CHAPTER 1

The Deeper Life

> It is one of the peculiarities of the imagination that it is always at the end of an era.
>
> Wallace Stevens, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words"

In a letter dated July 2nd, 1962, Ted Hughes writes of a recent visit to the Tate Britain in London, where a large exhibition by Francis Bacon was on display. "[S]eeing such a range of his work," Hughes writes, "and particularly the latest three studies for a crucifixion, I was bowled over. It's a shock, and not entirely disappointing, to find your deepest inspirations set out with such final power" (*LTH* 203). Bacon's triptych, saturated with garish orange and featuring slaughterhouse carcasses, a pair of unconcerned human observers, and a third out-of-frame figure suggested only by its shadow, offers not a drop of the grace or purpose we would look for in traditional depictions of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. The anonymous butchered victim of Bacon's painting exists as untranscendent meat, the loudly glaring interior spaces denying it (and us) a sky or horizon from which to borrow a bit of perspective, or any sense of connection to other victims. There is no dignity, no composure, nor even a feeling of scandal at their absence. Nothing but meat, and the two onlookers already moving away.

In trying to understand what these images can tell us about Hughes's "deepest inspirations," we ask: is this how our world ought to be? Is Bacon simply representing the bottom-line truth of human life and all else besides, or does the work convey regret over something genuine that has been lost? Bacon's title and format send us inevitably to Jesus' crucifixion, but is this event cast in an ironic or a nostalgic light? Perhaps, for the atheist painter, it is the former. But the redivinization of the human carcass is a career-spanning concern for Hughes, and the wholesale bleaching of the sacral from the carnal which Bacon offers us is exactly

the condition Hughes works to undo. Bacon's brutal assessment of the modern condition may match Hughes's, but Hughes's artistic response is one of unwavering regret.

Like Bacon, Hughes regularly uses Christian images and motifs to formulate his ideas, situating these ideas – rarely with straightforward agreement, often with a kind of productive antagonism – within the Christian tradition. His adaptations of the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent are the most visible examples, but there are many others. In doing this, he relies on both the plasticity and integrity of these motifs, just as he does with the full range of non-Christian myths and motifs that fill his work. Plasticity is essential if he is to enjoy artistic freedom; otherwise, any use of a religious symbol would be little more than a pious repetition. Integrity is essential if something of value is to survive these artistic manipulations, so the finished poem or story has the power to reorient us toward the sacred; otherwise, we are trapped in the stark pessimism of Bacon's painting.

1.1 What We Talk about When We Talk about God

In a 1970 interview published in Ekbert Faas's *The Unaccommodated Universe*, Hughes discusses modern Western culture's inability to cope with "the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe," which he also calls "God and divine power":

> If you refuse the energy, you are living a kind of death. If you accept the energy, it destroys you. What is the alternative? 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.[1]

Hughes clearly saw the religious impulse as an essential organ of the human condition, and saw the object of that impulse – "God and divine power" – as credible. The extent to which Hughes discusses this aspect of our condition is the extent to which he does theological work, and the purpose of this book is to take this work seriously by reading Hughes's poetry and prose through a theologically informed lens wiped of critical preconceptions.

To this end, I will be citing the work of four twentieth-century theologians: German American Protestant Paul Tillich (1886–1965); Swiss Protestant Karl Barth (1886–1968); German Protestant Jürgen Moltmann

[1] Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), pp. 200–1.

(b. 1926); and German Jesuit Karl Rahner (1904–84). Tillich and Barth especially are highly regarded, widely influential voices in twentieth-century theology, and all four wrote during and after what Hughes calls, perhaps pre-emptively, "the last phase of Christian civilization."[2] Collectively their lives span both World Wars, and in their need to respond to those catastrophic events we find a particularly strong link to Hughes's art. In assembling these writers, I do not pretend to be providing a representative cross-section of Christian theology, nor to be proposing a systematic theological reading of Hughes's work. My intention is to sponsor a conversation between Hughes's work and a body of roughly contemporaneous theology for the purpose of identifying areas of sympathy and conflict, to demonstrate Hughes's sophistication as a religious thinker within the Christian tradition. I aim to show that Hughes's treatment of Christianity is not simply one of ironic pilferings from the Bible and Nietzschean dismemberment of the Christian cultural psyche, but a serious and deliberate engagement with Christian ideas rather in the spirit of a salvage operation – as opposed to a wrecking ball.

As a secondary aim for this study, I intend to develop a relationship between Hughes and those American writers and poets loosely gathered under the term Transcendentalism, beginning with Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–82) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–62); proceeding through Emily Dickinson (1830–86); and culminating in Wallace Stevens (1879–1955). This tradition is the site of my own original enthusiasm for poetry, and when I first began to read Hughes, I placed him quite naturally in this Transcendentalist company. The naturalness of this placement, and the illumination afforded of Hughes's religious themes, will, I hope, become apparent through the intertextual and thematic links I establish between Hughes's work and that of the Americans. Stevens in particular, with his continual need to justify imaginative belief in a time of waning religious faith, is a valuable figure for comparison – so apparently different in poetic temperament from Hughes, yet beset by many of the same misgivings, and tempted by the same elations – and he will feature throughout this book. I further hope that by contextualizing Hughes's poetry within American letters, I may do something to encourage an end to his neglect within the American academy.[3]

[2] Ibid., p. 205.

[3] Hughes frequently implied his own placement in a lineage of British poets including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Yeats, and Lawrence, a lineage which critics, beginning with Keith Sagar, have accepted. I don't dispute the importance of these figures for Hughes, and discuss most of them along the way, but I do plead for a looser and fresher sense of Hughes's poetic citizenship.

Let me admit right now that this gathering of Continental theologians and American poets and writers is entirely idiosyncratic of my own reading. This is the conversation I am sponsoring; another reader might gather a different set of voices and hear a different conversation. The value and fascination for me is to observe how readily Hughes's work rises to the occasion: how frequently his work addresses serious theological concerns, and how frequently his thought harmonizes, in substance if not in form, with that of these not-quite-peers.

My argument is organized as a general Christian soteriology, a study of salvation. That is, it begins with the idea of a fall suffered by the first humans and traces a redemptive journey, through the tortured figure of Christ, to a state of restored divinity. The fall is approached from two angles: Chapter 2 explores Hughes's pseudoscientific idea that the evolution of human consciousness constitutes a fall from divine life, and Chapter 3 examines Hughes's many retellings of the story of Eden, including an attempt to tease out Hughes's sense of human moral accountability. Chapter 4 discusses the crucifixion in Hughes's work as a central metaphysical statement of the human condition. Chapter 5 tackles a range of cultural topics centered around the Protestant Reformation, and concludes with a discussion of Primitive Methodism, the religion of Hughes's early childhood. Chapter 6 returns us to the soteriological arc with a discussion of sacramental imagery and aspirations of redemption and transcendence. Finally, Chapter 7 turns to the poetry Hughes wrote about his first wife, Sylvia Plath, as well as to Plath's own writing, approaching this intertextual tangle as a case study for the ideas developed in the preceding chapters.

Insofar as Hughes might explore any theme in any book, my reading of his work is not strictly chronological. It is broadly the case that the earliest books – *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), *Lupercal* (1960), and *Wodwo* (1967) – are overtly concerned with sardonic refutations of Christian religiosity while being covertly busy with quiet explorations of human fallenness; this leads to *Crow* (1970), in which the fall and crucifixion both feature prominently; *Gaudete* (1977), *Cave Birds* (1978), and *Remains of Elmet* (1979) further explore these themes with particular attention paid to the repercussions of the Reformation, with each book offering tentative gestures toward redemption; and *River* (1983) is certainly the high-water mark of both sacramental and redemptive/transcendent language. That is to say, Hughes's output roughly – and only roughly – enacts a rejection of religion in the cultural sense, followed by a restaging of the Christian drama of salvation, almost as if Hughes had decided to begin the whole

Christian project again, playing it out on his own terms. *Wolfwatching* (1989) and *Tales from Ovid* (1997) deploy Christian themes and images earned in previous volumes but offer no real advances, and as such are discussed only incidentally in this book, while *Birthday Letters* (1998) provides an illustrative summation of Hughes's ideas as he applied them to the life and death of his first wife. There is a certain chronological drift, therefore, to my thematic chapter structure.

I return to this invocation of "God and sacred power" which we access through "the machinery of religion." It is certainly beyond the scope of this book to propose final answers to questions such as *Did Ted Hughes Believe in God?* We *can* say that the word "God" appears frequently across the whole of Hughes's *oeuvre*, and that this word does not gesture toward an empty space. What it does gesture toward is sometimes one thing and sometimes another, as we will see. "Religion," meanwhile, comes from the Latin *ligare*, meaning "to connect," as in the English words ligature and ligament. Religion, therefore, is etymologically a reconnection. Schleiermacher describes the essence of religion as a "feeling of absolute dependence," the fact that "we are conscious of ourselves as absolutely dependent, or, equivalently, as in relation with God," who is "the *whence* that is implied in this self-consciousness."[4] God is the object of our dependence, and our self-consciousness of this dependence creates religious feeling. Tillich, the most philosophical and poetic of my assembled theologians, offers other definitions of "God" that will help us avoid popular images of a bearded old man:

> "God" is the answer to the question implied in man's finitude; he is the name for that which concerns man ultimately.[5]
>
> The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means.[6]

Barth, the strictest doctrinaire of our theologians, writes of "God" that "this word signifies *a priori* the fundamentally Other, the fundamental deliverance from that whole world of man's seeking, conjecturing, illusion, imagining and speculating."[7] Rahner, the most focused on matters

[4] Robert Merrihew Adams, "Faith and Religious Knowledge," in *The Cambridge Companion to Friedrich Schleiermacher*, ed. by Jacqueline Mariña (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 35–51 (p. 37).
[5] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology Volume 1* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 211.
[6] Paul Tillich, *The Shaking of the Foundations* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1949), p. 63.
[7] Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. by G. T. Tomson (London: SCM Press, 2001), p. 27.

of epistemology, refers to God as "the absolute mystery," and defines the human as "a being oriented toward God": "His orientation towards the absolute mystery always continues to be offered to him by this mystery as the ground and content of his being."[8] Elsewhere he writes of the "unthematic and anonymous, as it were, knowledge of God" available to us as human subjects, of our being "always oriented towards the holy mystery" to which the word "God" refers.[9] To fuss over the theological technicalities of all this would be to pretend a false precision in Hughes's use of the word "God." The crucial observation is that all of these theological sketches approach God in relational terms, a relationality already present in the etymology of "religion." It will therefore suffice for the purpose of this study to define God as *that to which we seek reconnection*, where that seeking, that need for reconnection, is allowed as a given of the human condition as construed by Hughes and constructed by our theological focus group.

Aside from these rather abstract treatments, of course, "religion" and "God" both have more culturally burdened definitions. "The critical consensus is […] strongly in favour of the view that Hughes's project is, at bottom, a 'religious' one," writes Terry Gifford,[10] and he directs us to Neil Roberts's more exact observation that "Hughes's whole *oeuvre* can be seen as a struggle to articulate spiritual experience in a vacuum of religious forms,"[11] suggesting a tension between Hughes and formal religion apparent in his many prose statements on the topic. In "The Hanged Man and the Dragonfly," Hughes's essay introducing *The Collected Prints of Leonard Baskin*, he refers to the "deeper life" of artistic insight: "One hesitates to call it religious. It is rather something that survives in the afterglow of collapsed religion" (*WP* 84). Hughes may hesitate to call this deeper life "religious," but he uses two other explicitly religious words, the sacramental "consecrated" and the Calvinistic "elect" – perhaps with a touch of irony, perhaps not – to describe his friend and frequent collaborator's life's work. Yet we can grasp Hughes's point easily enough: religion in this sense is an affair of institutions and culture, often of politics, and too easily corrupted. Even at its best religion is the structure, the vessel: it is not the substance held.

[8] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2002), p. 44.
[9] Ibid., p. 21.
[10] Terry Gifford, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ted Hughes*, ed. by Terry Gifford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1–13 (p. 7).
[11] Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 188.

He speaks similarly to Faas, of "a shifting of your foundation to completely new Holy Ground, a new divinity, one that won't be under the rubble when the churches collapse."[12] Formal religion is not to be regretted categorically; the regret comes later, when institutions have calcified and become unresponsive to the need they originally expressed. And although this calcification and worldliness may have overtaken Christianity as surely as it overtook its predecessors, Christianity did for a time serve as an apt vessel, as Hughes makes clear in his introduction to his translations of Ovid, in which he refers to "that unique moment in history—the moment of the birth of Christ":

> The Greek/Roman pantheon had fallen in on men's heads. The obsolete paraphernalia of the old official religion were lying in heaps, like old masks in the lumber room of a theatre, and new ones had not yet arrived. The mythic plane, so to speak, had been defrocked. At the same time, perhaps one could say as a result, the Empire was flooded with ecstatic cults. For all its Augustan stability, it was at sea in hysteria and despair, wallowing at one end in the bottomless appetites and sufferings of the gladiatorial arena, and at the other searching higher and higher for a spiritual transcendence—which eventually did take form, on the crucifix. (*TO* x)

As Roberts points out, these references to religious cultural collapse, and particularly his account of Ovid's situation, parallel Hughes's understanding of his own era.[13] Hughes remarks to Faas:

> What Eliot and Joyce and I suppose Beckett are portraying is the state of belonging spiritually to the last phase of Christian civilization, they suffer its disintegration. But there are now quite a few writers about who do not seem to belong spiritually to the Christian civilization at all. In their world Christianity is just another provisional myth of man's relationship with the creator and the world of spirit. Their world is a continuation or a re-emergence of the pre-Christian world … it is the world of the little pagan religions and cults, the primitive religions from which of course Christianity itself grew.[14]

In naming these precursors in twentieth-century literature, Hughes makes plain that he sees himself living in the aftermath of the collapse to which T. S. Eliot and the rest bore witness, at a time when "the old rituals

[12] Faas, p. 207.
[13] Roberts, *Literary Life*, p. 188.
[14] Faas, p. 205.

and dogma have lost credit and disintegrated, and no new ones have been formed." In such a time of disintegration "the energy [of 'God and divine power'] cannot be contained, and so its effect is destructive – and that is the position with us."[15] Bacon, too, is "suffering the disintegration," and yet, perhaps speaking as much to his own art as to the painter's, Hughes insists that "one doesn't at all have a feeling of desolation, emptiness, or hopelessness" encountering the work.[16] Clearly, Hughes sees himself as bearing both the privilege and the burden of living "in the afterglow" of religious collapse, a time in which new religious forms, new vessels, have not yet taken shape. If Hughes overstates the disintegration of religion in his own time (a kind of golden age fallacy), he does so for the vital purpose of opening an imaginative space within which a religious poet such as himself can operate.

These statements by Hughes suggest that religion and imaginative art are doing the same essential work – that in a time of declining faith, "poetry and painting, and the arts in general, are, in their measure, a compensation for what has been lost," as Wallace Stevens says[17] – that poetry "must take the place / Of empty heaven and its hymns."[18] We see this link in Hughes's "Foreword" in the 1993 *Sacred Earth Dramas* anthology, a project he helped to found:

> The Duke of Edinburgh had the idea that the new knowledge [of the need to "change the way we live"] needs to be couched in language that bypasses verbal argument – language that comes from the heart and soul and therefore speaks directly to the heart and soul. In 1986 he organized a conference of the heads of religions from all over the world, at Assisi, to consider how a new environmental awareness might be incorporated into religious teachings. After that, he asked whether the various languages of art could convey the same awareness.[19]

Art and religion, by virtue of their communicative power, share a moral mandate in times of crisis. And we need only read Hughes's passionate and polemical review of Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution* (discussed in Section 3.2) to realize how keenly he felt himself to be living in a time of crisis. The ability to write religiously, in the best sense of that

[15] Ibid., p. 200.
[16] Ibid., p. 208.
[17] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel* (New York: Random House, 1951), p. 171.
[18] Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 167.
[19] Ted Hughes, "Foreword," in *Sacred Earth Dramas* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1993), pp. vii–viii (p. vii).

word and not at all in the worst sense, is therefore of central importance to Hughes's poetic career.

But how to write religiously – that is, to write about reconnection to God – without being immobilized by the miles-long baggage train of history and culture hitched to the word "God"? What to do with that word? It undergoes a notable reversal of fortunes across Hughes's career, from reprehensible cultural product to (nearly) redeemed noun for genuine divinity. Speaking about the backstory to his landmark collection *Crow*, Hughes explains the God-character of that book as a misguided cultural contrivance: "This particular God, of course, is the man-created, broken-down, corrupt despot of a ramshackle religion, who bears about the same relationship to the Creator as, say, ordinary English does to reality."[20] This can scarcely be called atheism, as Hughes credits "the Creator" in the same breath as discrediting the man-created God, but it is certainly a slight to organized religion.

Hughes's description of the God of *Crow* readily adheres to many non-*Crow* poems, especially from Hughes's first three collections, *The Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal* and *Wodwo*, where uses of the word "God" typically resemble little cannon-blasts of irony. Take for instance "Soliloquy," whose seriously uncharming speaker "shall thank God thrice heartily" (*CP* 26) to be buried alongside women who must at last tolerate his company. "God" here is nothing but a rhetorical device for a man seeking revenge for his loneliness. "Complaint," which begins with an address to "Aged Mother, Mary" (*CP* 32), may be gentler in tone than "Soliloquy," but its reference to "times quiet with God's satisfactions" is pointedly ironic in the context of chilling allusions to sexual violence. Both poems, meanwhile, are slightly ironized by the frames of their stagey, formal titles, which suggest cultural rather than spiritual commitments.

Turning to *Lupercal*, "The Good Life" introduces us to a would-be hermit who decides "Only a plump, cuffed citizen / Gets close enough to hear God speak" (*CP* 74). His loud prayers go unanswered, and the rhyming iambic tetrameter singsong underscores the poet's sarcastic attitude toward his subject. "The Perfect Forms" is a feast of religiously barbed sarcasm, with lines about the "Stupidity of the donkey / That carries Christ" and the "six-day abortion of the Absolute" (*CP* 82). Hughes's revulsion at the God-talk of Christian culture is undeniable, and it only increases in *Wodwo*. From the God who crafted the "Ghost Crabs" (violent avatars of

[20] Ted Hughes, *Crow* (Dublin: Claddagh Records, 1973).

Schopenhauer's Will) as his "only toys" (*CP* 149), to the inhuman formula "This has no face, it must be God" offered in "Song of a Rat" (*CP* 169), to the lazy-brained deism of "what is not the world is God" in "You Drive in a Circle" (*CP* 177), the enthroned creator-god becomes in *Wodwo*, if it had not been before, a token of no currency. Indeed, Hughes's relentless ironizing of the term "God" could become tiresome were it not part of an effort to clear away misapprehensions of divinity, an effort which elsewhere, even in the early books, begins to make positive compensations for the discrediting of that three-letter shorthand.

"The Conversion of the Reverend Skinner" from *The Hawk in the Rain*, for instance, omits any form of the word "God" in its attempt to redirect (rather than reject) religious sentiment. Rebuffed by a prostitute for his condescension and haughty moralizing, the Reverend is physically and spiritually humbled, lying "full length in the gutter" before receiving a vision: "Then he saw the thin moon staggering through the rough / Wiping her wound. And he rose wild / And sought and blest only what was defiled" (*CP* 32). This passage anticipates the wealth of Goddess imagery we find in Hughes's work – though "defiled" is certainly a problematic word, hinting that the Reverend's puritanical morality has survived the arrival of this new infatuation, a potentially autobiographical pattern I discuss in Section 5.1. "Crag Jack's Apostasy" from *Lupercal* is a folksy persona-poem whose speaker has thrown off his Christian heritage but finds that his own "god's down / Under the weight of all that stone." The poem is addressed to "you, god or not god," who arrives from "the world under the world" (*CP* 84), language suggestive of atheism, pantheism, Gnosticism, and much else a reader might wish to go looking for; it also curiously echoes Tillich's controversial assertion of a "God above God" or "the God above the God of theism," essentially his attempt to look beyond the God-object of worship to a divine principle existing prior to (above) the subject/object dichotomy.[21] Hughes's use of the lowercase "god" for the religious sketch work in "Crag Jack's Apostasy" reflects his discomfort with affirmative religious language, a discomfort which leads him to use such language (especially words like "divine" and "sacred") loosely and inconsistently in prose, sometimes with scare quotes and sometimes not. These choices should not be overinterpreted: Hughes is clearly aware of the cultural attachments such language brings with it, and his need to defend against these attachments may be more or less on any given occasion.

[21] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Binghampton: Vail-Vallou Press, Inc., 1952), p. 186.