

‘The Thought-Fox’

‘The Thought-Fox’ is, for many readers, especially young readers, their favourite Hughes poem. The mere glance I gave the poem in *The Art of Ted Hughes* is completely inadequate. There was even less excuse for neglecting the poem in *The Laughter of Foxes*.

Hughes almost always began his readings with ‘The Thought-Fox’, describing it as ‘my first animal poem’. In fact his first animal poem was ‘The Jaguar’, written in 1954. That Hughes opened both his *Selected Poems* and his *New Selected Poems* with ‘The Thought-Fox’ suggests that he thought of it as an overture announcing the central theme of all his subsequent poems.

Obviously it is an animal poem; but it is also, perhaps primarily, something else. The opening words of the poem ‘I imagine’ confirm what we have already been alerted to in the title, that this is not, primarily, a poem about a fox, but a poem about writing a poem, about the kind of thinking which produces poems, or produced them for Hughes at that stage of his career. In 1956, the year after the writing of the poem, Hughes tried to explain this kind of thinking to his wife Sylvia Plath. He tried very hard, very patiently, because it was what he thought she most needed to learn to release her own poetic imagination.

The thing to do in thinking about anything is not to try and get a clear mental picture of it, or a distinct mental concept, with all its details there, vivid in your brain, but to try to look at the actual thing happening in front of you. I find a clear distinction between these two types of thinking about a thing. As soon as I begin imagining the thing happening in my world, everything comes right. That’s not quite it. It’s as though in the first way of thinking I thought about the thought, taking the thought and forcing it into shape or realness. In the second way it’s more like the process of memory, I think straight to the thing and am not conscious of any mental intervention. ... The second way I get the feel, weight, sound, every nuance of atmosphere about a concrete thing. [*Letters* 52]

This is very similar to the instructions Hughes was later to give to children in *Poetry in the Making*:

Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this, the words look after themselves, like magic. [18]

In 1957, the year of the publication of ‘The Thought-Fox’ in *The Hawk in the Rain*, Hughes wrote:

In each poem, besides the principle subject ... there is what is not so easy to talk about, even generally, but which is the living and individual element in every poet’s work. What I mean is the way he brings to peace all the feelings and energies which, from all over the body, heart, and brain, send up their champions

onto the battleground of that first subject. The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented — the poem is finished. [Faas, *The Unaccommodated Universe*, 163]

The relevance of this to ‘The Thought-Fox’ is underlined by the resemblance of these closing words ‘the poem is finished’ to the closing words of the ‘The Thought-Fox’, ‘the page is printed’.

What, then, are the thoughts and memories, the ‘feelings and energies’, which Hughes here tries to articulate through the metaphor of the fox? His experiences of foxes had been so many and so vivid that he had already, when he wrote this poem in 1955, come to regard the fox as his totem. In *Poetry in the Making* he recalled

An animal I never succeeded in keeping alive is the fox. I was always frustrated: twice by a farmer, who killed cubs I had caught before I could get to them, and once by a poultry keeper who freed my cub while his dog waited. [19]

In his story ‘The Deadfall’ Ted goes camping with his older brother Gerald in Crimsworth Dene. In the middle of the night he is woken by a ghostly old lady, who takes him to the deadfall, where he is able to release a fox cub caught by its tail and a hind leg under the edge of the fallen slab. He does not notice until next morning that an adult fox lies dead under the slab. The brothers remove it and bury it. From the loosened earth Ted picks up what he thinks is a white pebble. It is an ivory fox. I asked Hughes if this had really happened. He said it had, and he still kept the ivory fox.

After the move to Mexborough when Ted was eight, he would get up early in order to walk along the Don before school. The river in spate had scooped out great hollows between the tree roots. He found that if he crept up the side of one of these hollows as quietly as possible, and peeped over into the next, he might see some interesting wildlife. On one occasion, as he crept up one side of such a slope, a fox, unknown to him, was creeping even more stealthily up the other. They reached the top at the same moment, and from a distance of about nine inches, for a split second that seemed an eternity, gazed into each other’s eyes. The presence of the fox, its perfect selfhood, was so intense that it seemed to enter the boy’s head and dislodge his own more provisional self.

At the end of Hughes’ second year at Cambridge he was becoming increasingly disillusioned with reading English, which was not, as he had hoped, helping his writing. In the early hours, unable to begin his essay on Dr. Johnson, he went to bed and dreamed that his door opened and

across the room towards me came a figure that was at the same time a skinny man and a fox walking erect on its hind legs. It was a fox, but the size of a wolf. As it approached and came into the light I saw that its body and limbs had just now stepped out of a furnace. Every inch was roasted, smouldering, black-charred, split and bleeding. Its eyes, which were level with mine where I sat, dazzled with

the intensity of the pain. It came up until it stood beside me. Then it spread its hand — a human hand as I saw now, but burned and bleeding like the rest of him — flat down on the blank space of my page. At the same time it said: ‘Stop this — you are destroying us.’ Then as it lifted its hand away I saw the blood-print, like a palmist’s specimen, with all the lines and creases, in wet, glistening blood on the page. [*Winter Pollen* 9]

The page was, indeed, blood-printed.

Yet another experience which had imprinted itself on Hughes was a scene in an Ingmar Bergman film where a fox crossed an expanse of virgin snow.

By recognizing the fox as his totem I meant that Hughes had instinctively recognized it (along with the wolf) as an outward living embodiment of everything within his own psyche which had been persecuted, injured, imprisoned, either by his culture or by his own rational intellect.

Clearly it was never Hughes’ intention to compress all these images of fox into the poem, rather to let those which were attracted by the theme of the act of writing a poem, come together and cohere. The poet must hunt for what will give his thought a living body, with a life beyond his own. The first words, ‘I imagine’, are his opening of the door, his invocation to ‘something else’ to visit him out of the darkness. At that point his ego abdicates control. In the words of Neil Roberts ‘Hughes does everything possible to suggest that the agency of creating the poem has passed from the speaker to the fox’ [*Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* 21].

What he imagines first is not the fox, but ‘this midnight moment’s forest’. Midnight is the witching time of night, when human consciousness is most exposed to the non-human. Darkness is the subconscious world with all its primeval fears. The other poem Hughes offers in *Poetry in the Making* as an example of what he is advocating is ‘Pike’. There, again at midnight, his lure is his invitation to the creatures of the deep to enter his world. He is terrified

But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move.
The still splashes on the dark pond,

Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night’s darkness had freed,
That rose slowly towards me, watching.

A forest on a starless night is ‘deeper within darkness’, and the unconscious projects its demons and horrors onto the creatures of night, such as bat and owl. The wolf, which never harms humans, has been so demonized for centuries.

The fox has been similarly victimized and persecuted. So the fox in the poem emerges indistinctly from the forest and falling snow, one step at a time, seeking what cover it can find, lame from some trap it has barely survived. But the forest at midnight is also the time when the stranglehold of culture and rational intellect is at its weakest, can

be, with sufficient courage, momentarily shed. The 'clearing' made by the poet's openness and receptivity emboldens the fox to assume its confident, brilliant foxhood, to come about its own business, and to enter in safety its true home, the 'dark hole of the head'.

It is for this reason that Hughes recommended a ten-minute time-limit for children to write poems:

'Animals' are the subject here, but more important is the idea of headlong, concentrated improvisation on a set theme. ... These artificial limits create a crisis, which rouses the brain's resources: the compulsion towards haste overthrows the ordinary precautions, flings everything into top gear, and many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open. Barriers break down, prisoners come out of their cells. [*Poetry in the Making* 23]

The poet ('of imagination all compact') has also been demonized, as a lunatic who lets his fingers move over paper as if they had a life of their own, who willingly enters the darkness to negotiate with 'whatever happens to be out there', who rashly opens the self to the not-self and the animal self. Why does he do it? The point is that the monsters which maraud in the unconscious have become monstrous only because of their imprisonment there. They are actually what Blake called the Energies. Their acceptance and release into the light makes it possible for them to begin to operate creatively. They are necessary to our wholeness. It is only when Prospero breaks the staff of his dominating ego and drowns the book of his rational intellect, frees Ariel from servitude, and acknowledges Caliban (a 'thing of darkness') as an essential part of himself, that he recovers his buried humanity.

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