CHAPTER V

THE ANIMAL WORLD: DOMESTIC

When Calvin Bedient dubbed Hughes a mere "voyeur of violence," he was only giving expression to the overtly aggressive aspect of Hughes, an aspect which most often has determined the critical atmosphere around Hughes's poetic world. However, it should be noted that the poet does but manipulate his wild menagerie only to plead for a heightened humanitarian cause, to exorcise disoriented violence and causeless brutality and at the same time maintain an integrated vitality in a peaceful atmosphere. It is in this respect that Hughes has been widely misunderstood and even accused of showing a marked lack of human concern in his poetry by critics like Colin Falck who insist that

... the real limitations of Hughes's animal poetry is precisely that they conjure emotions without bringing us any nearer to understanding them. They borrow their impact from a complex of emotions that they do nothing to define, and in the end tell us nothing about the urbane and civilized human world that we read the poems in. 2

Although Hughes does provide ample opportunity for such criticism by his projection of violence in the animal world--for in his view violence is an element inherent in nature--, he does not glorify violence for its own sake. He believes that any release of the innate, powerful, vital forces of nature should be guarded
and restrained so as to prevent the dangerously harmful energies from producing disastrous results. So he juxtaposes a poem of destructive violence with one of goodness and virtue in order to invalidate its negative repercussions. Hughes narrates his experiences during and consequent to the writing of his poem "Gog"

I wrote another jaguarish poem called "Gog." That actually started as a description of the German assault through the Ardennes and it turned into the dragon in Revelations. It alarmed me so much I wrote a poem about the Red Cross Knight just to set against it with the idea of keeping it under control . . . keeping its effects under control. 3

Hughes attributes similar experiences to other artists as well, in particular to two poets who influenced him greatly with their concern with myth-making, both traditional and personal—his poetic masters William Blake and W. B. Yeats:

Blake's great poem "Tyger! Tyger!" is an example, I think, of a symbol of this potentially dangerous type which arrives with its own control—it is yoked with the Lamb, and both draw the Creator. Yeats' poem about the Second Coming is very close—and the control there is in the direction given to the symbol in the last line—"towards Bethlehem." Not so much a control as a warning, an ironic pointer—but fixing the symbol in context.

Behind Blake's poem is the upsurge that produced the French Revolution, the explosion against the oppressive crust of the monarchies. Behind Yeats's poem is the upsurge that is still producing our modern chaos—the explosion against civilization itself, the oppressive deadness of civilization, the spiritless materialism of it, the stupidity of it. Both poets reach the same way for control—but the symbol itself is unqualified, it is an irruption, from the deeper resources, of enraged energy—energy that for some reason or other has become enraged. 4
Dangers resulting from such outbursts of destructive energy are ever present in genuine creative endeavours, especially in poetry. Yet it is essential to evoke the energy in order to prevent emotional sterility and social stagnation. Analysing the problem in depth, Hughes suggests what seems to be an alternative:

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.  

Hughes explores the possibility of conventional religions in offering the means to invoke the submerged energy and is often confronted with its gross inadequacies in doing so. Thus he turns to a primitive pre-Christian nature worship which when allied to the rituals of shamanistic practice is able to achieve the ideal state of existence which is akin to the one created by Greek tragedy as described by Nietzsche, where

... the state and society, and, quite generally, the gulf between man and man give way to an overwhelming feeling of unity leading back to the very heart of nature.

It is this cathartic effect arising out of the Dionysian wisdom of tragedy which the onlooker experiences intuitively and feels nullified as in Shakespeare's last plays, that Hughes attempts to achieve in his poetry.

The non-aggressive creatures of the Hughesian canon so far, have received scant attention from the critics who have but highlighted the more obvious aspects of ferocity and potency in his poetic world. A close reading of the early poems reveals
the presence of a few non-violent animals, who are nevertheless agents of the fiery Dionysian energy. Though incapable of infuriated passion and raging destruction like the predators on the rampage, these overtly gentle creatures on certain occasions exhibit boisterous and hysterical energy turbulently disordering the world around them. In "View of a Pig" (Lupercal), the poet looks down upon the body of a dead pig and mentally contrasts it with his memory of a live one. The pig, now dead, is like an inanimate object, heavy and unimpressive. It bears no resemblance to its former self and the protagonist feels no qualms about thumping it and treats it like a mere object:

Such weight and thick pink bulk
Set in death seemed not just dead.
It was less than lifeless, further off.
It was like a sack of wheat

I thumped it without feeling remorse.
One feels guilty insulting the dead,
Walking on graves. But this pig
Did not seem able to accuse.

... ...

Too dead now to pity
To remember its life, din, stronghold
Of earthly pleasure as it had been,
Seemed a false effort, and off the point.

The mode and style of the poem and the casual nature of the words used evidences the protagonists' matter-of-fact stance on viewing the dead pig. He is quite surprised at his own lack of emotion and disinterestedness. He recalls the energetic activity of live pigs that he had once witnessed at a fair and juxtaposes it with the uninspiring picture of the dead pig before him to accentuate the contrast in appearance:
Once I ran at a fair in the noise
To catch a greased piglet
That was faster and nimbler than a cat,
Its squeal was the rending of metal.

Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.
Their bite is worse than a horse's--
They chop a half-moon clean out.
The eat cinders, dead cats.

Distinctions and admirations such
As this one was long finished with.
I stared at it a long time.

The poet seems more concerned with his own inability to sympathize with the dead animal and the distancing of his emotions than with the actual death. His attempts at reverie and imaginative reproduction of the live pigs only serve to reinforce the deadness of this pig and his indifference to the indignities to which its body will be subjected. The minute the pig is separated from its vital energy, it loses its connecting sympathetic link with the human universe.

Though the poet finds the dead animal alien and is unfeeling in his attitude towards it, the same does not apply to a live animal. A close encounter with even a gentle and timid creature can inspire a sense of awe and fear even in a seasoned nature observer. In "Meeting" (HR), Hughes narrates an instance where a bold and confident individual came face to face with a black goat on an empty mountain slope. An unexpected opportunity to gaze into the creature's eye produced a nerve-racking experience for the human being:
But once when
On an empty mountain slope
A black goat clattered and ran
Towards him, and set forefeet firm on a rock
Above and looked down
A square-pupilled yellow-eyed look,
The black devil head against the blue air,
What gigantic fingers took

Him up and on a bare
Palm turned him close under an eye
That was like a living hanging hemisphere

And watched his blood's gleam with a ray
Slow and cold and ferocious as a star
Till the goat clattered away.

The single chance look at the creature at such close quarters
was enough to bring to the viewer an awareness of the hidden
power concealed within the animal. His airs of superiority
could only fade away in the obvious presence of such awesome
natural powers.

The strange animal instincts of the goat later came to be
viewed by the poet as evidence of the evil alienness of the world
of nature. In What is the Truth, the goat is seen by both the
Farmer's wife and the Schoolteacher as an evil beast, the earthly
representative of Satan. The teacher's distaste for the animal
is made obvious through his unfavourable description of the
creature appearing from the centre of destruction and disaster:

Out of the dusty fall of Babylon the Great
Walked the Goat, still searching for something to eat.

Out of the tombs of Egypt stepped forth
The Goat, chewing a scrap of mummy cloth.

Into the cave, from which Christ's body had flown,
The Goat peered, evil-eyed, with his horns on. (WT, p. 78)
To him, the Goat represents everything unholy and irreligious, possessing a capacity to survive unperturbed the most earth-shaking calamities and even to continue its search for food—personal survival being its only concern. The farmer's wife, on the other hand, has more genuine reason to be wary of the goat, for it has unhealthy designs on her plants, being in her opinion, "the worst of all garden pests." Her dislike rises out of her pragmatic fear of losing her flowers and the young fruit trees. But the prejudice takes root in religious dogma, which in this instance seems to emphasize the unsavoury side of the real beast.

A plague out of the Old Testament are goats!
Satan, sitting in their throats,
Looks at me through their evil eyes and gloats.

When a goat pulls at your coat, it's a sampling bite.
There it stands, chewing its marble, thinking:
I'll gnaw this whole globe down to a meteorite! (WT, p. 78)

The poacher, a close sympathizer with animals, is the only individual who makes any effort to see some good in the creature. But despite all his efforts to exonerate the animal by his reminder that "The Nanny Goat's milk is still the sweetest of milks/And her cheese of cheeses", the general impression one gets is that of a mean and evil beast. The negative traits which he tries to pass over swiftly cannot be ignored even by him for they are unholy and give the creature an aura of eerie menace. As the church itself has expressed its disapproval of the beast, it is not strange that its followers—particularly the women whom Hughes seems to consider its most devout adherents—follow suit. Though sensible men like the farmer and even a vagabond like the
poacher can appreciate God's creatures, the church does not accept them. It is so formalized and institutionalized that it has lost all links with the natural world, and fails to recognize the animals for what they are. It no longer sees all animals as God's creatures and attributes various human qualities to the beasts according to their convenience.

The geese are seen by the farmer's wife as "godly creatures" despite the fact that they destroy her garden just as the goats do. Yet in spite of their noisy clatter and discordant music, they are religious in her view for

At my first note on their bucket, though it's ten degrees below, Their choir stands in a ring and they lift their throats of snow.

And they carol out their discords, till their tall necks fence me in With a rusty-shipyard bonging echoing hollow din. Noel, Noel, they clang to God, which can't be called a sin. (WT, p. 83)

Still, she has no compunctions about killing them and preparing a Christmas feast out of them, for it is all done in the name of God. She even imagines that the bird has no objections to being treated thus and that it wilfully surrenders itself for the sacrifice:

The neck in its muff, its ruff of plumes, pretending to be dead, But the bright eye still open hearing every word what's said, And the beak that worked so hard at the world, and sang to me so strong, Holding carefully silent the plump tip of its tongue Lest it spoil our Christmas Feast with any whisper of wrong. (WT, p. 84)

The Schoolteacher disagrees with her pious justification of cruelty and is quietly contemptuous of her religious views.
Not overtly religious, he scoffs at the lady's extremely Christian viewpoint and presents his picture of the bird which is highly imaginative and romanticized. He imagines that the geese were "Two dirty queens, hating each other," once living in the splendour of snow mountains and dazzling peaks now reduced to eking a living out of muddy surroundings:

They couldn't fly to the ice-floes. Did they ever see snow fuming
Off sun-dazzle peaks? Their necks had long lost
The poured cream of a goose's plump neck softness.
Instead, clutching their draggily bunched-up skirts,

Lifting out of mud bare feet that were
More like rubber frogfeet, these two queens
Held their noses high--blue eyes always
Peering over something--or bowed, studying

Mud for another egg. Bub, bub, bub! (WT, pp. 84-87)

He heartily sympathizes with the creatures and their apparently pathetic surroundings. Similar feelings are attributed to other creatures like the Jenny Wren, the blue tit and the snipe by other members of the farmyard community who feel that the animals had all been wearied by the difficult life they have had to live and the innumerable hardships that are placed across their path.

In *Season Songs* (1975), "intended primarily for young readers" Hughes portrays a very pleasant and optimistic picture of the world of nature. Though death and pain are a natural ingredient of this world, the overall impression a reader gets is one of hopefulness and joy. According to Keith Sagar, these poems were the result of Hughes's efforts to recover from the morbid world of *Prometheus on His Crag*:
Now, to cheer himself up, he turned aside from his confrontation with God to write some more nature poems for children, making these up into a set covering the four seasons. But they did not turn out to be quite that. Hughes discovered or rediscovered more than he had bargained for, amazed himself at the miracles which had been going on making and unmaking themselves on his farm, in his garden, under his bootsoles, while his eyes had been focused on the Needle of Elbruz or on the furthest stars.  

Enthusiasm and encouragement form the prevailing mood in the whole collection of poems, where death and sorrow, though ever present, have no power to dampen the confident assurance. The young calf in the very first poem "A March Calf" is a typical representative of this buoyant excitement. He is born with enthusiastic joy in life, and despite all the odds stacked against him continues to be blindly optimistic:

Right from the start he is dressed in his best—
his blacks and his whites.
Little Fauntleroy—quiffed and glossy,
A Sunday suit, a wedding natty get-up,
Standing in dunged straw

Under cobwebby beams, near the mud wall,
Half of him legs,
Shining-eyed, requiring nothing more
But that mother's milk come back often.

Everything else is in order, just as it is.
Let the summer skies hold off, for the moment.
This is just as he wants it.
A little at a time, of each new thing, is best.

He is well fortified to face the dangers that lie ahead obstructing his progress in the battle of life. He has a powerful instinct that protects him from unexpected dangers. Though timid and helpless, he is still full of hope, a faithful devotee confident of supernatural help:
Ready for the worst, shut up in his hopeful religion,
A little syllogism
With a wet blue-reddish muzzle, for God's thumb.

Hughes, the pessimist, cannot understand its cheerful optimism
for he is fully aware of the unpleasant end that awaits the animal.

What did cattle ever find here
To make this dear little fellow
So eager to prepare himself?
He is already in the race, and quivering to win--

His eager ignorance of his cruel fate terrifies the viewer, for
he knows that the animal has to surrender to the doomed future
by which "his whole lineage/Has been tied up." Yet its cheerful
enthusiasm is infectious and creates a mood of peace and hope
around him whatever the distant future may bring in:

He is like an ember--one glow
Of lighting himself up
With the fuel of himself, breathing and brightening.

Soon he'll plunge out, to scatter his seething joy,
To be present at the grass,
To be free on the surface of such a wideness,
To find himself himself. To stand. To moo.

The note of pessimism and despondency hinted at in this poem is
completely repudiated by the poems in *Moortown Elegies* (1978).
The very mankind which can do most harm to the natural world is
also capable of caring for and nurturing the animals.

In these poems, Hughes depicts a pleasant situation where
men and animals coexist in harmony. In a complete reversal of
his earlier mood of despondency, Hughes presents a happy situation
of mutual help and interdependence between the human and the animal
worlds. This situation is the one existing in the traditional
English farm.
It was Hughes's experiences in one such farm that induced him to write these poems. Hughes worked for a period in a farm in Devon owned by Jack Orchard, who later became his father-in-law. He narrates the circumstances that influenced the creation of these poems.

While I farmed I kept a journal of sorts. Whenever some striking thing happened (and on a stock-farm, as in a hospital, something is always happening) I made a diary note of it . . . The idea of such notes is to get the details down fresh, to make an archive of such details . . . To begin with I used the ordinary journal prose, a short-hand sort of jotted details, relying on these things to bring the memory back. Then I happened to write one in rough verse, and at once discovered . . . that . . . not only did I seem to move deeper and more steadily into reliving the experience, but every detail became much more important . . . After that I stuck to verse.

Those journal entries in verse form, of his farming experiences served to bring in an entirely new dimension into his poetry. The disturbed violence, the irrepresible discontent and the sense of futility in the earlier poems is here replaced with a sense of peaceful co-existence and calm acceptance.

The animals are no longer merely the symbols for the wild, hostile and unattainable powers of nature. They are part of a large harmonious unity. They are reconciled with the environment they are in and free within their own domain, unlike the caged jaguar or other animals of the earlier poems.

At times the animals are wary of human presence and suspicious of any action by a human agency. In the poem "Bringing in new couples," for instance, the sheep are reluctant to blindly allow themselves to be led to a shelter from the freezing cold,
and suspect the men of harming their newly born lambs. Their natural instincts and past experience of the cruelty of mankind have taught that safety lies in distrust and they react instinctively

We coax the mothers to follow their babies
And they do follow, running back
In sudden convinced panic to the patch
Where the lamb had been born, dreading
She must have been deceived away from it
By crafty wolvish humans, then coming again
Defenceless to the bleat she's attuned to
And recognizing her own—a familiar
Detail in meaningless shape—mass
Of human arms, legs, body-clothes—her lamb on the white earth
Held by those hands. Then vanishing again
Lifted. Then only the disembodied cry
Going with the human, which she runs in a circle
On the leash of the cry.

The ewe cannot comprehend the situation how her lamb came to be within human custody and what her own reactions to the strange situation ought to be. But it is obvious that the presence of the human being there is not just a chance but a supreme necessity. For without his aid, none of them would have survived the bitter cold.

The harshness of nature and its relentless cruelty towards the animals is repeatedly brought to the reader's notice in several poems. The elements are harsh on the creatures living in the wild and offer them no protection or help in their struggle for survival. In "Poor Birds", the title itself indicates the pathos of the condition of the unprotected birds on a cold wintry day. They survive the night only by dreaming of heaven and

All day
The try to get some proper sleep without
Losing sight of the grass. Panics
Fling them from hill to hill. They search everywhere
For the safety that sleeps
Everywhere in the closed faces
Of stones.
They can find no hope of shelter in the natural bodies. The wind, the twigs and the stones are indifferent to their panic and the severity of their travails. In such extreme circumstances, it is only natural for the creatures to turn to the human being for succour.

The majority of the poems in this collection are set in the winter, when the helpless animals need greatest protection from the cruel onslights of the elements. Then the farmer appears as a saviour for the suffering creatures. His timely intervention becomes essential for the protection of life. There is need for a "good shepherd" in the primitive battle for survival. Even in the case of the most primitive and natural of situations—a birth—the need for human help is often inevitable. If timely help is unavailable, tragedy could result as in "February 17th", where the calf has to be cut up to save the mother and the reader is presented with a grotesque scene where "... the body lay born, beside the hacked-off head." Hughes elucidates the gravity of the situation graphically:

... His mother can't help. And if the good shepherd isn't nearby it's the end. If he is nearby then he catches the mother and with a gentle hand feels—in past the lamb's neck to find maybe a crooked leg or a half-way hoof. So with this he can help the lamb out... But if the good shepherd's little bit late, the lamb's head, trapped at the neck, will be too swollen to be pushed back in... and the lamb is dead. This happens now and again, and then the lamb has to be got out of its mother.

In this situation, the farmer is too late, but that is not always the case. Very often, in the real farmland situation that Hughes
writes of, the farmer is able to bring about a happy ending and free the animal from the agony that would have inevitably led to its death. Hughes writes of such a pathetic instance in "Little red twin".

She might not make it. Scour

Has drained her. She parches, dry-nosed.
We force-feed her with medical powder mix.
We brim her with pints of glucose water.
Her eyes are just plum softness, . . .

The human efforts, artificial and alien as they may be are yet meaningful. And they succeed in their attempt at saving the calf after a weary and sleepless night of hard labour.

After a time the domestic animals not only look up to the human beings but also develop a strange dependence on them. They place all their affection on the farmer and cannot understand his absence. When the farmer has to depart for his heavenly abode, as in the case of Jack Orchard, the animals and even the seemingly lifeless aspects of nature, are completely at a loss. Hughes describes the situation in "The day he died":

The trustful cattle, with frost on their backs,
Waiting for hay, waiting for warmth,
Stand in a new emptiness.

From now on the land
Will have to manage without him.
But it hesitates, in this slow realisation of light,
Childlike, too naked, in a frail sun,
With roots cut
And a great blank in its memory.

The harmony and mutual affection between man and animal is complete in this situation. The farm obviously provides the ideally English location for a harmonious relationship between man and nature,
especially the animal world. Hughes has finally found the perfect situation for the fulfilment of his ideals and dreams.

The situation which Hughes has physically described in *Moortown Elegies* is explained in religious terms in *What is the Truth*. In this collection of poems interspersed with prose narratives, the animals do not appear physically on the scene. But they are constantly present in the reader's consciousness for all the human participants continuously speak of them and they are clearly a very significant part of human life and awareness. The situation is one of farm life and the human beings are all persons who live either in a farm or around it. They are all closely connected with animal life, whether it be within the farm or outside it, and are therefore able to speak with clarity and precision about the animals they choose to describe. The animal world Hughes describes is far from the idealistic and perfectly peaceful one that the calf in *Season Songs* hopes to grow up to. The cruel and cannibalistic aspects of this world such as the geese eating up each other's eggs are juxtaposed with the tender and loving side of the animals. Though man is aware of the need for compassion and fellow feeling towards these creatures their dependence upon him, he is led by his shrewd practicalism and materialistic nature to exploit them to suit his personal ends. This is obvious from the varied descriptions of the cow presented by the farmer, his wife and his daughter to their divine audience consisting of God and His Son. The farmer's wife idealizes the cow as a mother of mankind,
and praises it for its gentleness and motherly love. She narrates a story of how the cow nursed Adam when he was "a helpless babe," and rescued him from innumerable dangers, thereby preserving mankind for eternity:

No, the gentle Cow came, with her queenly, stately tred, Swinging her dripping udder, and she licked his face and head, And ever since that moment on the Cow's love he has fed.  
(WT, p. 22)

The farmer, on the other hand, has a very practical attitude towards the gentle beast. He sees her as a noisy creature which is useful as she produces immeasurable quantities of serviceable material. His approach to her is thoroughly utilitarian:

The milk-herd is a factory:  
Milk, meat, butter, cheese.  
You think these come in rivers? 0  
The slurry comes in seas  
The slurry comes in seas. (WT, p. 22)

Though quite pleased with her capacity to produce milk and full of praise for it, he completely ignores its gentle calmness and has little respect for the motherliness attributed to it by his wife. In fact, he is full of contempt for the noisy creature that spends its time swatting flies and even earns God's displeasure by making his disgust plain. To make up for her father's plain-speaking, the farmer's daughter presents a highly romanticized view of the cows as exotic and graceful dancers

With their long dancers' necks, to left and to right  
And that slight outfling of hooves, a slow dance-step--  
Bodies of oil,  
Dancers coming from hard labour in the fields.
And there's a flare of white skirts when they swirl
On such exact feet
With the ankles of tall dancers

In under the girders and asbestos. (WT, p. 25)

But the farmer, despite his contribution at his earlier speech
cannot accept this highly exaggerated view and therefore chooses
to speak about an animal now extinct from his sphere of activity
but worthy of all exaggerated praise in his opinion. The horses
he describes are not the horses seen today, but the farming
horses of yore possessing divine qualities:

You'd never believe the elastic in them, their nimbleness
and their power.
Though they'd look like whispy old haystacks, propped-up
and leaning there,
They could earth-quake like flood-water, brown-backed
and tossing over a weir.

Our last friendly angels—that's what they were.
Their toil was a kind of worship, their every step
a bowing of prayer
Hidden under tangled hair and sweat. (WT, p. 27)

These ideally perfect creatures are obviously too good to be true,
for they no longer exist amid mankind. Despite the fact that
they were once plentiful and every road and yard reeked of them
they have now become extinct for they have been out done by the
matchless efficiency of machinery:

But the tractor shoved them all
Straightback to God. It didn't take much to undo them.
They were made of the stuff of souls, and the little
grey Ferguson rattled straight through them.
Now you will not see them. But I saw them. (WT, p. 27)

This kind of idealized portrait of the horses recurs at various
occasions in Hughes's poetry. In his very first collection of
poems, The Hawk in the Rain, horses figure as an essential and
inseparable part of the natural world surrounding them. The horses in the poem "The Horses" stand apart from all the other creatures portrayed by Hughes in that they are absolutely still and silent unlike the relentlessly active jaguar and the macaw with its raging inner fires. In the early hour before dawn, when the atmosphere is dark, silently still and seemingly evil, the horses merge into the menacing gloom of the atmosphere

Huge in the dense grey—ten together—
Megalith—still. They breathed, making no move,

With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,
Making no sound.

I passed: not one snorted or jerked its head.
Grey silent fragments

Of a grey silent world.

But this impression of the animals does not last long, for as the sun rises the enveloping cloud is torn apart by its erupting bright colour and the horses now stand "steaming and glistening under the flow of light." Though still quiet and unmoving, their silence now becomes an extension of their patient and tolerant nature, rather than an ominous quality. In "Rain Horse", a story placed alongside Hughes's poems in Wodwo, the horse is the menacingly hostile representative of the natural world. The protagonist, a country man, now long settled in urban territory goes back to the rural countryside of his youth in the hope of finding "... something, some pleasure, some meaningful sensation, he didn't quite know what" (Wodwo, p. 45). But contrary to his expectations, he is treated with hostility as an outcast, for
he has changed much in the past twelve years and has lost the
capacity to appreciate nature and finds himself bored there.
Making its appearance almost along with the rain, the horse,
acting as the nature spirit behaves contrary to its habitual
conduct and attacks the man ominously and repeatedly. The whole
series of events is so unexpected and unusual that the protagonist
later wonders whether the horse was indeed real or merely a
figment of his imagination. But the farm horses described in
"Two Horses" (SS) are very concrete, sturdy creatures with an
almost unearthly capacity for work. These powerful animals are
not only beautiful but gentle and earthy as well:

Shaggy forest giants, gentle in harness
Their roots tearing and snapping
They were themselves the creaking boughs and the burden
Of earth's fleshiest ripeness, her damson tightest
Her sweetest

They are the "last friendly horses"¹² about which the farmer of
What is the Truth reminiscences nostalgically. In "Two Horses,"
we see them actually in action, hard at work in the fields,
enjoying the work and faithfully offering their labour as a
prayer:

       Hour after hour
       The tall sweat-sleeked buttocks
       Mill-wheels heavily revolving
       Slackness to tautness, stretch the quiver—the vein mapped
       Watery quake-weight
       In their slapping traces, drawing me deeper
       Into the muffled daze and toil of their flames
       Their black tails slashing sideways
       The occasional purring snort

The pleasure with which they occupy themselves at the continuous
strenuous labour is indeed stimulating for a human being. This
is probably the reason why the farmer's daughter in *What is the Truth* dreams she is a horse galloping through the world with news of the new magic foal that had just been born. She describes its growth to adulthood and the consequent developments in its character, how the foal grows up.

Till he's perfect Horse. Then unearthly Horse
Will surge through him, weightless, a spinning of flame
Under sudden gusts,

It will coil his eyeball and his heel
In a single terror--like the awe
Between lightning and thunderclap.

And curve his neck, like a sea-monster emerging
Among foam,

And fling the new moons through his stormy banner,
And the full moons and the dark moons. (*WT*, p. 19)

The horse in Hughes's poetry is therefore seen to be a combination of the real and the imaginary, the perfect beast that unites within itself the qualities of practical utility and romantic idealism. It is the creature that appears in dreams and nostalgic reminiscences, it is also a creature that is strong and hardworking, with a sincerity that helps it make labour itself its prayer.

Different angles of the same animal are sometimes highlighted by Hughes in different poems showing how a change of mood or outlook in the viewer can very often display a completely different perspective. And a different perspective can make one see the same creature in an entirely new light. The sheep in *Season Songs* are almost human in their emotional attachment to their younger ones and their confused thoughts at shearing time:
Eyes deep and clear with feeling and understanding
While her monster hooves dangle helpless
And a groan like no bleat vibrates in her squashed windpipe
And the cutter buzzes at her groin and her fleece piles away
("Sheep", SS

In Remains of Elmet on the other hand, the human beings are seen
to be sheeplike for they seem timorous and unemotional amid the
vastness of the moor or the machinery around them. But in "Sheep",
the animal obviously has the upper hand, for despite the loss of
her fleece "she has come off best". Her animal instinct for
survival has clearly stood her in good stead. Both the positive
and the negative qualities of sheep are discussed by the shepherd
in What is the Truth as he moves through a series of emotions
ranging from weariness resulting from overwork to genuine pleasure
in his job. Tired after a hard day of continuous shearing, he
is initially full of complaints about his flock and can speak
only of the problems involving them.

But when reprimanded by God, he corrects himself and proceeds
to glorify the sheep and it is only after he has ploughed through
such extremes of emotion that he gives his real view of the animal,
which still turns out to be unpleasant for God.

The Truth about the Sheep alas
Is that it leads a childish life
Head in the fairy-tale of grass
And never thinks about the knife.

They leap when shearers shave them bare.
"Look, we're lambs again," they bleat.
But their lambs lament and stare
"First you were wool but now you're meat!" (WT, p. 41)

Their innocence is exploited by the brutally cruel shearers
though they do no real harm. The sheep are seen essentially as
animals in these poems rather than raised to human proportions or reduced to being mere mindless subjects of contempt or ridicule. The relentless exploitation of these peaceable creatures seems doubly pathetic when one recollects the fact that normally the sheep are happy and harmless creatures as in the Shepherd's second and idealized description:

The Sheep is a mobile heaven, it nibbles the hill,
A manageable cloud,
A cloud for a lawn, or a field-corner.
A small, patient cloud
In whose shade the Shepherd's dog can rest
A cloud going nowhere,
Growing on the hillside, fading from it--
A cloud who teaches quiet. (WT, p. 41)

It is obvious from these narrations that the human approach to the animals is not always that of a "good shepherd". Though there are several instances of perfect identity of thought and feeling with the animals, this is not always the case. The mature, level-headed persons like the farmer are always scheming up new methods of exploitation. Even when he expresses his admiration of a creature, it is clearly an appreciation of its worth. It is the utilitarian value of the partridge that he appreciates:

A grand bird is the Partridge, a wild weed of a sort
The cheapest weed on all my ground, it never costs a thought.
And when it puffs and flies it's Bang! and Bang!
and pretty sport. (WT, p. 11)

This shrewd materialistic approach is very much in contrast to the attitude shown by his son, who takes the trouble of untaming a tame badger. He teaches her to go back to the wild and fend for herself. Initially she is lonely and unhappy. Soon she adapts herself to her new natural surroundings, her real home.
Now the roles of the badger and the human beings seem to have been exchanged and the badger takes the upper-hand in her new home, barely tolerating her human associates:

Or are we her lodgers? To her
Our farm-buildings are her wild jumble of caves, Infested by big monkeys. And she puts up with us--
Big noisy monkeys addicted to diesel and daylight. (WT, p. 14)

In this situation both the human being and the badger are equally at home. Both possess a sense of identity and of proud ownership of the land.

Like the farmer's son, the poacher also has a fondness for the badger, for whom he nurtures a special affinity being a creature of the night like himself. For him, the animal is the very epitome of night, sleeping in a black hole all day and eating "worms beetles things full of night" in order to keep himself "filled up with night." Like a burglar, he has acutely sharp senses and instinctive responses, and is well-endowed with powerful equipment--the "terrific muscle", the "shocking chomp" and the small eyes which are apparently harmless. But apart from all these physical qualities, he has a significant hidden virtue. According to the saying, he is the spirit of imagination that should be constantly nurtured and kept unharmed, the intangible conscience that lies unseen deep within individuals. Referring to the common belief the poacher states:

My Dad said
Kill a badger kill your granny. Kill a badger never see
The moon in your sleep. And so it is.
They disappear under their hill but they work a lot
inside people. (WT, p. 60)
The badger therefore like the fox represents the spirit of fancy, killed off and hunted out by shrewd materialists, but treated with great concern and even respect and allowed to run its full rein by lovers of the wild like the poacher and the farmer's son.

Each animal is generally portrayed as a representative of its kind. For this purpose its name is written in capitals by Hughes. Only in the case of extremely domesticated animals is a name given as in the case of Bess the Badger and Roger the pet dog. Roger is never referred to as a dog in the book. He is treated very much like a spoilt child who is pampered by all and unlike everyone else, he can laze around all day doing nothing other than warming himself. Apart from this he is gluttonous too, for,

He'll work as hard as you could wish
Emptying the dinner dish,

Then flops flat, and digs down deep,
Like a miner, into sleep. (WT, p. 107)

Despite all these obvious shortcomings, he is treated with warmth and affection by the farmer's family.

The animals are given individuality within the framework of the farm. Though each of them is used to represent its kind, it has its individual eccentricities as in the case of Roger who specializes in enjoying his own life thoroughly

Asleep he wheezes at his ease.
He only wakes to scratch his fleas.

He hogs the fire, he bakes his head
As if it were a loaf of bread.

He's just a sack of snoring dog
You can lug him like a log. (WT, p. 107)
Though spoken in terms of contempt and disgust, the underlying affection is disclosed to the reader.

It is this kind of natural affection and comradeship with the animal world that God wishes his flock to develop and propagate. The gatekeepers of traditional religion and Christianity in particular, like the vicar are unable to respond to the animal with mutual regard. Though God expects him to "set things right" for "He's the Shepherd of a flock too," he falls for short of His expectations by distrusting the natural and neglecting the instinctive actions of animals. Safely ensconced within the glass case of his institution, his flame lacks the power of real fire. He has little sympathy for the pathetic activity of the Bat which "Is battered about/By the rackets of ghosts" (WT, p.42) in its desperate search for light. Instead of being truly Christian in spirit and helping the creature in its noble task, the vicar treats it with contempt

... the jittery bat's
Determined to burst
Into day, like the sun

But he never gets past
The dawn's black posts ... (WT, p. 42)

Constrained to live within the rigorous bounds of the imposing religion, he can no longer respond naturally to the Bat. Instead, the harmless creature assumes devilish proportions in his eyes and seems to even challenge the vicar's authority to the church by its innocent activities.

Hughes sometimes makes use of the worm to expound the tale of the serpent in the Biblical frame. In "A Childish Prank,"
for instance, Crow cuts the worm "God's only son/Into two writhing halves." By stuffing the tail half into man and the head half head first into woman, Crow creates a non-existent sexuality, for the head half

... crept in deeper and up
To peer out through her eyes
Calling its tail-half to join up quickly, quickly
Because O it was painful.

This form of primitive, instinctive sexual urge, frowned upon by the moral code of a stern Christianity, was created by Crow with the worm. Therefore the worm is regarded as the mean instrument of a series of sex-oriented crimes in relation to mankind.

By What is the Truth? (1984), Hughes's view of the worm undergoes a change. The despicable worm is now described by the farmer as a lord who can live off the land and on the labours of others. The worms are obviously in a far better situation than mankind represented by the farmer

I hear for every acre there's a ton of worms beneath,
I hear that worm meat's better meat than fatted barley beef.
We're farming only half our farms, and that's the new belief. (WT, p. 93)

Apart from this much-resented over lordship, it is their complete naturalness and lack of self-consciousness that gives them their superiority over man. The shepherd narrates a rare incident that he has witnessed by sheer chance—the natural scene of two lobworms mating.
Their instinctive act in the midst of natural surroundings clearly transforms the place into a garden of Eden as it was before the fall of man. The primordial beauty engendered by their activity recreates a pre-Christian world. Here, man takes the role of Satan who is responsible for the annihilation of an ideal world. When the creatures become aware of his presence

Their loving was chilled at the touch of my stare--
0 I almost could hear it, their cry of despair

As like snapping elastic, they whipped back apart
And I can still feel it, the shock and the smart

As they vanished in earth, each alone to its den.
And I've never seen such a marvel again. (WT, p. 119)

The consequences of his presence can be seen on a symbolic level as well, for, it was man's appearance into the world of nature that caused the destruction of the peace in the well-balanced state of nature. By his conscious or unconscious actions, man had disturbed the near-perfect ecological balance in nature making real harmony or real union impossible.

Hughes repeatedly makes use of the concepts of sexual union and courtship as the points of climax in the fertility ritual. While sexual union is quite imperfect and not given adequate importance in the human world, it follows its natural course in the animal world. At the climax of the fertility dance
in *Gaudete*, Lumb wearing the pelt of a red stag unites sexually
with Felicity dressed up as a hind, and this ritual act brings
destruction upon them all, for it is unnatural. In *What is Truth*,
the mere presence of the human interloper is enough to separate
the two lob-worms. But in *Flowers and Insects* (1986), the
courtship of the butterflies in "Two Tortoiseshell Butterflies"
reaches its natural conclusion undisturbed by any unwarranted
agency, human or non-human. Though initially the female butterfly
ignores the male or flees him, she finally succumbs to his tempting
attractions:

His wings open, titillating her fur
With his perfumed draughts, spasming his patterns,
His tropical, pheasant appeals of folk-art,
Venturing closer, grass-blade by grass-blade,
Trembling with inhibition, nearly touching--
And again she's away, dithering blackly. He swoops
On an elastic to settle accurately
Under her tail again as she clamps to
This time a Daisy. She's been chosen,
Courtship has claimed her. And he's been conscripted
To what's required
Of the splitting bud, of the talented robin
.......... the first
Caresses of the wedding coming, the earth
Opening its petals, the whole sky
Opening a flower
Of unfathomably-patterned pollen.

The participation of all of nature in the consummation with its
symbolic action blessing the mating pair reflects the joyous
significance of the event and its role in creativity and procreation.
Nature welcomes the act and jubilates at the prospect of its
own revitalization through fresh flowering and revival of birth
and death cycle.
In another poem "Eclipse" (F & I) from the same collection, Hughes describes in detail the mating of two spiders. In this case, the creatures are quite undisturbed by the human voyeur, who proceeds to record their activities in minute detail. The protagonist drinks in each movement with voracious interest looking forward to the gruesome climax where he expects to witness the "famous murder" of the male by the female after the act. But despite his detailed examination of every movement and patient observation he can recognize no such gruesome act. After a lengthy session of voyeuring, the protagonist takes a short break which deprives him completely of his entertainment:

So I stopped watching.
Ten minutes later they were at it again.
Now they have vanished. I have scrutinised
The whole rubbish tip of carcases
And the window-frame crannies beneath it.
They are hidden. Is she devouring him now?
Or are there still some days of bliss to come
Before he joins her antiques

It is clearly the human agent who makes much of the unsavoury aspects of human nature. As the protagonist himself comments it is probably the human shadow that attributes dark designs to these creatures, who flee from human interference at the earliest opportunity:

They are hidden
Probably together in the fusty dark,
Holding forearms, listening to the rain, rejoicing
As the sun's edge, behind the clouds,
Comes clear of our shadow.

Thus the animals in Hughes's poems develop from the aggressive predators of his early poems to the dependent domestic...
beasts of the farmyard in Moortown and are finally seen as independent creatures with an instinctive capacity for creativity and the potency to perpetrate their race infinitely unlike men who, overburdened with an oppressively sterile intellectuality, have much to learn from them. Like the animal helpers of the shamanistic ritual, those creatures have a distinctive role to perform, for they form the vital link between the world of nature and mankind and can show him the pathway to the elemental power lost to civilized man in the contemporary world. As L. R. Ries has observed, "... the animal world is used by Hughes as a means of gaining greater insights into the human world."\textsuperscript{13} Though realistic, they are not the real animals seen in life, but ones projected to highlight the shortcomings of the modern social situations and to act as a foil to magnify the deficiencies of contemporary man by the contrast. They exemplify the idealist concept of what man should strive to be as well as the horrorsome state from which he should fortify himself.
NOTES


4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., pp. 200-01.


8 Ibid., p. 159.


10 Ibid., p. 266.

11 Though "Rain Horse" is a character in one of Hughes's stories I have referred to it in accordance with Hughes' prefatory note to *Wodwo*: "The Stories and the play in this book may be read as notes, appendix and universified episodes of the events behind the poems, or as chapters of a single adventure to which the poems are commentary and amplification. Either way, the verse and the prose are intended to be read together, as parts of a single work."

12 The same phrase is used in the poem "Two Horses," (SS) and *What is the Truth*