise that much more powerful than God is the natural world. This insight leads him towards the end of the book to a naturalistic, animistic view of nature, closely resembling that described by Taylor in *Dark Green Religion*. It also leads him to accept the principles of natural selection as inevitable for survival, something he struggles to do while under the influence of the Christian God.

As a comment on the relationship between humans and the environment, *Crow* is an apocalyptic narrative. In “A Disaster,” a 'word', symbolising language and abstract thinking, turns on its creator, destroying both people and the built environment. It then starts to take on the natural world, at which point even Crow becomes concerned:

There came news of a word.
Crow saw it killing men. He ate well.
He saw it bulldozing
Whole cities to rubble. Again he ate well.
He saw its excreta poisoning seas.
He became watchful.
He saw its breath burning whole lands
To dusty char.
He flew clear and peered.

However, once the people who sustain it are gone, the word is weakened:

Ravenous, the word tried its great lips
on the earth's bulge, like a giant lamprey –
there it started to suck.

But its effort weakened.
It could digest nothing but people.

So, “[i]ts era was over”.

In “Revenge Fable”, the outcome is worse. In this poem, people (a “person”) lose sight of their dependence on the natural environment (the “mother”) in the process of trying to understand and control it:

There was a person
Could not get rid of his mother
As if he were her topmost twig.
So he pounded and hacked at her
With numbers and equations and laws
Which he invented and called truth.
He investigated, incriminated
And penalized her, like Tolstoy,
Forbidding, screaming and condemning,
Going for her with a knife,
Obliterating her with disgusts
Bulldozers and detergents
Requisitions and central heating
Rifles and whisky and bored sleep.

With all her babes in her arms, in ghostly weepings,
She died.

His head fell off like a leaf.

Unlike in “A Disaster”, where the era of humanity ends but the earth survives, in “Revenge Fable” both people and planet perish.

In “Crow and Mama” every step of humanity's imagined liberation from nature scars the face of the earth forever. In this poem Crow represents humanity while the earth is again referred to as “mother”:

When Crow cried his mother's ear
Scorched to a stump.

When he laughed she wept
Blood her breasts her palms her brow all wept blood.

He tried a step, then a step, and again a step -
Every one scarred her face for ever

Crow moves further and further away from his mother, or at least so he thinks. He even makes a rocket to get away from her, even though his “trajectory / Drilled clean through her heart”. In the rocket he finally feels “cosy”, due perhaps to the fact that he does “not see much”; he can see only parts of the earth through portholes in the rocket, a possible reference to the limited or specialised views of the world represented by different fields of scientific expertise. To his shock, however, when the rocket eventually crashes on the moon, Crow finds himself crawling “out / Under his mother's buttocks.”

“Crow and Mama” suggests that no matter how removed humanity thinks it is from the natural world, it is in fact not detached from it at all. The poem relates to the idea of “Spaceship Earth,” popularised in 1968 by Buckminster Fuller in *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth*, which describes the planet as a limited resource on which people depend as they travel through space. It is also a comment on the space race of the 1950s and 1960s, including the landing of the first humans on the moon in 1969. In “Crow and Mama”, where Crow finds himself still under his “mother's buttocks” even as he crawls out of his spaceship and onto the moon, Hughes makes the point that regardless of technological progress, humanity ultimately cannot escape the constraints and conditions of the earth’s limited resources.

The relationship between humans and nature depicted in *Crow* is based on three main misconceptions: a Christian worldview, an exaggerated belief in science and technology, and idealisation of nature. The relationship between Christianity and science and technology and their influence on the natural environment was first addressed by Lynn White in his influential article “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” published in *Science* in 1967. White argued that the shift from paganism to Christianity signifies “the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture,” and that “[e]specially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen” (1205). Unlike older nature religions, Christianity separates the spiritual from the physical realm. The result, according to White, is that Christianity supports an unsustainable attitude towards the environment that makes any improvement of the nature-human relationship difficult, or even impossible.

According to White, the spread of Christianity is closely related to the development of science and technology that has taken place since around the time of the

Middle Ages, as humans have gradually gained knowledge about nature and acquired sophisticated tools for modifying and manipulating their environment. White suggests that these developments have not merely coincided, but that the progress of science and technology has in fact been enabled by a Christian worldview. He concludes that modern technology and science “are so tinctured with orthodox Christian arrogance toward nature that no solution for our ecological crisis can be expected from them alone”, and that “[s]ince the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious” (1207).

Crow rejects the separation of the spiritual from the physical and opposes the Christian narrative on multiple levels. “Two Legends”, the first poem in *Crow*, traces *Crow*’s origin out of darkness instead of a Christian light, while the second poem, “Lineage” rewrites the Christian creation story:

In the beginning was Scream
Who begat Blood
Who begat Eye
Who begat Fear
Who begat Wing
Who begat Bone
Who begat Granite
Who begat Violet
Who begat Guitar
Who begat Sweat
Who begat Adam
Who begat Mary
Who begat God
Who begat Nothing
Who begat Never
Never Never Never

Who begat *Crow*

This account of creation replaces the civilised Christian word with its more primal and primitive sibling, the scream. Jarold Ramsey notes that “Lineage” is a “mockery of Biblical genealogies” and an illustration of how Hughes “seems to be intent, with the help from world folklore, on re-writing portions of Creation itself so that the first story in our book of human predicaments is more consistent with the chapters in which we live” (178). In “*Crow*’s Theology”, *Crow* further ponders the relationship between God and man:

Crow realised God loved him –
Otherwise he would have dropped dead.
So that was proved.
Crow reclined, marvelling, on his heart-beat.

And he realised that God spoke *Crow* –
Just existing was his revelation.

But what
Loved the stones and spoke stone?
They seemed to exist too. –

This realisation leads him to more radical questions:

And what spoke that strange silence
After his clamour of caws faded?

And what loved the shot pellets
That dribbled from those strung-up mummifying crows?
What spoke the silence of the lead?

He arrives at an unorthodox conclusion:

Crow realised there were two Gods –

One of them much bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons.

The “much bigger” and more powerful god is nature, or a biocentric god. Unlike the disabled but caring Christian God, the biocentric deity is both mighty (it has “all the weapons”) and threatening (“loving his enemies”). It does not care for humanity as different from stones, lead or silence.

Throughout *Crow*, Christian concepts are similarly questioned and ridiculed. In “Crow's First Lesson,” God tries to teach Crow how to say the word “love.” Crow fails dramatically and excessively: instead of pronouncing the word “love” he retches, gags, and produces first a shark and then, in quick succession, “a bluefly, a tsetse, a mosquito,” all disease transmitting insects. These are followed by “[m]an's bodiless prodigious head” and finally “woman's vulva.” The poem is a catastrophic failure for God; instead of redeeming Crow he is reduced to tears and cursing as he tries to separate the various body parts that have immediately begun fighting on the ground. Crow, unreformed, flies “guiltily off.”

The most important subject of critique in *Crow* after Christianity is science and technology. Where Christianity allows people to hide behind a benevolent God, science, according to *Crow*, allows people to hide behind numbers, or makes them slaves under their own inventions. “Crow's Account of the Battle” describes how soldiers, assisted by new technological inventions, kill each other with increasing efficiency:

There was this terrific battle.
The noise was as much
As the limits of possible noise could take.
There were screams higher groans deeper
Than any ear could hold.
[...]
The cartridges were banging off, as planned.
The fingers were keeping things going
According to excitement and orders.
The unhurt eyes were full of deadliness.
The bullets pursued their courses
Through clods of stone, earth and skin,
Through intestines, pocket-books, brains, hair, teeth
According to Universal laws.
And mouths cried 'Mamma'
From sudden traps of calculus,
Theorems wrenched men in two,
Shock-severed eyes watched blood

Squandering from a drain pipe
Into the blanks between the stars.

The suggestion that scientific discoveries lead to ever more atrocious acts of violence recalls the story of the serpent emerging from a “hatched atom” in another *Crow* poem, “A Horrible Religious Error,” which in turn relates to the biblical story of the fall of man. The reference to the atom also ties in with critique of nuclear weapons following the Second World War, an important part and precursor of 1960s countercultures (see for example, Nelson 31); the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was formed in the UK in 1957 while the international Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons was opened for signatures in 1968 (after ten years of preparation), for example.

In several *Crow* poems, scientific destruction is related to a biblical framework. “Crow's Account of the Battle” suggests that a combination of science and religion amplifies devastation:

Reality was giving its lesson,
Its mishmash of scripture and physics,
With here, brains in hands, for example,
And there, legs in a treetop.

In the end there is “no escape except into death.” Rand Brandes notes that “while there are many mini-crises throughout [*Crow*], the main ones are encapsulated in 'Crow's Account of the Battle'”:

Theorems, scripture and physics lead the self away from the instincts that make us healthy and whole. They separate us from divine creation and our natural spiritual needs. Over time and in isolation they produce a desensitized and fragmented self and society capable of unimaginable atrocities. (73)

In *Crow*, science and technology also devastate the environment. White traces modern exploitation of nature to the seventh century, when the introduction of a new plough revolutionised land distribution and made it possible to use the land more efficiently than before, based on the capacity of a machine rather than on human muscle power. This change was accompanied, according to White not accidentally, by a transition from paganism to Christianity. In pagan animism, different parts of nature are guarded by different spirits, before you can fell a tree or mine a mountain you have to placate the spirits. By replacing this animistic view of nature with a view that relocates the spiritual realm to an imagined heaven, Christianity, White argues, “made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference” (1205).

The marginalisation of nature spirits and their replacement by scientific and technological developments is described in “Crow's Undersong”, where nature (“she”) attempts but fails to enter a Western, civilised world. Unable to handle modern tools, she tries but “cannot come all the way”:

She comes singing she cannot manage an instrument
She comes too cold afraid of clothes
And too slow with eyes wincing frightened
When she looks at wheels

She comes sluttish she cannot keep house

She can just keep clean
She cannot count she cannot last

She comes dumb she cannot manage words

In spite of her shortcomings, nature is “amorous” and brings hope, as without “hope she would not have come”; without her, there would be “no crying” and “no city”, as without her there would be nothing at all. Terry Gifford notes that “Crow's Undersong” “is a celebration of all that remains of a raw force that is now 'under' the trappings of civilisation and conscious, rational life” (43). This force is the same as the nature spirits that White describes as relocated by Christianity to an otherworldly realm (in the form of saints), where they have no influence over man's exploitation of the earth's resources.

Several critics have recognised that Crow is a trickster figure.⁴ Trickster stories are designed to destroy old orders and make room for new ideas; they are by definition countercultural. In his comprehensive study of trickster figures from 1956, Paul Radin describes the trickster in its most archaic, Native American form, the one that Crow most closely resembles, as “at one and the same time creator and destroyer”, and states that the trickster “possesses no values, moral or social, is at the mercy of his passions and appetites, yet through his actions all values come into being” (xi).

In “Trickster Founders of This New Earth”, John Gamber shows that Native American tricksters “begin with the understanding that other-than-human elements comprise controlling forces over which they have, and more importantly *should* have, little power” (n.p.). Gamber also suggests that the trickster “not only uses stories to con the people, but is himself a story”, a story that “operates to liberate” (n.p.). According to Gamber, the trickster narrative “counters multiple levels of confinement, internment, imprisonment, bondage, and limitation” in order ultimately to recreate the world: “[t]he trickster, though mischievous, is imagined to be innocent; his aim is to recreate the world, to imagine it otherwise” (n.p.).

With its roots in folklore and indigenous cultures, the trickster story opposes Christian narratives and logic through form as well as content. Unlike Christianity, the trickster assumes a comic rather than a tragic worldview; compared to Christian images of divine love and selfless acts of sacrifice, the trickster story is recognized, as Radin points out, by “[l]aughter, humour and irony” (x). This is illustrated in “Crow Communes,” where Crow sits on a mountain that is also God's shoulder, while God lies “agape, a great carcass,” paralysed by Crow who has taken the form of a literal 'chip on his shoulder'. The word “agape” suggests an image of God as gaping, stupefied. The origin of the word agape is “agapan,” meaning love or affection, especially in the sense of a selfless and self-sacrificing Christian love. It recalls early Christian love feasts, where meals were eaten in the name of Christ. “Agape” thus evokes God's love of humanity, as well as a more general Christian love. By pairing “agape” with “carcass,” and by previous adjectives referring to God as “exhausted” and “snoring”, the poem associates this meaning of “agape” with a hugely negative image of God as debilitated and selfless to the

⁴ See for instance, Gifford 40.

point of becoming completely effaced. Not surprisingly, the Christian concept of agapan is entirely lost on Crow, as is that of communion. Playing the part of literal “hierophant,” meaning priest or interpreter, Crow “communes” simply by tearing off an actual piece of God's shoulder. He eats it and confirms that “it's true, he suddenly felt much stronger.” Unlike the Christian tradition, the story of *Crow* is haphazard, random and comical, and its protagonist mostly selfish and exploitive. By using a trickster figure as his protagonist, Hughes extends the effect of the countercultural content of *Crow* through an equally countercultural narrative form.

Crow and dark green religion

A few poems toward the end of *Crow* attempt to restore the animistic nature spirit described as pushed aside in “Crow's Undersong.” These poems are preceded by several others in which Crow tries but fails to find alternatives to a Christian framework for relating to the natural world. In “Crow and the Sea,” Crow fails to understand the ocean, as the sea is just too vast for him to grasp:

He tried ignoring the sea
But it was bigger than death, just as it was bigger than life.

He tried talking to the sea
But his brain shuttered and his eyes winced from it as from open flame.

He tried sympathy for the sea
But it shouldered him off – as a dead thing shoulders you off.

He tried hating the sea
But instantly felt like a scruffy dry rabbit-dropping on the windy cliff.

He tried just being in the same world as the sea
But his lungs were not deep enough

And his cheery blood banged off it
Like a water-drop off a hot stove.

Finally

He turned his back and he marched away from the sea

As a crucified man cannot move.

Crow does not realise when he turns away from the sea that he is inevitably walking towards a different shore. The image illustrates how the sea and the natural world are larger than Crow can apprehend, as well as impossible to forego. From this insight come feelings of insignificance, of his lungs being “not deep enough”.

In “Crow Goes Hunting,” the word from “A Disaster” returns, this time in the form of a group of words, a hunting party (“a lovely pack”). The words are sent out by Crow to catch a fleeing hare, this poem's representative of nature. As it turns out, no matter how cunning the words are the hare is able to parry each of their attacks with superior defensive tricks. The hare sets off the story as, with the pack of words on its tail, it

converted itself to a concrete bunker.
The words circled protesting, resounding.

Crow turned the words into bombs – they blasted the bunker.
The bits of bunker flew up – a flock of starlings.

Crow turned the words into shotguns, they shot down the starlings.
The falling starlings turned to a cloudburst.

Crow turned the words into a reservoir, collecting the water.
The water turned into an earthquake, swallowing the reservoir.

The earthquake turned into a hare and leaped for the hill
Having eaten Crow's words.

Crow gazed after the bounding hare
Speechless with admiration.

Crow enters the hunt full of confidence in his “well-trained” words that have “strong teeth,” dismissing his opponent with “what is a hare?” As it turns out, no human invention thought of by Crow can outwit the forms of nature accessible to the hare, including rain, other animals, and earthquakes. The poem ends with Crow's defeat as the words are “eaten,” reversing the outcome of “A Disaster,” where the word attempts (but fails) to swallow the earth. In the last line, Crow is simply “[s]peechless with admiration”.

“Crow and the Sea” and “Crow goes Hunting” try but fail to understand non-human nature without referring to either a Christian or a scientific framework. The alternative that finally emerges relates to non-Western or pre-Christian mystical or magical worldviews. “Crow Goes Hunting” recalls the story of Proteus from Greek mythology, a sea god who can tell the future but changes shape as a means to avoid being captured and forced to do so. The adjective ‘protean,’ meaning extremely versatile or adaptable, is derived from his name. Ovid tells the story of “The Changes of Proteus” in *Metamorphoses*, a narrative of nature and animals that, like *Crow*, rivals Genesis. Recalling the story of Proteus towards the end of *Crow* suggests that the protagonist is beginning to find alternatives to the Christian worldview that he has rejected in the preceding poems.

The worldview that eventually begins to make sense for Crow is a form of “dark green religion” as identified and described by Taylor. According to Taylor, dark green religion “considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care” (ix). Referring Hughes to this dark green countercultural movement captures the two main themes of his work, and of *Crow* in particular, its spiritual intent and its environmental concern and the vital connection it perceives between these two.

Dark green religion opposes the Christian separation of the spiritual from the earthly, as well as the hierarchical view of humans as superior to the rest of nature. It also disputes science and technology as defining features of human progress. Taylor describes this eco-spiritual view of the world as:

generally deep ecological, biocentric, or ecocentric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is, valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This

value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of human moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics. (13)

Though there is no clear-cut definition that separates religion from spirituality, Taylor notes that “[i]n common parlance, *religion* is often used to refer to organized and institutional religious belief and practice, while *spirituality* is held to involve one's deepest moral values and most profound religious experiences”; while spirituality is primarily concerned with “personal growth and gaining a proper understanding of one's place in the cosmos,” and is often “intertwined with environmentalist concern and action,” the world's major religions “are generally concerned with transcending this world or obtaining divine rescue from it” (Taylor 3).

According to this definition, dark green religion is spiritual rather than religious, despite its name. The difference highlights that *Crow* critiques not just Christianity but religion *per se*, as institutionalised and based on ideas of transcendence. Taylor states that without formal texts or institutions, dark green religion is “reinforced and spread through artistic forms that often resemble and are sometimes explicitly designed as religious rituals,” whilst also seeking “to destroy forms of religiosity incompatible with its own moral and spiritual perceptions” (ix). *Crow* pursues both these aims, staging rather than describing a spiritual connection to the natural world and using its trickster protagonist to overthrow the dominant Christian faith.

Dark green religion shares some points of view with deep ecology or ecocentrism, terms more often used in ecocritical discourse for referring to similar sets of beliefs. Greg Garrard points out that “[t]he notion of ecocentrism has proceeded from, and fed back into, related belief systems derived from Eastern religions, such as Taoism and Buddhism, from heterodox figures in Christianity such as St Francis of Assisi (1182-1286) and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), and from modern reconstructions of American Indian, pre-Christian Wiccan, shamanistic and other 'primal' religions” (24). These influences are also visible in dark green religion as signs of the 1960s “religion-related ferment” that Taylor refers to as the background to its emergence.

The difference between a dark green and a simply green religion corresponds to the difference between 'shallow' environmentalism and deep ecology, also described by Garrard:

whereas 'shallow' approaches take an instrumental approach to nature, arguing for preservation of natural resources only for the sake of humans, deep ecology demands recognition of **intrinsic value** in nature. It identifies the dualistic separation of humans from nature promoted by Western philosophy and culture as the origin of environmental crisis, and demands a return to a monistic, primal identification of humans and the ecosphere. (24; emphasis in original)

With similar reasoning Taylor notes that “green religion” suggests religions that have recently undertaken “internal religious reform to make their religions environmentally responsible” (12), whereas dark green religion refers to belief systems that are organised on a basic level around beliefs in nature as sacred. The comparison extends to the difference between counterculture and subculture; the former wants a fundamentally different social order while the subculture advocates merely adjustments to existing orders, for instance the incorporation of environmental concerns into a Christian tradition rather than a complete change of belief systems.

Taylor identifies four different categories of dark green religion: spiritual animism, naturalistic animism, Gaian spirituality, and Gaian naturalism. Of these, *Crow* is best characterised as an expression of naturalistic animism, described by Taylor as “the perception that spiritual intelligences *or* lifeforces animate natural objects or living things” (22). Naturalistic animism, while believing in a spiritual dimension of nature, is sceptical of any supernatural realm:

Naturalistic Animism involves either skepticism or disbelief that some spiritual world runs parallel to the earth and animates nonhuman natural entities or earth herself. But those engaged in it nevertheless express, at minimum, kinship with and ethical concern for nonhuman life. Moreover, for many naturalistic animists, understanding and even communicating with nonhuman lifeforces is possible. According to the historian Donald Worster, this kind of felt kinship, and the biocentric ethics that tends to accompany it, can be grounded in evolutionary theory. (Taylor 22)

Like *Crow*, naturalistic animism often takes a Darwinian view of the history of the earth:

Darwin clearly believed that a kinship ethic can be deduced from knowledge of our common ancestor and awareness that other animals suffer and face challenges, as do we. This kind of conjecture represents an emphatic form of analogical reasoning as well as an act of moral imagination – this is typical of those engaged in Naturalistic Animism. Animism understood in this way can be entirely independent of metaphysical speculation or supernaturalistic assumptions. (Taylor 23)

The animistic view of nature that Taylor describes also entails the belief that “people can, *at least by conjecture and imagination*, and sometimes through ritualized action and other practices, come to some sort of understanding of these living forces and intelligences in nature and develop mutually respectful and beneficial relationships with them” (15-16). This kind of ritual practice is carried out in *Crow* both in the individual poems and through the trickster narrative structure of the collection as a whole. *Crow* enacts what Taylor describes as a form of spirituality “understood as a quest to deepen, renew, or tap into the most profound insights of traditional religions” (3). In this sense, the figure of *Crow* is a ritual or mythical device used by Hughes to 'tap into' a specific belief system.

The naturalistic animism of *Crow* is best expressed in the last poem, “Littleblood”, where the speaker attempts to communicate with the spirit of nature, referred as 'littleblood.' Though present in all parts of nature, in the contemporary world of environmental crisis, this spirit is wounded and hiding:

O littleblood, hiding from the mountains in the mountains
Wounded by stars and leaking shadow
Eating the medical earth.

These lines capture the difference between the nature spirit and the Christian saint, as explained by White:

It is often said that for animism the Church substituted the cult of saints. True; but the cult of saints is functionally quite different from animism. The saint is not *in* natural objects; he may have special shrines, but his citizenship is in heaven. Moreover, a saint is entirely a man; he can be approached in human terms. In addition to saints, Christianity of course also had angels and demons inherited from Judaism and perhaps, at one remove, from Zoroastrianism. But these were all as mobile as the saints themselves. The spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled. (1205)

Different from the mobile saints, littleblood is confined to earth; he has nowhere to hide from the mountains other than "in the mountains." Injured by the stars, suggesting a Christian heaven, his medicine is the empirical earth.

The next two stanzas explain that though littleblood is without a body of his own, he is present everywhere:

O littleblood, little boneless little skinless
Ploughing with a linnet's carcass
Reaping the wind and threshing the stones.

O littleblood, drumming in a cow's skull
Dancing with a gnat's feet
With an elephant's nose with a crocodile's tail.

The last line of *Crow* beckons this spirit to come and sing in the speaker's ear: "Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood." In this poem, the violent and assertive tone of poems like "Revenge Fable," with "[f]orbidding, screaming and condemning" humans, has been exchanged for a quieter and more attentive stance, trying to listen to rather than fight the spirit of nature.

Green spirituality and poetry of violence

Crow contrasts the view of nature as spiritual and of inherent worth with a bloody version of Darwinism, also referred to as Hughes's "poetry of violence," present in other collections by Hughes as well. In "Crow Tyrannosaurus," *Crow* is alarmed, as he suddenly perceives the horrors of the food chain:

It was a cortege
Of mourning and lament
Crow could hear and he looked around fearfully.

The swift's body fled past
Pulsating
With insects
And their anguish, all it had eaten.

Crow wonders if he should try to change his ways:

'Alas
Alas ought I

To stop eating
And try to become the light?'

But of course he cannot. His evolutionary predisposition outweighs his moral doubts and he is trapped by his instincts. The struggle between instinctive and moral selves drives the evolution of his being, as Crow becomes all crows:

But his eye saw a grub. And his head, trapsprung, stabbed.
And he listened
And he heard
Weeping

Grubs grubs He stabbed he stabbed
Weeping
Weeping

Weeping he walked and stabbed

Thus came the eye's
 roundness
 the ear's
 deafness.

The eye's roundness evolves to spot the grubs while the ear becomes deaf in order to shut out the "mourning and lament" of his prey. The moral conflict reflects, as Ramsey notes, man's "predicament as conscious beast, human animal" (180). The contrast between Crow trying "to become the light" and the evolution of deafness illustrates the difference between Christianity and Darwinism. It also complicates the idea of nature's inherent worth by portraying the cruelty inherent in the struggle for survival.

"Crow's Nerve Fails" also depicts a Darwinian worldview. Crow, stricken by guilt as he looks back over his own history, realises that "[h]is prison is the earth," and that his own prosperity has been at the expense of others. As he reflects on everything he has eaten, he is, as in "Crow Tyrannosaurus," horrified:

Crow, feeling his brain slip,
Finds his every feather the fossil of a murder.

Who murdered all these?
These living dead, that root in his nerves and his blood
Till he is visibly black?

But he also notes the inevitability of these rules of his being:

How can he fly from his feathers?
And why have they homed on him?

Is he the archive of their accusations?
Or their ghostly purpose, their pining vengeance?
Or their unforgiven prisoner?

He cannot be forgiven.
His prison is the earth. Clothed in his conviction,

Trying to remember his crimes

Heavily he flies.

These lines reject the Christian concept of forgiveness as both impossible and unmotivated; confined to earth, Crow has not done anything he was not designed to do. The feathers made of other beings also exemplify descriptions of an animated natural world, where all parts of nature have agency, that recur throughout *Crow* and support an ecocentric rather than anthropocentric worldview.

“Crow Frowns” attempts to reconcile a spiritual with a Darwinian nature concept. It accepts the basic evolutionary principles described in “Crow’s Nerve Fails” and “Crow Tyrannosaurus”, but interprets them differently. In this poem, Crow’s adherence to the rules of his being is a source of freedom rather than guilt; his “eating is the wind.” “Crow Frowns” concludes with a sense of wonder rather than horror at the process of evolution:

We are here, we are here.
He is the long waiting for something
To use him for some everything
Having so carefully made him

Of nothing.

This poem suggests that Crow is beginning to see himself as part of rather than in conflict with the rest of nature. The repetition of “[w]e are here, we are here” shows him focusing on the here and now rather than on an otherworldly, spiritual realm.

Poems that depict the violent side of nature in vivid detail have led critics to accuse Hughes of writing “poetry of violence.” In defence, Hughes has argued that “violence” can mean many things, and that the violence his poems describe is not of a negative kind, but rather an expression of evolution and creation.⁵ This kind of violence is for Hughes synonymous with nature, and therefore amoral, even positive in the sense that it is an expression of the same energy that creates life. Channelling this creative energy, by writing poetry, for example, is for Hughes a way of connecting to the powerful forces of the natural world.

However, the view of nature as both Darwinian and amoral and of intrinsic value is questionable; at least from an anthropocentric perspective, there is an inherent contradiction between the recognition of a violent nature and the view suggested in other poems that what is natural is also right. In “After Lynn White: Religious Ethics and Environmental Problems,” Willis Jenkins states that environmentalist projects can be located “along a cosmological continuum, from anthropocentric to nonanthropocentric,” so that “for example, stewardship and environmental justice initiatives appear to the anthropocentric side while creation spirituality and deep ecology sit on the other” (297). The combination of a Darwinian and spiritual view of nature would seem to place Hughes and the dark green religious movement at an extreme non-anthropocentric end of that continuum.

⁵ See the interview with Hughes reprinted as “Ted Hughes and Crow” in Faas.

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