On Crow Images: What Ted Hughes’ *Crow* Shares with Chinese Literature

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At the sight of the word *crow*, people tend to picture an ordinary or even disgusting bird, not as beautiful as a peacock or as regal as an eagle. Crows are black all over and sing songs that are grating and arrhythmic. However, it is this little bird that appears frequently in mythic and literary works by both Western and Eastern writers. It seems that a crow has different profound cultural significances. In the *Old Testament*, for example, God created human beings but was aggrieved by their wickedness. He eventually flooded the whole Earth to destroy them except Noah, who was told by God to make an ark to escape the disaster. After forty days, Noah sent out a raven (a larger crow) and let it keep flying in the air until the water receded from the earth.\(^{[1]}\) In Greek mythology, a crow is the incarnation of Apollo, who symbolizes energy and emotion. Crows are worshipped as the messenger of God in Japan. Every year pious Buddhists in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Burma celebrate a temple fair that hallows crows because they regard the song of crows as auspicious. Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Sri Lanka, is even called “the Heaven of Crow”, where flocks of crows hover in the air.\(^{[2]}\)

In Chinese, the word *crow* is made up of two characters “鸟” and “鸦”. “鸟”
means black which is the color of crows; “鸦” refers to a kind of bird. Chinese mythology, legends, and folktales have oceans of records of crows, and this little animal bears rich and intricate cultural connotations. In Chinese culture, the crow has diverse images involving death and gloominess, defiance and intrepidness. Interestingly, this paradoxical mixture of both survival and fatality can find its best representation in Ted Hughes’ fourth collection, Crow. There comes into being the idea that, although the crow image has its own cultural origins, both Western and Eastern cultures endow the crow with the epitome of both good and bad, positive and negative, hopeful and hopeless connotations.

As Bentley suggests, there are plural discourses informed Ted Hughes’ Crow: biblical narratives, myth, the cartoon strip, science, and psychoanalysis. These short sequential poems present a solitary, crafty, and strong Crow: sometimes he flies over mountains or searches in garbage heaps; sometimes he grins at the scenes of disaster. He has suffered tremendously, but he endures and lastly survives the ordeal. In this sense, his role is comparable to literary and folkloric ones played by many cultural heroes: St. George, Oedipus, Hercules, Christ, and Satan. Sagar reveals that Crow consists paradoxically of the destructiveness of Nature, hope, and determination to keep trying. Similarly, Weatherhead states that Crow, as both the victim and force of life, is well equipped to accept the pain in his life and manages his despair by sheer physical confrontation. Their remarks boil down to one fact: Hughes’ crow symbolizes a cycle of suffering and endurance, despair and hope, life and death, as it were, the universal truth of human existence.

The theme of depression and universal bleakness is so clearly seen and deeply felt in some of the poems in which negotiation seems impossible. Brandes’ comments make a strong case. In his eyes, Crow is Ted Hughes’ most gloomy and disturbing volume. He considers this collection to be “Hughes’s dark night of the soul” and thus has “a terrible touchstone in one’s memory field”. In this dark world, there is nothing but a black hole which both light and Crow cannot avoid. This point is best summed up by Kimball. Crow, he maintains, has a negative function because blackness and negation permeate this collection. As he says, there appears “a sobering and stark impression of Hughes’ preoccupation with the themes of discord and disharmony”. A close analysis of some poems will shed light on the dark world that Crow is going through.

Readers may be overwhelmed by the “black” image in the opening “Two Legends”. This poem shows a bleak and repressive vision which indicates a sense of
nonnegotiable doom. Blackness has pervaded the essential life and become the only color of eyes, the tongue, the heart, the liver, the lungs, the blood, the muscle, the nerves, the brain, and even the soul. Despite the striving of muscles, the life is still beset with an oppressive blackness. Therefore, the brain can only show “tombed” or dead visions; the soul is only a “stammer of the cry” (Crow, p. 217. Hereafter, only the page is parenthesized). The world of Crow, in Kimball’s words, is “a legend of the unexplained but undeniable disorder”. Emptyness and blackness intertwine with each other to feature this disorder in which all is black and light is absent. Blackness negates direction and sight and leads to total darkness:

Unable to suck in light  
[...]
Striving to pull out into the light  
[...], could not
Pronounce its sun.
[...]
An egg of blackness
Where sun and moon alternate their weathers
To hatch a crow, a black rainbow
Bent in emptiness  
over emptiness (217)

This bleak vision continues in “That Moment”. The face, which signifies human existence, has already lain broken, and there is only gravel. The abandoned world has become lifeless and empty because all trees and streets are closed forever:

And the trees closed forever  
And the streets closed forever  
And the body lay on the gravel  
Of the abandoned world  
Among abandoned utilities  
Exposed to infinity forever (209)

The theme of emptiness is reinforced in “Conjuring in Heaven”, in which the essence of the cosmos is described as a violent force that squashes, chops, and, shakes the “nothing”:

So finally there was nothing.
It was put inside nothing.
Nothing was added to it
And to prove it didn’t exist
Squashed flat as nothing with nothing.
Chopped up with nothing.
Shaken in a nothing. (235)

Hughes’s vision of bleakness culminates in “Robin Song”. A shocking image of the hunted victim and lost sufferer forces itself upon the readers’ attention. The last lines—

I am the maker
Of the world
That rolls to crush
And silence my knowledge. (235)

—graphically stage a horrible picture of universal destruction and the corresponding sense of despair. If the Creator becomes the Destroyer, there will be no world at all. The loneliness, agony, and helplessness of life will give way to another more horrific monster—death, which Crow can never escape.

Death is another depressing theme that is informed in Crow; this little creature has experienced his death and the death of others when being born. He is first exposed to death in “Examination at the Womb-Door”. Death owns everything, from body to soul and from earth to space, stronger than hope, will, love, and life. Death looms large before the newly born Crow and threatens his weak life. Crow also meets with others’ death. In “A Disaster”, Crow finds that the technological progress winds up in the “collapsing mushroom” of the atom bomb, giving rise to the total destruction: “Its era was over.”(227)

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 clearly and peered. (226)
Here “news of a word” is news of war, which consumes human beings’ lives. At the beginning Crow delights in the destruction and is apathetic to it; however, he is later puzzled by the powerful force of words that wipe out all cities and people.

Crow witnesses the suffering and dying of people for no reason in “In Laughter”. This poem describes a relentless, frightening, and absurd world where laughter is sharply contrasted with the destruction, the death:

Cars collide and erupt luggage and babies  
In laughter.  
That steamer upends and goes under saluting like a stuntman  
In laughter.  
The nosediving aircraft concludes with a boom  
In laughter.  
People’s arms and legs fly off and fly on again  
In Laughter.  
The haggard mask on the bed rediscovers its pang  
In laughter, in laughter.  (233)

There is something, in Ramsey’s words, “of Beckett’s grim humor”—if nothing exists, the only thing you can do is to laugh, something of “simple hysteria—a terrible comedy beyond tragedy”, in which the only visible is carcass.⁹⁹

“Crow’s Account of the Battle” offers another glimpse of the cruel reality: the world is full of earsplitting noises of screaming and groaning:

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. (222)

He finds that “everything struggled on its way” (222) in this barbaric battle, which seems inevitable and ceaseless:

Reality was giving its lesson,  
Its mishmash of scripture and physics,  
With here, brains in hands, for example,  
And there, legs in a treetop. (222)
He finally realizes that "[t]here was no escape except into death" (222).

The summary poem "King of Carrion" displays Crow as the very totem of death. "His kingdom is empty", resided by "skulls" and "the scaffold of bones" (209). There is no sign of life except for the deathlike "silence":

The empty world, from which the last cry  
Flapped hugely, hopelessly away  
Into the blindness and dumbness and deafness of the gulf  
Returning, shrunk, silent  
To reign over silence. (209)

The overwhelming image of emptiness and death that has pervaded this collection recurs for the last time.

Interestingly, this negative image is exactly what a crow is associated with in the Chinese culture because the crow has long been used as the symbol of bad luck and ill omen in China. There are lots of Chinese idioms and sayings concerning this association. For example, the idiom "天下乌鸦一般黑" means that the whole world is evil and no goodness exists. The saying "乌鸦报丧" demonstrates unmistakably that the crow is the jinx. In ancient literary works, a crow was commonly used to reinforce the bleak atmosphere and symbolize death: In a deserted creepy graveyard, there is nothing but a crow singing the harsh and plangent songs. The sheer imagination of this horrific scene will make the readers' hair stand on end. The association of a crow with a bad portent is best embodied in ancient Chinese poetry.

As a Chinese proverb runs, "无悲不成诗". Most of the ancient poems concern the feelings of sadness and bleakness: the sadness of departure and the bleakness of loss. While sadness characterizes ancient Chinese poetry, a crow plays a significant part in piling on gloom and depression. Take as an example the following Chinese poem "枫桥夜泊" by 张继 (715－779) in the late 700s:

月落乌啼霜满天,  
江枫渔火对愁眠.  
姑苏城外寒山寺,  
夜半钟声到客船.

This poem depicts the poet's emotions when he is leaving his hometown on the boat. It expresses the love of his birthplace and the sadness of separation. The crying of
crows is intermingled with the ringing of bells to intimate his sorrow of having to be apart with his family.

Written by 马致远 (1260－1334)，a famous poet in the Yuan Dynasty, “秋思” articulates the poet’s nostalgia:

枯藤老树昏鸦，
小桥流水人家。
古道西风瘦马，
夕阳西下，
断肠人在天涯。

The poet skillfully externalizes his feeling as a vagrant by describing a picture of the autumn countryside at the sunset. He uses five adjectives “昏”, “老”, “枯”, “瘦”, and “古” to respectively modify five nouns “鸦”, “树”, “藤”, “马”, and “道”. These adjectives stage a desolate scene of a jaded horse wandering in the bleak countryside, accompanied by solitary crows. It is only through this vivid depiction that a rover’s loneliness, agony, and helplessness is crystallized. The sense of solitude and distress culminates in the last line in which a brokenhearted traveler is still trudging in a foreign land.

In the mean time, the close link of crows with death and gloominess cannot negate the fact that a crow also stands for rebellious spirit in Chinese literature. A short novel “药” is often singled out as an example. Its author, “鲁迅” (1881－1936), was not only a great Chinese writer and intellectual, but a great revolutionary. According to Eber, Lu has been hailed in China for decades as “a progressive leader who pointed out the correct revolutionary path” and “used literature to advance the revolutionary struggle”.[10] Lu, through his pen, voiced suffering and indignation of the youths and called for their revolt. Eber states that Lu Xun’s fiction was a eulogy to Chinese revolutionary pioneers who never wavered in the unbearable persecution and suffering, even at the cost of their lives.[11]

The protagonist in “药”, Xia Yu, is such a positive hero, who sacrifices his life for the revolution. This short novel ends with the poignant scene in which his dejected mother wails before his grave with a crow on it:
The deathly stillness in the graveyard may remind readers of what a crow is usually connected with—the vision of death. As a great mentor of the Chinese revolution, nevertheless, Lu Xun in no way meant the crow to be a negative symbol of pessimism due to the temporary failure of the revolution. However, a closer examination of the crow depicted in this scene shows, at the same time, the striking resemblance of Lu Xun’s crow to an eagle in that it stands as immobile as iron and flies as fast as an arrow. With an eagle’s qualities, Lu’s crow embodies a strength, an energy, latent but powerful. Once released, this tremendous power of the masses will destroy the old and usher in a brand new epoch. The deafening caw of the crow is the alarm bell that calls on the Chinese youths to rise and give battle to feudalism and imperialism. It also signals the Chinese revolutionaries’ loud protest against their oppressor and their resolution to fight. These pioneers’ bodies may perish, but their spirit remains, because, as the reincarnation of the hero, the crow at the end of this scene is still flying. In this light, Lu Xun’s crow sharply reflects the determined, indestructible, and fearless spirit of the revolution.

It is this spirit that also informs Ted Hughes’ Crow. In Brandes’ view, “[d]eath was the midwife that delivered Crow”[12] because Ted Hughes’ personal tragedies
are just under the surface of all poems—three victims of suicide (his wife, Sylvia Plath in 1963; his partner, Assia Wevill, and their four-year-old daughter, Shura, in 1969).[13] Although Brandes argues that these sufferings “compound this volume’s sense of hopelessness and confusion”, he still thinks that Ted Hughes avoids projecting individual anguish into a universal experience.[14] Brandes looks to Crow for a sign of hope instead:

In Crow Hughes looks death in the face and fearlessly follows it into the abyss. All of the “bad” things that happen in Crow are part of the “reality”, but so are the possible good things. Given Hughes’s personal tragedies and history’s compounding miseries, it would have been easier not to write Crow. But in Crow “nothing” is “something”—“something” to hold on to.[15]

As this comment reveals, what permeate Hughes’ Crow are hope and spirit rather than despondency. The hope for existence gives rise to the daring, indomitable, and everlasting fighting spirit of Crow.

This hope is personified as “she” in “Crow’s Undersong”. As Hughes mentions in “The Environmental Revolution”, “Nature as the Great Goddess of mankind, and the Mother of all life” has re-emerged.[16] This poem delivers the message of hope, which continues as long as life remains. “She”, the Mother Nature, is coming back into the human predicament of isolation from nature, but this plight is not hopeless:

She has come amorous it is all she has come for
If there had been no hope she would not have come
And there would have no crying in the city
(There would have been no city) (237)

In terms of Crow’s spirit, Hughes’ “A Reply to Critics” offers a clear-cut explanation. Crow, he suggests, is subjected to the face-to-face confrontation with unfathomable forces in his journey. He can “either give up” or “press on till he breaks through to what he wants”. [17] Even if that breakthrough will crush him, he does break through and “reappears elsewhere as the same Old Crow, or rather as not quite the same”—a “Crow of more fragments, more precariously glued together, more vulnerable”. [18] Hughes touches on the same topic in “On Images in Crow”:

Crow either gives up, or he breaks through to what he wants and is exploded. That he explodes is positive. If he had withdrawn, he would have remained fixed in his error. That he
pushes it to the point where he is annihilated means that now nothing remains for him but what he has exploded him—his inner link with his creative self: a thing of spirit fire.\textsuperscript{[19]}

In this sense, the way of facing calamity underlies Crow’s spirit. He realizes that to do it is horrible, but he even more amply recognizes that not to do it is certainly more horrible. Since he will not compromise or escape, the mere way available to him is to face catastrophe without turning back. He is devoted to the search for his self in a harsh world. His sublime spirit is self-realized through his unbending and unrelenting struggle.

Crow appears as Ted Hughes’ ordinary man, living a life beset with suffering and doomed to death. Nevertheless, Crow is the symbol of life in that he is stronger than death; Crow is a rebel against whatever tries to subjugate his creative self. A better understanding of Crow’s spirit requires the readers to find answers, which are actually provided by Hughes himself, to two questions: What does Hughes’s Crow fight against and why?

During the period of writing Crow, Hughes published several essays and took interviews. He chose issues of Western civilization and Christianity in his interview with Ekert Faas. As far as he is concerned, Western science disintegrates the society, and Christianity kicks Nature out of human beings.\textsuperscript{[20]} He addressed the same point in “The Environmental Revolution”, saying, “Christianity deposes Mother Nature and begets, on her prostrate body, Science, which proceeds to destroy Nature”\textsuperscript{[21]}. Western civilization, he stated, derives from Reformed Christianity, and they together contribute to

the fanatic rejection of Nature, and the result has been to exile man from Mother Nature—from both inner and outer nature. The story of the mind exiled from Nature is the story of Western man. It is the story of his progressively more desperate search for mechanical and rational and symbolic securities, which will substitute for the spirit-confidence of the nature he has lost.\textsuperscript{[22]}

In this light, Crow may be read as the protagonist’s rebellion against the deprivation of instinctual life and as his quest for what is deprived. Fernandez sees this instinctual life as a demonic force, irrational, emotional, experienced, and “intrinsic, like a skeleton, not extrinsic like theories”\textsuperscript{[23]}. He maintains that Hughes intends Crow to show “the failures of Christianity and technology to contain the demonic force”\textsuperscript{[24]}. Whether this force is creative or demonic, it is safe to say that Crow’s
struggle is to learn how to live according to the laws of nature and that mere existence is the victory of his self over death.

At the beginning of Crow’s world, there is blackness and emptiness, a state similar to death (“Two Legends”). However, as Lu Xun’s crow flies toward the sky, Hughes’s Crow is “flying” too. This flying, as Sagar asserts, is “at least a sign of life and selfhood”[25]. No matter what his world seems to be, Crow is never frustrated because he is stronger than death. Nowhere is this idea seen more clearly than in “Examination at the Womb-door”. Crow defeats death by passing the womb-door and entering another cycle of human life:

But who is stronger than death?

Me, evidently.

Pass, Crow. (219)

Likewise, death fails to annihilate Crow during the process of his birth in “A Kill”. Crow is “Flogged lame with legs”, “Shot blind with eyes”, “Strangled just short of his last gasp / By his own windpipe”, and “Clubbed unconscious by his own heart” (211). His “bowel-emptying cry” (212), like the loud caw of Lu Xun’s crow, signals the success of his struggle for life.

The stronger-than-death motif continues through “A Grin”. In spite of the prevalence of death and depression, Faas declares, there is a gleam of hope to come from “visions of further passion, agony and destruction”[26]. In his opinion, this poem, following Crow’s triumph over death in “Examination at the Womb-Door”, reiterates “the refusal of death’s dominion”[27]. The grin cannot find “a permanent home” or “tenure / In eternal death” (213). No matter how hard it tries the faces of suffering people: a woman in labor, a man in the car-crash, a machine gunner, a murder, or a man in the electric chair, “none of it lasted” (213). Death is defeated again:

The grin
Sank back, temporarily nonplused,
Into the skull. (213)

During his growth, Crow has been constantly put to a series of trials and ordeals by God, science, or other incomprehensible forces. Crow becomes increasingly involved in human suffering in that he is transformed, hammered, burned, blasted, or
obliterated. With unflappable resolution, Crow stands in defiance and survives them all. He is the indestructible bird that persists.

The use of Biblical stories in some poems offers a glimpse of Crow’s triumph over Hughes’s incapable God. The Bible says in the New Testament: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. He was with God in the beginning”\[28\]. The first three words of “Lineage” echo these two verses, but in the beginning was not “the word” but “Scream” (218). All things originate in the scream rather than in God. It is from this scream that come “Blood”, “Eye”, “Wing”, “Bone”, and “Sweat” (218)—the symbol of life. It is the scream that begets Adam, who begets Mary, who begets God, who begets nothing, as Genesis records, however, only God is the Creator of all things:

> When the Lord God made the earth and the heavens—and no shrub of the field had yet appeared on the earth and no plant of the field had yet sprung up, for the Lord God had not sent rain on the earth and there was no man to work the ground, but streams came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground—the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being.\[29\]

Therefore, the original lineage in the Bible is totally inverted in the Crow’s world.

As the title “A Childish Prank” implies, Crow here undertakes his career as a blasphemer, relishing in playing mischief on God. Ramsey views this poem as “a paradigm of Hughes’s sacrilegious use of mythic traditions”\[30\]. God is not described as omnipotent as he should be because he is puzzled by the problem in the Garden of Eden:

> Man’s and women’s bodies lay without souls, 
Dully gaping, foolishly staring, inert 
On the flowers of Eden. 
God pondered. (215)

Unlike impotent God who is trying to figure out a spiritual answer, Crow’s solution is sexual. In Fernandez’s terms, Crow contributes to the Christian Redemption in that “[c]reation is completed by the bestowal of sexuality on mankind”\[31\]. “Worm”, “God’s only son” (216), is “a symbol of regeneration, the being born again of the Christian Redemption”\[32\]. Fernandez concludes that in the Crow myth, the real “Redeemer” is Crow (not Jesus Christ) who “redeems man by instilling in him the ability to regenerate himself through sex”\[33\].

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God’s inability is continued in “Crow’s First Lesson”. Trying to teach Crow how to talk, God reiterates the command:

“Love,” said God. “Say, Love.”
[...]
“No, no,” said God. “Say Love. Now try it. LOVE.”
[...]
“A final try,” said God. “Now, LOVE.”

God tries to teach Crow the abstract and rational “Love”. Nonetheless, Crow’s love is emotional, irrational, and physical. It comes with no surprise that Crow rejects God’s teaching and elicits chaos:

And Crow retched again, before God could stop him.
And woman’s vulva dropped over man’s neck and tightened.
The two struggled together on the grass.
God struggled to part them, cursed, wept—(211)

In Crow’s world, God’s love is pointless. This view is corroborated in “Snake Hymn”. What remains is not God’s omnipresent love, but the essential truth about birth and death, sex and life.

God’s impotence evokes Crow’s feelings of dissatisfaction and even disobedience in “Crow Communes”. Crow tries to converse with God, but God, tired and asleep, cannot answer his questions:

“Well,” said Crow, “What first?”
God, exhausted with Creation, snored.
“Which way?” said Crow, “Which way first?”

God’s silence forces Crow to solve the problem in his own way:

Crow tore off a mouthful and swallowed.
“Will this cipher divulge itself to digestion
Under hearing beyond understanding?”

A trance of defiant silence ensues:

Crow, the hierophant, humped, impenetrable.
Half-illumined. Speechless.
(Appalled.) (224)

Shamed into anger, this impotent God endeavors to destroy the insubordinate by depriving the instinctual self. In “A Horrible Religious Error”, when the serpent
“emerged”, “God’s grimace writhed”, “man’s and woman’s knees melted”, and they whispered “Your will is our peace” (231). However, this symbol of natural force is finally beat and eaten, so result in the “Religious Error”. In “Apple Tragedy”, God, the Lord of Creation, appears as an “interloper” versed in magical tricks and the originator of sin and death. The Fall of man is not caused by the serpent’s seducing Eva to eat the apple, but by “a new game” invented by God:

The serpent stared in surprise
At this interloper.
But God said: “You see this apple?
I squeeze it and look—Cider.” (250)

This God, fearful of natural human instinct, attempts to save it by containing it. As a result, the man must “hang himself in the orchard” to save his honor, while the woman must cry “Rape! Rape!” (250) Ironically and inevitably, “everything goes to hell” (250) because of the rejection of human desire.

Crow defies God by having his own creation in “Crow Blacker than Ever”. In God’s created world, everything seems in disorder because God and man repulse each other:

When God, disgusted with man,
Turned towards Heaven,
And man, disgusted with God,
Turned towards Eve,
Things looked like falling apart. (244)

Crow interferes and creates his own world by nailing them together. The result is that “Man could not be man nor God” (244). However, Crow remains Crow, “[f]lying the black flag of himself” (244).

His rebellion winds up in God’s more relentless revenge, but Crow steels himself for any torture, thus inflicting despair and suffering on the torturer. This is best represented in “Crow’s Song of Himself”. God is getting rid of pagans by means of torture, and his action characterizes any form of religious intolerance. God exerts all of his efforts and tries every feasible means, hammering, roasting, crushing, tearing, blowing up, hanging, burying, or chopping Crow. Despite this, God cannot avoid being depressed and has to admit: “You win, Crow.” (247)

Triumphant Crow, hence, begins to search for a true creator for the purpose of flouting God’s false creation. He gains an insight in “Crow’s Theology”. He realizes that the God he confronts is “the man-created, broken down, corrupt despot of a
ramshackle religion” who “accompanies [him] through the world in many guises, mis-teaching, deluding, tempting, opposing and at every point trying to discourage or destroy him”[34] and that beyond the traditional God, there must be another God:

Crow realized there were two Gods—
One of them bigger than the other
Loving his enemies
And having all the weapons. (227)

It is clear that this bigger God is technology, which “loved the stones” and “the shot-pellets” and “spoke the science of lead” (227).

Ironically, this loving “God” merely replaces Christianity as another container of instinct and Nature. In “Crow’s Account of St. George”, St. George is described as a typical scientist in the Age of Technology because “He sees everything in the Universe / Is a track of numbers racing towards an answer” (225). “He rides those racing tracks” (225), making a silence, melting cephalopods, and picking the gluey heart. He is obsessed with his scientific invention to the point where nature begins to appear demonic in his illusion. He is haunted by all kinds of demons which imply the natural force—from a Crow-like one, “bird-head, / Bald, lizard-eyed, the size of football, or two staggering bird-legs”, to a dragon-like one, “belly-ball of hair, with crab-legs, eyeless” (225). With intense fury, St. George “smashes”, “tramples”, “splits”, “scatters”, and “bifurcates” the demons (225). A horrifying picture ends the poem, in which the crazy scientist “recovers”, only to find “his wife and children lie in their blood” (225). This tragedy signifies the disastrous consequence of destroying the irrational and natural world.

Despite the power of science and technology, Crow remains unscathed and undaunted. In “The Battle of Osfrontalis”, Crow is unimpressed by a variety of words involved with technology. He is thus attacked by words with “the glottal bomb”, “light aspirates”, and “guerilla labials” (214). Crow, however, ignores them, only whistling. What is given up first are words that “retreated, suddenly afraid/into the skull of a dead jester”, while Crow “yawned—long ago” and “had picked that skull empty” (214).

Crow also encounters other forces, but still survives. Despite the sun’s destructive power in “Crow’s Last Stand”, “something” remains unaffected:

Burning
  burning
  burning

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there was finally something
The sun could not burn. (210)

Charred as it is, “Crow’s eye-pupil, in the tower of its scorched fort”, remains “[l]impid and black” (210). In “Oedipus Crow”, Crow is seriously dismembered: His torn insides are stormed, his leg removed, and his brain twined. However, Crow, “cheered by the sound of his foot and its echo”, manages to survive, although “One-legged, gutless, and brainless” (230).

This “boneless” and “skinless” little blood has gone through the unutterable suffering of life, “Wounded by stars and leaking shadow”, “Reaping the wind and threshing the stone” (258). The little creature stays alive, though, “drumming in a cow’s skull”, “Dancing with a gnat’s feet”, and “Sucking death’s mouldy tits” (258). The last poem of this collection, “Little Blood”, presents in miniature the entire motif of Crow’s persistence and survival. As Heaney claims, this poem is the best illustration of transition from the tragic to the transcendent, and it is as if, “at the last moment, grace has entered into the Crow-cursed universe” [35].

This “grace” is nothing but the tough spirit Crow possesses that sustains him, that makes him the final victor, and that enables him to laugh at, scorn, and attack his ubiquitous enemy—fatality. It is He that ultimately overpowers death:

Crow jeered at—only his own death.
Crow spat at—only his own death.
Crow spread rumors—only about his own death.
He robbed—only his own death.
He knocked down and kicked—only his own death.
He vowed revenge—only on his own death.
He tricked—only his own death.
He murdered—only his own death. (272)

He remains “he who never has been killed” (253).

It is interesting that such a common, ugly, and even repulsive bird as a crow can find crucial analogues among the literary works of both Eastern and Western cultures. The crow is described as a paradoxical symbol of pessimism and optimism, death and life. This little bird is the witness or victim of a great deal of pain or death, but it bounces up again and again after having been destroyed by inconceivable blows. The crow knows neither good nor evil; it owns no values, moral or social, yet through its uncompromising fight for survival come all values. The truth the image of crows in literature conveys is the ceaseless repetition of birth and death, creation
and devastation. Though knowing the anguish of human life and approaching death, Crow endures because what survives is a hard-won life-will.

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**Notes:**
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[29] *The Holy Bible: New International Version*, Genesis 2:4-7.
[30] J. Ramsey, “Crow, or the Trickster Transformed”, p. 179.
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