Ted Hughes

by
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SCOPE OF TOPIC

'With a man it is otherwise' (Thrushes): appropriately, *The Times* obituary of Ted Hughes makes the 'special' case for his poetry, reminding us that 'its forcefulness and animal vitality injected new life into English poetry'. The aim of this Bookmark is to show that the special forcefulness of Hughes' poetry stems from his powerful conviction that, whereas animals are quite literally fit to survive on this planet, 'with a man it is otherwise'.

BOOKS TO READ

Ted Hughes: *The Hawk in the Rain* (Faber, 1957)
Ted Hughes: *Lupercal* (Faber, 1960)
Ted Hughes: New and Selected Poems 1957-1994 (Faber, 1995)

FURTHER READING

John Clare: Selected Poems (Penguin, 1990)
D. H. Lawrence: Selected Poetry (Routledge, 1990)
Elizabeth Bishop: Complete Poems (Hogarth Press, 1984)
Ted Hughes: *Wodwo* (Faber, 1967)
Ted Hughes: *Crow* (Faber, 1970)
Ted Hughes: *Season Songs* (Faber, 1976)

E. L. Black: Nine Modern Poets (Macmillan, 1966)
Michael Schmidt: Fifty Modern British Poets (Pan, 1979)
John Lucas: *John Clare* (Northcote House, 1994)
Keith Sagar: *The Art of Ted Hughes* (Faber, 1975)

NOTES

Ted Hughes is an animal-poet. As such, he adds himself to the tradition which begins with John Clare (1793-1864) and reaches its apotheosis with D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) who both attempt in their poetries to give us individual animals – a badger, a blue jay – exactly as they are. E. L. Black has a go at explaining to us what Hughes' traditional affinities with Lawrence are:

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> His poems about animals show the sort of sympathy with them that D. H. Lawrence shows in his poems **Bat** and **Snake**; more important, they share Lawrence's admiration of the essential sanity and goodness of our instinctive impulses.

Lawrence's animal-poems – **Fish**, **Snake**, **Kangaroo**, **Mountain Lion** – are of such importance that they ask a question about Hughes' subsequent contribution: what – if Lawrence has done such justice to these beasts before him – may his successor be said to have added? in short, why is Hughes at all 'special'? The answer, it seems to me, lies in the extent to which Black is right about Lawrence and wrong about Hughes. From Lawrence's assertion in **Fish** that he is 'not the measure of creation', it is but a short step to **Snake**:

> Someone was before me at my water-trough,
> And I, like a second-comer, waiting.

In these lines is expressed that sympathetic admiration for snake, kangaroo and cougar to which Black alludes; here, Lawrence is humbled by his sudden recognition that man did not necessarily come first (in either sense) to the water-trough and he is thereby awed into conceding that he and animal are at least equal citizens of the earth. The point about Hughes is that he treads one step further still: in his poetry, man, far from being equal with animal, is demonstrably inferior.

In his best work, there is this single theme: that human capacities are ultimately inadequate to cope with the non-human forces of nature. In **The Horses**, **Esther's Tomcat**, **Hawk Roosting**, **An Otter**, **Thrushes**, **Pike**, **Crow on the Beach** and **Swifts**, there is an overwhelming sense that second-coming is no good; in the wild world, the supreme principle is primogeniture. For Ted Hughes, the irony of the human condition is not that man is a finite creature in an infinite world (though this forms part of his recognition); for him, the irony is that man is an unnatural creature in a natural world. His major contention is that man – not animal – is alien to the planet on which he has found himself: while a mere man may drown in the drumming ploughland, the hawk effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.

THE HAWK IN THE RAIN (1957)

It was at Buxton Opera House in September 1985 that I heard Ted Hughes read **The Thought-Fox**; even then, it must have been the most anthologised and most selected of his poems (eg. in Faber paperbacks of 1962 and 1972) and as such was an inevitable inclusion in his programme. Yet **The Thought-Fox** (as the compound-title forewarns us) is not entirely typical of those animal-poems by which Hughes made his name: it is not only a Lawrencean attempt to apprehend an animal's primaeval stealth, to capture the foxiness of a fox, but also a metaphysical conceit in which he succeeds in writing about both a physical encounter and a mental process at one and the same time. Seated at his desk, a 'blank page' before him, Hughes stares into the night and records his observation not in a common noun, but in a metonym:

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Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness.

'Something' – it is not clear just what or where – is making a dramatic appearance. At first, it seems that the third and the fourth quatrains –

A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees

– do not extend any metaphor, but content themselves with a literal description of a fox's furtive progress: for instance, the triple repetition of 'now' and the enjambment between the quatrains seem rhythmically to track that 'movement', make the 'neat prints' in the snow. But it occurs on second thoughts that the rush to synecdoche ('Two eyes') and the pause before each 'and' are functional in the description not only of a fox's wary footsteps, but also of a poem's composition. The fox is both a nocturnal and a solitary creature – but then so is the poet.

From the outset, Hughes has urged this reading of the poem upon us. That anaphoric 'something' is both a 'thought' and a 'fox'; his diction is simultaneously suggestive of stanza-formation and fox-movement, if not always in that order. In the fifth quatrain, the 'widening deepening greenness' [of the fox's eye] is his own 'widening deepening' awareness of the vulpine creature itself, 'coming about its own business' with a primitive integrity which he reveres; in the final analysis, the coined adverb 'concentratedly' is perhaps the most important word in the poem, emphasising – as it does – that it is by concentrating intensely on an animal that the animal-poet comes to terms with its otherness. This is how 'it' (an ambiguous pronoun) 'enters the dark hole' not of its earth, but of the poet's head; this [= by means of sustained concentration] is how the poem about it gets written and 'the page is printed'.

Like Clare, Ted Hughes is a solitary observer of non-human nature. Like a fox, like an otter, this animal-poet is famous for his secret peregrinations through dark nights and early mornings:

I climbed through woods in the half hour-before-dawn dark.
Evil air, a frost-making stillness,

Not a leaf, not a bird –
A world cast in frost. I came out above the wood

Where my breath left tortuous statues in the iron light.

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In **The Horses**, Hughes' couplets range freely across the page in a manner that anticipates the forms in which he composes his later poems; one thinks here of **An October Salmon** and **That Morning**. He writes a rhythmical prose; it takes its shape neither from a rhyme-scheme nor from a count of syllables, but from the metaphors which he extends. Given that Barbara Hepworth was also brought up in the West Riding of Yorkshire, it is small wonder that her sculptures occur to him as he traverses its contours. Hepworth's comment – "I, the sculptor, am the landscape" – finds an echo in Hughes' profound imagination; in imagining that his breath casts 'tortuous statues in the iron light', he is trying – as she did – to identify personally with this pagan landscape. The point of this poem is his failure to do so:

> And I saw the horses:
>
> Huge in the dense grey – ten together –
> Megalith-still. They breathed, making no move,
>
> With draped manes and tilted hind-hooves,
> Making no sound.

Inevitably, man's understanding of this primordial environment is inadequate; he cannot make sense of the ten megaliths which – like Easter Island statues – loom suddenly before him. Alan Bold maintains that Hughes' loose couplets "end solidly on nouns" in order to emphasise "the physical presence of the natural elements that constitute the horses' environment". He has a point; without doubt, Hughes makes these laconic statements in an effort to establish a world of solid objects by which he feels either daunted or dwarfed. In other words, he has ventured into a world where the elements are not natural to him.

The Horses makes the case that Hughes is a poet in the Romantic tradition. It is a Romantic poem not only because it dramatises its author's solitariness, but also because it insists upon the radical difference (which he perceives in this solitariness) between the human and the non-human worlds. The narrative-thread of the poem is thin, but significant. Its beginning 'in the hour-before-dawn dark' – when Hughes first sees these ten horses upon the Pennine moorland – is portentous. The horses are so completely at one with the primaeval world in which they live – they are 'grey silent fragments of a grey silent world' – that they pay no heed to his intrusion and thereby perturb him. Dawn breaks:

> Then the sun
> Orange, red, red erupted
>
> Silently, and splitting to its core tore and flung cloud,
> Shook the gulf open, showed blue,
>
> And the big planets hanging.

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Here – in the middle of the narrative – Hughes finds himself overwhelmed by the sheer beauty of this natural phenomenon; he stares awestruck as if he were witness to a galactic accident. He is therefore incredulous when he walks back by way of the horses and finds that they have been utterly unmoved by this cosmic occurrence. He discovers to his astonishment that they remain peaceful and statuesque:

> There, still they stood,
> But now gleaming and glistening under the flow of light,
>
> Their draped stone manes, their tilted hind-hooves
> Stirring under a thaw while all around them
>
> The frost showed its fires. But still they made no sound.
> Not one snorted and stamped,
>
> Their hung heads patient as the horizons.

Such is the horses' harmony with this static environment that, far from reacting dramatically against it, they begin imperceptibly to take on its luminous aura; they become 'creatures of light' (That Morning). Now that morning has broken, Hughes is inviting us to make the imaginative connection between conditions before the Pennine Dawn and conditions before the Dawn of Time. Clearly, he reiterates his description of the horses in order to suggest that theirs is a twinned motionlessness: not only in space, but also in time. Hughes' point is not – as it might have been – that the horses merely have no notion of time; it is that they inhere in an infinite dimension from which finite man is by definition shut off. Significantly, their shaggy heads are 'patient as the horizons': that is, they exist on a timeless plane that pre-dates human civilisation. This confrontation, then, serves to reinforce Hughes' sense of alienation from the big planet on which he lives.

The Horses is a fabulous poem: it is a fable that reminds man of his inexorable alienation from Earth every time that he hears it. The end of this story –

> May I still meet my memory in so lonely a place
>
> Between the streams and the red clouds, hearing curlews,
> Hearing the horizon endure

– takes the shape of a rhetorical plea from Hughes himself that he never forget its salutary moral. Although Michael Schmidt is right that the noun 'horizons' recurs too often in Hughes' poetry, it "does overtime" (as it puts it) only because it is of symbolic importance. By this symbol for the linear movement of time, he can call up a scale of existence that he as a man is unable to measure; 'hearing curlews, hearing the horizons endure', he will be reminded of his human limitations, of his own inability to 'endure'.

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LUPERCAL (1960)

In **Hawk Roosting**, the eponymous bird of prey is a Darwinian hero, portrayed as being better fitted for survival than any other creature on Earth. The poem takes the form of a dramatic monologue in which Hughes' speaker – the sparrowhawk – can be heard expressing his sense of his own superiority. Because he is a first-comer, he has a strong sense of entitlement to his own way.

Hughes' sparrowhawk enjoys a complete certainty about his place in Creation; he sits 'in the top of the wood', supremely confident ('my eyes closed') that he occupies his rightful place in the natural order of things. The hawk is an utterly uncomplicated creature: between his beak ('hooked head') and his talons ('hooked feet') there is 'no falsifying dream'. By this phrase, Hughes means that the falcon does not deal in abstract ideas/concepts; his is a simplified form of existence in that it does away entirely with theories and concentrates solely on practicalities; with him, there are 'no indolent procrastinations' (**Thrushes**). The hawk exists for no other reasons than to 'kill[s] and eat'; what is more, he is completely at ease with these functions because they enable him to preserve his pre-eminence.

In the second quatrain, Hughes' sparrowhawk explains that he is the lord of all he surveys; consequently, 'the high trees' exist purely and simply for his 'convenience'. So far as the hawk is concerned, every aspect of the natural world has been created for his convenience; each is 'of advantage' to his twin-ambitions of killing and eating. From his lofty perspective, it looks as if the great globe itself ('the earth's face') is presenting itself for his 'inspection' alone; it seems to the hawk, perched at an imperious height, that he is holding the entire earth between his talons ('in my foot'). He is literally self-centred because he believes that the world 'revolves' around him: indeed, that it does so at his instigation. As a first-comer, he makes no apologies for his ruthless behaviour, for the earth, from his literal point of view, belongs entirely in his possession ('all mine'). It is this primitive way of thinking which conditions every statement he makes.

During his monologue, Hughes' hawk makes an extensive use of first-person pronouns: he uses 'I' six times and 'my' eleven times, not to mention 'me' twice and 'mine' once. His vision of the world takes account only of things (eg. 'high trees', 'rough bark', 'sun's ray') which serve the purpose of his existence. Nowhere does the hawk express this solipsistic view more powerfully than in the monosyllabic line 'I kill where I please because it is all mine'; in this line, he expresses his absolute delight in pleasing himself – even where the pleasure involves killing. It is significant that the hawk rejects 'sophistry'; he does not need to argue because he goes about his business by *force majeure*; in his world, might is right. He does not need to bother with any kind of social etiquette; his oxymoron – 'My manners are tearing off heads' – is ironic at the expense of his own savagery. His further assertion – that 'no arguments assert my right' – repeats that he does not need to engage in negotiation or reasoned debate with anyone: from his stance on the 'rough bark', where he is 'roosting', it looks to him as if he has a natural right to dominate.

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Reinforcing him in this belief are the geographical and meteorological conditions of his existence: 'The sun is behind me'. The first-person narrator speaks as if the sun (upon which the earth itself relies for existence) is both literally and morally behind him: that is, supporting his utterly selfish way of living. The roosting hawk – 'Nothing has changed since I began' – feels justified in this way of living because it has not altered since the Dawn of Time. It is by the natural law of primogeniture that he occupies his position in Creation; he was here first. Not surprisingly, he envisages 'no change': because the status quo suits him perfectly, he 'is going to keep things like this'. This final assertion is so self-assured that he sounds as if he is asking the world, "What are you going to do about it?" Like an autocratic ruler, he is certain that he can overcome any challenge to his supremacy. In a more comical incarnation, he is Mytholmroyd Man: not unlike a stereotypical Yorkshire-man, he is a blunt and domineering individual with an uncompromising attitude to opposition or resistance.

D. H. Lawrence, the pioneer of this genre in modern poetry, was expert at evoking a degree of 'sympathy' for both fish and snake. For his part, Hughes is adept at expressing a cowed reverence for the superior powers of non-human nature. A. J. P. Smith confirms that Part I of **An Otter** is a successful attempt on Hughes' part to capture "the very soul of otteriness". In Part I, Hughes' feeling trespasses beyond his simple admiration for the creature and heads towards envy and awe. It is by its perfect response to its instincts that this shy amphibian – 'neither fish nor beast' – is made both beautiful and mythical. An otter

> Brings the legend of himself
> From before wars or burials, in spite of hounds and vermin-poles;
> Does not take root like the badger. Wanders, cries;
> Gallops along land he no longer belongs to;
>
> Of neither water nor land. Seeking
> Some world lost when first he dived, that he cannot come at since,
> Takes his changed body into the holes of lakes ...

In asking the title of his poem to stand for the subject of his plain sentences, Hughes achieves a compression that recalls *The Observer's Book of Wild Animals*; it is by this stylistic means that the naturalist and the poet – and Hughes is emphatically both – become one. Some of his expressions remind us of Lawrence ('yet water-gifted, to outfish fish') and of Dylan Thomas ('galloping up roads with the milk wagon'); but essentially this plain style – in which bold, declarative statements predominate – enables him to give a controlled display of his own verb-power. Nor are these verbal fillips meretricious; his purposeful references to action accumulate to suggest that an unique versatility is what Hughes values and finds precious in this sleek animal.

By contrast, man is pedestrian and restricted; he is nothing like so adaptable and flexible. As we might expect, Hughes' form – five-line stanzas which maintain a momentum by means of rapid enjambments – enacts both the agility and the

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flexibility of this rare and elusive creature. His graphological representation of its homing instinct –

from sea

To sea crosses in three nights
Like a king in hiding. Crying to the old shape of the starlit land,
Over sunken farms where the bats go round
Without answer

– implies a capacity for prestidigitation; in particular, it insists upon a heroic vitality which it does not have in common with common man. After its inveterate wanderings in exile, it makes a clandestine return to its natural habitat as if it were Bonnie Prince Charlie or Charles II. Nothing daunts its determination to reclaim its territory; it retakes possession of its imagined kingdom as if it were a poet.

In Part II, Hughes makes plain that this prophet is ironically without honour in 'the starlit land ... where bats go round'. This – the way Hughes looks at the world – is because the world is populated by alien species. There is no wonder – as the otter makes for his holt – that

The hunt's lost him. Pads on mud
Among sedges, nostrils a surface bead,
The otter remains, hours. The air
Circling the globe, tainted but necessary,

Mingling tobacco-smoke, hounds and parsley,
Comes carefully to the sunk lungs.

Man is without the instinct to detect an otter in his submarine camouflage; nor has he the patience to wait 'hours', a corresponding power to endure. In order to emphasise man's unfitness for habitation of this planet, Hughes states that the air which circles it is 'tainted' with 'tobacco-smoke, hounds and parsley'; a campaigner for Animal Rights, he will see things only from the animal's point of view. His poetic strategy –

He keeps fat in the limpid integument

Reflections live on. The heart beats thick,
Big trout muscle out of the dead cold;
Blood is the belly of logic; he will lick
The fishbone bare

– is to deride human tendencies towards fastidiousness and indolent procrastination. Whereas an indolent man has time to indulge in peripheral day-dreams, to stand and stare at his own reflection in the stream, an otter is in his element there; he needs the water to subsist and will readily 'lick the fishbone bare'. Ted Hughes has 'no falsifying dream' about the nature of animals (**Hawk**

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Roosting); he does not forget that they kill so that they can eat/survive. By contrast, man's logic leaves something to be desired; by contrast with animals' positive qualities, man's negative resolution to reduce this graceful organism to a grotesque ornament – to a 'long pelt over the back of a chair' – is criminal. It is more than 'a pettiness' that he has 'to expiate' (Lawrence, Snake); it is a crime against nature. Otter-hunting causes ructions that break the green peace and arouses Hughes' personal hostility. His friendliness towards the earth is not modishness; by the power of his poetic voice, he can endow his cause with a philosophical validity and make conservationists of us all.

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