

Poetry as Ritual: Ted Hughes

“And again now, and now, and now”—these words come from Ted Hughes’s poem “The Thought-Fox”. I begin with them because they suggest both the impact and urgency of Hughes’s verse and also its sinuousness, and the syntactical self-awareness with which it creates a feeling of immediacy.

“The Thought-Fox” is based on a use of metaphor unusual to Hughes (“Ghost Crabs” is another example). The fox coming from its element “deeper within darkness” is made equivalent to the impulse of the poem, coming, we assume, from the dark unconscious mind of the poet. The cunning traditionally associated with foxes is linked with the non-rational knowingness of the poet. The longing for and celebration of this impulsive creation are recurrent through Hughes’s poems. He admires and presents for our active contemplation the utter self-sufficiency of brute creatures, the identity of impulse and will in them which he seems to feel man lacks and never had—even such a primitive giant creature as Gog in the poem of that name asks, “What was my error?” and the almost-man Wodwo is full of doubts:

But what shall I be called am I the first
Have I an owner what shape am I what
shape am I am I huge if I go

(*Selected Poems*, p. 109)

Many of Hughes’s poems celebrate unthinking animal completeness—“The Jaguar”, “The Bull Moses”, “Pike”; and even “Snowdrop” sees that traditionally shrinking flower as wilfully self-fulfilling:

She, too, pursues her ends,
Brutal as the stars of this month,
Her pale head heavy as metal

(*Selected Poems*, p. 54)

and in “Thrushes” the “bullet and automatic / Purpose” is praised, the rational hesitance of self-conscious man deplored:

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years: his act worships itself—while for him,
Though he bends to be blent in the prayer, how loud and above what
Furious spaces of fire do the distracting devils
Orgy and hosannah, under what wilderness
Of black silent waters weep.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 53)

As Hughes says in his introduction to the Penguin *Vasko Popa*, *Selected Poems*, “They [certain East European poets] have mana-

ged to grow up to a view of the unaccommodated universe, but it has not made them cynical, they still like it and keep all their sympathies intact. They have got back to the simple animal courage of accepting the odds". (p. 10)

The metaphorical identification in "The Thought-Fox" is unusual in Hughes's earlier poems. More commonly he makes comparisons in the manner of D. H. Lawrence between the self-containedness of animals and the self-division of man, or he creates the completeness of the animal and leaves the moral implications out of the poem itself, to be deduced (if at all) by the reader, as in "Hawk Roosting". This is a technique I shall return to later because it touches on the whole difficult question of what attitude we are being asked to take towards the violence quite clearly celebrated in many of Hughes's poems.

"The Thought-Fox" is a particularly successful poem because it is shaped and contained by the dramatic incident which is its central impulse: the metamorphosis of fox into poem. It begins in the present tense, which is always the most vivid, with the action of the poet, "I imagine . . ." and the punctuation emphasizes the immediacy—the colon at the end of the first line is completed by the imagined landscape, external and internal, of the first two stanzas; the colon at the end of the second stanza is completed by the rest of the poem; there is no full stop within the next four stanzas. This gives the poem a pace and a feeling of drive and suspense which is fulfilled by the final magic transformation: the appearance of the poem.

I use the word "magic" deliberately. The poet is conjuring this fox by his language, and not without a sense of fear ("with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox"), until it turns into his poem. The poem itself is beautifully modulated in its use of assonance and off-rhyme. It has the delicate, brilliant and perhaps cold qualities given to the fox, though it also has its boldness and concentration. Thus the poem itself enacts the metaphor of the title: it *is* the thought-fox.

This sort of wit and concentration is Hughes at his best. His humour certainly gets blacker, and *Crow* (1972) is very like an obscene version of the Road-Runner, but it is a very important part of his general attitude and poetic manner. In "Pike", for example, the changes in tone from the neutral description of the opening through the off-hand humour of stanza six:

With a sag belly and the grin it was born with.
And indeed they spare nobody.

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Two, six pounds each, over two feet long,
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb—
to the terrified apprehension of the last stanza:

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.

(*Selected Poems*, pp. 55-56)

form a dramatic and emotional pattern that makes this perhaps Hughes's most disturbing poem. The humour is an integral part of that dark world which so fascinates him. Perhaps it is one of several things he learnt from Nietzsche.

In an interesting interview with Egbert Faas published in *London Magazine* in January 1971, Hughes spoke a good deal about his concern with "the primeval world".¹ He felt that modern man had turned away from the dark forces and "settled for the minimum practical energy and illumination". He attacked "the psychological stupidity, the ineptitude, of the rigidly rationalist outlook", though he did not underestimate the dangerousness of the non-rational world:

"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."

This does not mean that Hughes is a Christian, or even sympathetic to Christianity with its ideals of self-sacrifice (his equation of the Virgin Mary with the Great Goddess of the primitive world is highly questionable, whatever cults survived in early Christianity). I am not sure that it even means that his imagination is "theological", as Peter Porter has suggested. But it does mean that it is religious and that it is concerned with language as magic and with poems as rituals. "Jaguar" does contain evocations of animal power and freedom and "The Bull Moses", one of his greatest poems, is an apotheosis of primitive sexual strength. This is one of the reasons, I think, why the poems are so elaborately structured, why the language is so forceful and compacted. They are not attempts to express violence or to titillate us with violent thrills, in the way that you might say Thom Gunn's poems are, though we are often conscious of the element of fascination that Hughes feels. These poems have a real respect for violence and try to treat it as a religious force.

1 The interview is reprinted elsewhere in this issue.

Hughes speaks in the *London Magazine* interview of the primitive mother goddess, and while there is nothing maternal or conventionally feminine about anything in Hughes's work (he always seems wary of female sexuality, most clearly in *Crow*, but also in his versions of creation myths, the witty "Theology", for example), he does try to link violence and fertility. This is presumably why he was attracted to writings about Shamanism and to the American Indian mythology which is important in *Crow*. The shaman is more or less raped by the spirit which chooses him as a vessel and may be utterly destroyed by the experience (Castaneda's writings are a recent gloss on this ancient myth).

Hughes is thus less interested in personal expression (the "I" in his poems is often quite vague) and more interested in the value of the experience and in what it can reveal about the energy of the universe ("poetry is nothing if not that, the record of just how the forces of the Universe try to redress some balance disturbed by human error"—*London Magazine*, p. 7). Thus his nature poetry tends to concentrate on the force inherent in natural phenomena and to present actions rather than descriptions—there are very few colours, for instance.

It is obvious that Hughes loves England:

Crying to the old shape of the starlit land,
Over sunken farms where the bats go round,
Without answer. Till light and birdsong come
Walloping up roads with the milk wagon

(*Selected Poems*, p. 50)

but his attitude is neither sentimental nor nostalgic, because he sees "England" as a powerful, still violent place ("Pike", "November", "An Otter", quoted above), capable of resurgence:

They are the moil of history, the convulsion
In the roots of blood, in the cycles of concurrence.
To them, our cluttered countries are empty battleground.

("Ghost Crabs", p. 64)

And while this poem seems to be elaborating a general view of the relationship between history and the unconscious mind, I think Hughes always brings us back to his Englishness by his particular use of language. He grew up in West Yorkshire where he learnt to use dialect as well as standard English, and he has spoken of his affinity with Chaucer and with Shakespeare and has described Shakespeare's language as "dialect taken to the limit . . . the whole crush and cramming throwaway expressiveness of it was right at the heart of its dialect" (*London Magazine*, p. 13).

This attitude to language also points to one of Hughes's weaknesses. When he fails to organize a poem dramatically he can fall

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into a sort of linguistic "cramming throwaway" which is too confused to communicate. Take "Six Young Men". The first three stanzas present a quite sensitive, rather tepid response to the lost hopes of the young men of the First World War, perhaps inspired by reading Wilfred Owen. Then the poem seems to shift gear from the pastiche style of the first stanzas to Hughes at his most packed and idiosyncratic, almost Hopkinsesque:

His mightier-than-a-man dead bulk and weight:
And on this one place which keeps him alive
(In his Sunday best) see fall war's worst
Thinkable flash and rending, onto his smile
Forty years rotting into soil.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 28)

The contrast is too sudden and is not, I think, accounted for in the dramatic movement of the poem.

In his recent reading at the Adelaide Festival (March 1976) Hughes spoke about this poem. The photograph was taken in the valley below Hughes's childhood home; the young men were his father's friends, who joined up together, fought in the war together, were killed together. His father alone survived. The photograph was part of family legend, much talked about, and Hughes apparently wrote again and again about the war until he managed to exorcise the guilt in the series of poems called "Out", having decided that it "had nothing to do with me". Perhaps all of these things are present to Hughes and are meant to come through the intensity and clottedness of the language of the last two stanzas. To me the experience remains too private and the nature of the emotion trying to express itself in the violent language is obscure.

What I have called dramatic organization in Hughes, which perhaps he learned from John Crowe Ransom (*London Magazine*, p. 14), is usually one of his great strengths. "Imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously . . . Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it" he said in his advice to children writing poetry (*Poetry in the Making*, p. 18). This immersion in the object works for Hughes in different ways: "The Jaguar" is both detached from the animal and later in the poem, sympathetically identified with it; "Hawk Roosting" is a dramatic monologue in which the speaker is the hawk and everything is seen from inside his head; "An Otter" identifies with the beast and then moves away from it to emphasize the moral triviality of man who kills the otter, not from any natural imperative but from his own emptiness:

Yanked above hounds, reverts to nothing at all,
To this long pelt over the back of a chair.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 50)

The speaker flatly identifies himself here with man the enemy of the water-gifted, brilliantly restless otter: its skin has become a decoration in his house.

When a poem contains a shift of identification of this sort we have no difficulty in seeing the moral implications: the blood logic of the literally ambivalent otter is preferable to the empty imperatives of human beings. Several other poems take this stance: "Thrushes", for example, and "Strawberry Hill", where the blood-sucking stoat is preferred to the imitative pretensions of the eighteenth-century stylist. Where the identification of the speaker and the subject of the poem is complete, as in "Hawk Roosting", it is harder to know where the reader stands. Hughes has described this poem as "Nature thinking" and perhaps, therefore, it implies that man is not a part of Nature in the way that other animals are. Hughes seems to suggest (in *Wodwo*, for example) that there is no substratum that we can call "human nature", because man's self-consciousness will already have begun to modify such a thing even when the self-consciousness is quite primitive. Perhaps it is the absence of self-consciousness in this sense which is the most disturbing thing in "Hawk Roosting". The speaker seems like a megalomaniac (or like "Hitler's familiar", as Hughes said), though when Hughes read the poem at the Adelaide Festival he read it very flatly, with no emphasis on the pronouns, so that this possibility was played down. We know that there must have been changes in the world around the hawk and we know that he will die, but he sees only what he wants to see: will and perception are identical:

Nothing has changed since I began.
My eye has permitted no change.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 39)

The poem builds subtly to the final assertion of will for the future, through an account of the present state of the speaker, how all things conspire to his comfort and advantage, an account of his past and a return to an assertion of his God-like power: "No arguments assert my right" (all arguments, by implication, being sophistry).

Hughes has pointed to the presence of the *Book of Job* in the poem, and I assume that he refers to it not to take its Christian implications about pride and humility and the necessarily unknowable nature of God, but to make a Manichean reading—that the

world consists of equally powerful forces of light and darkness and we exclude one of them at our peril. Christianity regards the powers of darkness as evil and to be suppressed; it emphasizes the powers of light. Hughes, I think, sees both powers as neutral, each capable of becoming evil when not in balance with the other.

Thus I do not think that Hughes is advocating violence, or admiring violence, in a simple sense. Nor do I think that "Hawk Roosting" is ironic, "placing" violence either by the poem's internal reference to megalomania or by an external reference to the reader's moral system. I think the poem is more religious than moral; that Hughes is calling up the powers of violence, containing them in the elaborate working of the poem and offering that to us for contemplation. He is saying, if you think the world is by nature benevolent or rational you are ignoring forces that will eventually erupt and destroy us all. This is something like the Freudian idea of trying to bring the subconscious into consciousness, but Hughes believes far less in the power of reason to control the non-rational than Freud did. Hughes believes in the power of magic, and poetry is his magic.

Not all of Hughes's poems have such a strong dramatic organization as "Hawk Roosting". As I have said, the emotion may be confused in sheer virtuosity of language, as in "Six Young Men" and as in "Relic" where even the Biblical cadences cannot save its essential thinness:

Jaws

Eat and are finished and the jawbone comes to the beach

(*Selected Poems*, p. 49)

and the rhymes, too, betray this—neither clinching nor funny (cold/hold, laugh/cenotaph). Hughes can also be carried away into smartness by clever ideas, and then he tends to disguise the lack of real impulse in a poem not with verbal exuberance but with cryptic utterance. When this happens the poem comes out like a puzzle, it communicates neither emotion nor idea, energy nor meaningful pattern. Sometimes one can see that a surreal dream or nightmare effect is implied, as in "Scapegoats and Rabies". Sometimes you can solve a problem of cryptic utterance by reading aloud and working out where the pauses should be. There is a longish pause, for example, at the end of line two in the last stanza of "Pike" which makes all the difference to the syntax of the next line. Pauses and line-lengths are very important for discovering Hughes's syntax which is often deliberately ambiguous or mysterious.

"Cleopatra and the Asp" is an example of a poem which remains for me a series of puzzling utterances. Hughes is not very good in presenting people unless, like the tramp in "November" or the Colonel in "The Retired Colonel", they are more like animals than human beings. Given that the Cleopatra of the poem is not a person but a combination of a Shakespearean character and a sex-goddess, I still think the lack of a human dimension in the poem is a weakness. The speaker begins in a high Shakespearean vein, "braving" her reflection as she braves the snake which is her true soul and death. She then enumerates her powers as a sex or fertility spirit (like the primitive Egyptian or Syrian snake goddess, Kadesh) and this pattern of sexual implication is continued to the last line. The poem is, I take it, the female principle's curse on the perverted male who prefers the sword to the phallus despite his goatish astrological sign. The poem is quite funny in its use of ambivalent language, but I find it interesting that Hughes's female principle has none of the real sexual threat that you feel in the male principle of "The Bull Moses". Her curses are rhetorical and empty, and the poem is weakened rather than strengthened by its Shakespearean references. I suspect that despite his statements about our foolish rejection of the power of the Great Goddess, Hughes is quite contemptuous of the seductively female (whose attraction Shakespeare recognized so clearly), for his treatment of female sexuality is always flippant. The effective embodiments of the primeval world in Hughes's poems are always male: the hawk, the male otter, the stoat, the bull Moses, the pig, the pike. Perhaps the triviality of *Crow* is the Great Goddess's revenge?

It is tempting to try to bring together this account of Hughes's strengths and weaknesses by comparing the two Jaguar poems, one from *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957), the other from *Wodwo* (1967), but I cannot help feeling that this is one of Hughes's jokes. "The Jaguar" is an elegant poem, too anthropomorphic for my taste. Compare "and adore their fleas in the sun", with its condescending interpretation by the speaker, with the openness and humility of

The brow like masonry, the deep-keeled neck:
 Something come up there onto the brink of the gulf,
 Hadn't heard of the world, too deep in itself to be called to,
 Stood in sleep.

(*"The Bull Moses"*, p. 41)

where the inadequacy of man is still part of the point, but where the animal is seen more strongly. "The Jaguar" is too easy and

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contemptuous in its assumption that "deep calls to deep":

At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
As a child at a dream

(*Selected Poems*, p. 11)

too easy altogether, both in its ideas (the mining/bomb metaphor for the jaguar, the equation of the jaguar and the visionary) and in its language—the rhymes, which Hughes seldom uses, and here to what effect? (strut/nut, or/straw) and the off-rhymes (sun/lion, coil/wall). I think the poem is neither successfully symbolic (*is* it some sort of answer to Rilke's "The Panther"?) nor successfully evocative. Perhaps it wants to do too many things at once and none of them with much conviction.

"Second Glance at a Jaguar" seems to confirm this. Notice the throwaway title, "Glance". Perhaps this is Hughes getting his own back on the sort of Literary Establishment critic who has hailed him as a survivor-poet whose figures "through the sharp details which bring them so threateningly to life, reach back, as in a dream, into a nexus of fear and sensation"² And the poem itself is such a farrago, such a parody of the accumulation of charged details which is Hughes's usual method of building up a sense of mysterious threat. The poem seems to me to be not just a parody of the restless leashed power of "The Jaguar", but a travesty of the earlier poems about such power. Every figure in it is melodramatically exaggerated:

A terrible, stump-legged waddler
Like a thick Aztec disemboweller.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 67)

Where does this figure come from but from stylized representations of Aztec gods? We might just as well assume, as in Gombrich's joke, that the Ancient Egyptians were all one-eyed and had only profiles, no full face. And the language is inflated towards self-parody:

He's wearing himself to heavy ovals,
Muttering some mantrah, some drum-song of murder
To keep his rage brightening.

There seem to me to be two possibilities: either this is very bad writing indeed, or it is meant to be funny. You might well ask, of course, why bother to be.

There is certainly a deliberate unconventionality in Hughes's sympathy for unexpected figures. "November", I suppose, is relatively conventional in its feeling for the tramp as a creature of the natural world like the hanged owls, hawks, weasels, gang of cats

2 A. Alvarez, *The New Poetry* (Penguin, revised edn. 1966), p. 31.

and crows, but "The Retired Colonel" presents the Blimp figure as a "Mafeking stereotype" with the courage, masculinity and endurance of "the last English/Wolf" and "the last sturgeon of Thames". So, too, "View of a Pig" uses a heavy, assertive manner concentrated into the matter-of-fact four-line stanzas to try to enact both the heavy, dead presence of the pig itself (not a usual object of contemplation) and the precise feeling of the speaker towards its physical unattractiveness and the incomprehensibility of life. We feel the struggle not to sound grandiose and inflated ("It was too dead." "It was not a figure of fun") and the attempt to use the human faculties of memory and comparison in the presence of the brute fact of death: metaphorically to "shift the weight of the pig":

Distinctions and admirations such
As this one was long finished with.
I stared at it a long time. They were going to scald it,
Scald it and scour it like a doorstep.

(*Selected Poems*, p. 45)

We feel the complexity of the sound-patterning and the control of pace in the poem to be an assertion of the human intelligence as marvellous as the pig's hot blood and the piglet's nimble trotters, an assertion doomed like the pig to utter extinction. It is this brilliant interaction and equality between the dead pig and the live poet which gives the poem its feeling of delicate control and conviction and its power to move us.

Why do we read Hughes? In a book on children's writing, *Poetry in the Making*, Hughes declared:

The struggle truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man's principal occupation, wherever he could find leisure for it, ever since he first grew this enormous surplus of brain. Men have invented religion to do this for others. But to do it for themselves, they have invented art—music, painting, dancing, sculpture, and the activity that includes all these, which is poetry. (p. 124)

Thus Hughes is both a moralist and religious. He believes that man has lost his "genuine self" in a shrinking, rationalistic world. He believes that we can have access to the primeval, violent world through our dreams, which that world controls, and through art, which we control, more or less. Because poetry is rhythmic, metaphorical and highly structured it is the most powerful ritual we have, both for calling up the primitive forces and for controlling them for good, not for evil. In Hughes's best poems the energy, the invention and the control give the reader confidence in his attitude and in his gift, however much the reader may actually disagree with his beliefs. Like everyone else, Hughes suffers on

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occasions from bad faith, bad verse and from arrogance of mind. *Crow* seems to me too secondhand to be welcomed. I do not think we can either take over the myths of other people or pretend to be more primitive than we are. The Trickster may be one of Jung's archetypes but he has to speak in a form we can recognize. And while all archetypes may be in some sense tricksters, I wonder if all tricksters are archetypes? I suppose that in these poems Hughes was trying to combine his feeling for the male forces (which he always, theoretically, seems to call female) and his need to reach a larger number of people. His writing for children may be an aspect of the same need. English literature has never fostered many myths, and the myth of the artist as shaman is surely very foreign to it. Hughes is at his best in the poems in which as a man of humility and wit he speaks to us as intelligent human beings, offering for our shared contemplation beings and experiences whose mystery he has felt deeply:

He would raise
His streaming muzzle and look out over the meadows,
But the grasses whispered nothing awake, the fetch
Of the distance drew nothing to momentum
In the locked black of his powers. He came strolling gently back,
Paused neither toward the pig-pens on his right,
Nor toward the cow-byres on his left: something
Deliberate in his leisure, some beheld future
Founding in his quiet.

I kept the door wide,
Closed it after him and pushed the bolt.

(*Selected Poems*, pp. 41-42)

University of Sydney

PAMELA LAW