

[This essay was published just before the publication of the Faber and Faber edition of *Cave Birds*.]

Deep in the heart of *Wodwo* there lies ‘The Wound’. Among the poems and stories a radio play is offered as part of the ‘single adventure’ of the volume. Private 521 Ripley is being marched by Sergeant Massey towards a destination of which Ripley is uncertain. In fact Ripley’s ramblings indicate his uncertainty about most things that enter his tired mind. He is told that they are searching for a chateau which, after crossing an icy river, they find. Their knocks are answered by women’s laughter, the yapping of dogs and eventually the appearance of the Queen. As the snarls of dogs and squeals of pigs are replaced by shrieking laughter, Ripley and Massey are ushered in to the banquet, which is to be followed by ‘fun and games’, and finally the dance. Ripley refuses to eat and is troubled by repeated incoherent memories. A girl attempts to pull him away from the table, but Ripley resists. Massey describes how he and his men were surrounded with ammunition but no food, and were driven to eat their dead comrades, a story which draws delight from the women and disgust from Ripley who was there at the time. At the height of their excitement the women dismember Massey. The girl returns to seduce Ripley but when he again resists she tells him that he has a bullet hole right through his head. Ripley immediately finds himself in the pitch black of a room from which he eventually finds his way into the ballroom. Dancing to the orchestra are the Sergeant and several men whom Ripley recognises as his dead comrades with a certain degree of horror. Behind the curtains Ripley and the girl discover a storm and gunfire. Ripley relives the conditions of his besiegement. They return to the dance to see the floor swallowing up all his comrades who are being dragged under by the panicking women. Deciding that he must walk out of the battle which has replaced the dance Ripley at last uses the aid offered by the girl. Desperately he promises to marry her if they ever ‘get back to streets’. Suddenly two soldiers find Ripley and call for a stretcher, commenting on the size of his wound and the strength of his ‘animal instinct’.

How many readers of *Wodwo* have got through ‘The Wound’ at a first reading? And how many readers of the play are left feeling that it is a play either of obscure surrealist symbolism or wordily disguised simplicity? I felt that my first failing to get into, and then to make very much sense of ‘The Wound’ was a result of the play’s undisciplined structure and indulgently overwritten imagery. After rereading it recently I still feel these qualities to be the play’s limitations in specific sections of it, but it now seems to me that the central concerns and later language of the play make it the most disturbing and the most positive of the prose works in *Wodwo* and deserving of more attention than readers might at first have given it. Perhaps, as I shall try to show, the radio broadcast of *Cave Birds* has made me more alert to the moral strength of ‘The Wound’.

To invite comparison between the play and the poems as Hughes does in his Introductory Note to *Wodwo* is surely a threat to the play in the context of poems which are feeling towards a voice of archetypal simplicity on the theme of dissolution and different kinds of ‘threats of death’. The stories do achieve a tight, brief, directness, but a play demands a more elaborate structure and runs the risk of appearing self-consciously ‘poetic’ in this context. ‘The Wound’ fails to a certain extent on both counts. In the early part of the play Hughes indulges in the creation of mystery with too many twists, and delights in strings of images in order to visualise the mental processes of Ripley; Ripley’s longest speeches are too rambling and repetitive in form. The language achieves more concise power as it also gains more dramatic significance culminating in the profound poetry of the wound image itself and the ambiguous moral struggle that Ripley’s fight for survival comes to represent.

In fact ‘The Wound’ shares with the poetry of *Wodwo* an imaginative use of narrative in an adventure into the realm of dissolution and death. As the play progresses it derives

much of its force from the same quality of folktale imagery and narrative strength that the poems draw upon. Like the story 'Snow', 'The Wound' offers a challenge to the reader to define the reality of its hero's experience. What begins in 'The Wound' as the semi-conscious struggle of an exhausted soldier to grasp 'what's gone wrong', grows as the story becomes increasingly weird, into a surreal fantasy that appears to be a process of the mind at, or possibly after, the moment of his death. This growing sense that Ripley, like his Sergeant and his comrades at the dance, has actually died, is countered by his own vital resistance to the world of living death which he has entered. This dramatic tension is resolved in narrative terms by the final revelation that Ripley has been walking all this time towards the probable salvation offered by the stretcher-bearers.

The sequence of situations in which Ripley finds himself and his responses to them, suggest the kind of moral tests by sometimes seductive and sometimes frightening fantasies that the soul of a dead Buddhist guided through by the *Bardo Thodol*. Hughes was actually working on an oratorio of this Tibetan Book of the Dead at the time of writing 'The Wound'. There is perhaps a stronger parallel between 'The Wound' and the nearest English equivalent to the *Bardo Thodol*, the traditional song known as 'The Lyke-Wake Dirge'. Like the *Bardo Thodol* this song originates as an instruction to a dead person for the successful progress of their soul through various tests of their integrity when alive. The 'whinnes', or gorse bushes, in the song act as the women do in 'The Wound', to destroy the physical identity of the person who does not have the moral resources to resist them. Ripley, like the dead Tibetan Buddhist, plays a more active part in the process than the Christian who passes through the rewards or punishments of 'The Lyke-Wake Dirge'. The song has a strangely eerie tune which can be heard in a recording made by The Young Tradition (TRA SAM 13), but it is the structure and function of the song which is echoed in 'The Wound':

This ae night, this ae night,
 Every night and all,
 Fire and fleet and candle-light,
 And Christ receive thy soul.

When thou from hence away art passed,
 Every night and all,
 To Whinny-Muir thou com'st at last;
 And Christ receive thy soul.

If ever thou gayest hosen or shoon,
 Every night and all,
 Sit thee down and put them on:
 And Christ receive thy soul.

If hosen and shoon thou ne'er gav'st nane
 Every night and all,
 The whinnes sall prick thee to the bare bane
 And Christ receive thy soul.

From Whinny-muir when thou may'st pass,
 Every night and all
 To Brig o' Dread thou com'st at last;
 And Christ receive thy soul.

From Brig o' Dread when thou may'st pass,
 Every night and all,
 To Purgatory fire thou com'st at last
 And Christ receive thy soul.

If ever thou gav'st meat or drink,
 Every night and all,
 The fire shall never make thee shrink,
 And Christ receive thy soul.

If meat or drink thou ne'er gav'st nane,
 Every night and all,
 The fire will burn thee to the bare Lane
 And Christ receive thy soul.

This ae night, this ae night,
 Every night and all
 Fire and fleet and candle-light
 And Christ receive thy soul.

The sharply described disintegration of the flesh clearly rewards a selfish life. The hero of Hughes's *Cave Birds* sequence, which was broadcast by BBC Radio 3 on 23 June 1975, was a cockerel, the traditional image of strutting self-importance. The opening words of the narrative which linked the poems set in motion a trial in which the hero's humanity was tested by his response to the nature and conditions of his existence. The sequence began with a narrator's voice:

The hero's cockerel innocence, it turns out, becomes his guilt. His own self, finally, the innate nature of his flesh and blood, brings him to court.

The tenth poem in the broadcast sequence [rewritten as number eight, 'In these fading moments I wanted to say', in the Faber edition of 1978] was prefaced by the narrative comment, 'He comprehends some of the contradictions of his guilty innocence, and his innocent guilt'.

HE CALLED

Near the door, under the square of light.

Only a fly
 Landed on his lip.

He tried to feel death. He dreamed a person
 Numbed in icy petroleum
 Burning, and in the nest of flames
 Becoming a huge cockroach
 A thing
 That slowly raised a claw to point at him.

He tried to feel life.

He drew aside the curtain of a dead sparrow's eye
 That could once lift the head off him like a chloroform —
 It stared dull and worthless.

He shouted
 As if mountains had spoken.

As if he stood In the mountainous after-silence
 Hearing his voice crumble.

The whole earth
 Had turned in its bed
 To the wall.

The final image of this poem comes close to Ripley's feeling that everything around him is cut off from his own reality. The essential difference is that Ripley fights to keep a distance from the ambiguous pleasures of the women and stays alive, whilst the hero of this poem is rejected by the natural world which 'goes dead on him' because he fails the tests of his humanity. The gentle delicacy of the line 'He drew aside the curtain of the dead sparrow's eye' affirms a value in life that he can no longer appreciate. He can only 'dream' himself into a confrontation that demands a humane response, whilst Ripley must resist the dream situations which confront him at a distance from him, trying to draw him in. This poem has extended the metaphysics of 'Crow and the Sea' into an explicitly moral measure of humanity. This is the advance of *Cave Birds* on *Crow*. The interesting parallel with 'The Wound' lies in the way the sequence of experiences tests the hero's own integrity by demanding his discrimination of the 'reality' of others. The moral ambiguity of those situations with which he is confronted, demands a realisation and judgement of the ambivalences in himself. Despite his physical and mental exhaustion Ripley is alert to his sense that

Something's gone wrong. Some thing. A slight error in the thirtieth decimal
 place is having its consequences - every step a multiplication. Be careful, Ripley.

When Ripley enters the chateau for which he and the Sergeant have been searching, the Queen invites the women to indicate to Ripley 'where they are'. Chorally they describe their post-mortems indicating they are in the house of the dead. But the choral poetry develops a satire of society's repulsion towards suffering having been institutionalised into organised fascination:

the zinc bench on which they stretched me trembled with the thunder and enthusiasm
 of the journalists under the windows.

One of the accusations against the hero of *Cave Birds* was his 'bonfire unconcern for the screaming in the cells'. These women's bodies have been dissected and displayed 'in the dailies [...] in the name of the law not to speak of humanity'. The women have themselves taken on this perverse delight in horrors of the flesh to the extent that their screeches emerged from those of dogs and pigs when the chateau door was first opened. Ripley reveals his true humanity by rejecting the chateau as 'lousy old brothel, all tarted up'.

The question of Ripley's integrity is, however, complicated by the Sergeant's revelation that, in the face of extreme hunger in their encircled farmhouse, the soldiers left alive

cut up those dead lads of ours and ate them raw.
(Shrieks, squeals)

Ripley: Sarge!

Sergeant: You were there, Ripley, don't look so righteous.

Whether Ripley is fully implicated is not so important as his attitude in the context of that of the women. He clearly has no right to 'look so righteous', but his objection to the telling of the story for the thrill of the audience, separates him from the death-dominated pull of the chateau. Similarly his refusal to eat with the women, although his attempt to provide reasons emerges as an absurdity ('I get nightmares being eaten by bulls') does represent a spirit of resistance to their moral dissolution, a dissolution which becomes physical at the dance. Because Ripley again refuses to accept the exhortations to join the dance from friends whom he knows to have been killed at the farmhouse, he is not finally dissolved into the ballroom floor as his comrades are ultimately dragged under by the women.

Ripley's positive clinging to life throughout the play is dramatically focused around his relationship with the girl who, although she instantly says she loves him, has a desperation in her attempt to draw him away from the banquet. Ripley is at first repulsed by what he senses as the used whore in her youthful face, yet finally, in trusting her, finds that she saves him. It is his words 'Will you marry me?' that attracts the attention of the stretcher-bearers. This moment represents not only the survival of life in the face of conditions dominated by death, but the salvaging of basic human values by resisting the easy relief of his suffering. His firm resistance to the temptations of the chateau has led Ripley in a straight line towards the stretcher-bearers: 'He must have walked over nine miles with that lot, straight towards us. That's animal instinct for you.' But the animal instinct to survive is for Ripley, as it is for Ivan Denisovich in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's novel of that name, a moral instinct that defines his humanity on the edge of death, against that of more comfortable 'civilized' society.

The brief and moving twist at the end of the play thus changes the significance of the story. Ripley is seen to have been engaged in a physical struggle for his life that is also an assertion of his humanity. His subconscious has given metaphorical shape to that struggle, just as 'The Lyke-Wake Dirge' and the *Bardo Thodol* provide metaphors for a similar definition of humanity through the folktale structure of the testing journey in the face of death. The play's final shift into the reality of the battlefield makes it clear that Ripley's disgust at the anti-human hell of the chateau, his indignation at Massey's reporting the survivors' cannibalism, his refusal to eat or later to dance, his initial resistance to the girl then his need for her, all constitute a positive recognition and personal resistance to the process of dissolution by which he is surrounded.

Throughout the play he refuses to acknowledge the wound in his own head. This is both his limitation and his strength. He instinctively blinds himself to the weakness in himself in order not to capitulate. Thus sometimes with absurdity, sometimes hypocritically, nevertheless Ripley resists and survives, at a price. In one of the most powerful passages in the play the significance of the wound in his head is explained to him by the girl:

Ripley: What's that great sky-blinking glimmer and the rumble, like the sun trying to rise. I suppose lots of summer thunder goes with all this.

Girl: That's your life, working at the hole in your head.

Ripley: What?

Girl: That's the war, working at all the undead. Well, aren't we going to walk?

That Ripley survives is, in the context of the play, a moral achievement. Yet it remains an ambiguously 'instinctive' one. Ripley is not fully conscious that the forces of dissolution, as well as of life, are exposed by his wound, to be in himself. The 'slight error' that is 'having its consequences' is in his own nature: it is an internal as well as external condition of his existence. Whether Hughes extends the final achievement of 'The Wound' we shall have to wait for the full publication of *Cave Birds* to discover.