

“The thought fox” by Ted Hughes

I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
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, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business
Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

The 'THOUGHT-FOX' has often been acknowledged as one of the most completely realized and artistically satisfying of the poems in Ted Hughes's first collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*. At the same time it is one of the most frequently anthologized of all Hughes's poems. The particular interest is in the underlying puritanism of Hughes's poetic vision and in the **conflict between violence and tenderness** which seems to be directly engendered by this puritanism.

'The thought-fox' is a poem about writing a poem. Its external action takes place in a room late at night where the poet is sitting alone at his desk. Outside the night is starless, silent, and totally black. But the poet senses a presence which disturbs him:

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness.

The disturbance is not in the external darkness of the night, for the night is itself a metaphor for the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet's imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring. At first the idea has no clear outlines; it is not seen but felt – frail and intensely vulnerable. The poet's task is to coax (get) it out of formlessness and into fuller consciousness by the sensitivity of his language. The remote stirrings of the poem are compared to the stirrings of an animal – a fox, whose body is invisible, but which feels its way forward nervously through the dark undergrowth:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
The half-hidden image which is contained within these lines is of soft snow brushing against the trees as it falls in dark flakes to the ground. The idea of the delicate dark snow evokes the physical reality of the fox's nose which is itself cold, dark and damp, twitching moistly and gently against twig and leaf. In this way the first feature of the fox is mysteriously defined and its wet black nose is nervously alive in the darkness, feeling its way towards us. But by inverting the natural order of the simile, and withholding the subject of the sentence, the poet succeeds in blurring its distinctness so that the fox emerges only slowly out of the formlessness of the snow. Gradually the fox's eyes appear out of the same formlessness, leading the shadowy movement of its body as it comes closer:

Two eyes serve a movement, that now

And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between trees, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow. ..

In the first two lines of this passage the rhythm of the verse is broken by the punctuation and the line-endings, while at the same time what seemed the predictable course of the rhyme-scheme is deliberately departed from. Both rhythmically and phonetically the verse thus mimes the nervous, unpredictable movement of the fox as it delicately steps forward, then stops suddenly to check the terrain before it runs on only to stop again. The tracks which the fox leaves in the snow are themselves duplicated by the sounds and rhythm of the line 'Sets neat prints into the snow'. The first three short words of this line are internal half-rhymes, as neat, as identical and as sharply outlined as the fox's paw-marks, and these words press down gently but distinctly into the soft open vowel of 'snow'. The fox's body remains indistinct, a silhouette against the snow. But the phrase 'lame shadow' itself evokes a more precise image of the fox, as it freezes alertly in its tracks, holding one front-paw in mid-air, and then moves off again like a limping animal. At the end of the stanza the words 'bold to come' are left suspended – as though the fox is pausing at the outer edge of some trees. The gap between the stanzas is itself the clearing which the fox, after hesitating warily, suddenly shoots across: 'Of a body that is bold to come / Across clearings. ..'

At this point in the poem the hesitant rhythm of that single sentence which is prolonged over five stanzas breaks into a final and deliberate run. The fox has scented safety. After its dash across the clearing of the stanza-break, it has come suddenly closer, bearing down upon the poet and upon the reader:

an eye,

A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its own business. ..

It is so close now that its two eyes have merged into a single green glare which grows wider and wider as the fox comes nearer, its eyes heading directly towards ours: 'Till, with a sudden sharp

hot stink of fox “ It enters the dark hole of the head’. If we follow the ‘visual logic’ of the poem we are compelled to imagine the fox actually jumping through the eyes of the poet – with whom the reader of the poem is inevitably drawn into identification. The fox enters the lair of the head as it would enter its own lair, bringing with it the hot, sensual, animal reek of its body and all the excitement and power of the achieved vision.

The fox is no longer a formless stirring somewhere in the dark depths of the bodily imagination; it has been coaxed out of the darkness and into full consciousness. It is no longer nervous and vulnerable, but at home in the lair of the head, safe from extinction, perfectly created, its being caught forever on the page. And all this has been done purely by the imagination. For in reality there is no fox at all, and outside, in the external darkness, nothing has changed: ‘The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.’ The fox is the poem, and the poem is the fox. ‘And I suppose,’ Ted Hughes has written, ‘that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them.’[1]

After discussing ‘The thought-fox’ in his book *The Art of Ted Hughes*, **Keith Sagar** writes: ‘Suddenly, out of the unknown, there it is, with all the characteristics of a living thing – “a sudden sharp hot stink of fox”. A simple trick like pulling a kicking rabbit from a hat, but only a true poet can do it’.[2] In this particular instance it seems to me that the simile Sagar uses betrays him into an inappropriate critical response. His comparison may be apt in one respect, for it is certainly true that there is a powerful element of magic in the poem. But this magic has little to do with party-conjurors who pull rabbits out of top-hats. It is more like the sublime and awesome magic which is contained in the myth of creation, where God creates living beings out of nothingness by the mere fiat of his imagination.

The very sublimity and God-like nature of Hughes’s vision can engender uneasiness. For Hughes’s fox has none of the freedom of an animal. It cannot get up from the page and walk off to nuzzle its young cubs or do foxy things behind the poet’s back. It cannot even die in its own mortal, animal way. For it is the poet’s creature, wholly owned and possessed by him, fashioned almost egotistically in order to proclaim not its own reality but that of its imaginatively

omnipotent creator. (I originally wrote these words before coming across Hughes's own discussion of the poem in *Poetry in the Making*: 'So, you see, in some ways my fox is better than an ordinary fox. It will live forever, it will never suffer from hunger or hounds. I have it with me wherever I go. And I made it. And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words' (p. 21).)

This feeling of uneasiness is heightened by the last stanza of the poem. For although this stanza clearly communicates the excitement of poetic creation, it seems at the same time to express an almost predatory thrill; it is as though the fox has successfully been lured into a hunter's trap. The bleak matter-of-factness of the final line – 'The page is printed' – only reinforces the curious deadness of the thought-fox. If, at the end of the poem, there is one sense in which the fox is vividly and immediately alive, it is only because it has been pinned so artfully upon the page. The very accuracy of the evocation of the fox seems at times almost fussily obsessive. The studied and beautifully 'final' nature of the poem indicates that we are not in the presence of any untrained spontaneity, any primitive or naive vision. It might be suggested that the sensibility behind Hughes's poem is more that of an intellectual – an intellectual who, in rebellion against his own ascetic rationalism, feels himself driven to hunt down and capture an element of his own sensual and intuitive identity which he does not securely possess.

The conflict of sensibility which Hughes unconsciously dramatizes in 'The thought-fox' runs through all his poetry. On the one hand there is in his work an extraordinary sensuous and sensual generosity which coexists with a sense of abundance and a capacity for expressing tenderness which are unusual in contemporary poetry. These qualities are particularly in evidence in some of the most mysteriously powerful of all his poems – poems such as 'Crow's undersong', 'Littleblood', 'Full moon and little Frieda' and 'Bride and groom lie hidden for three days'. On the other hand his poetry – and above all his poetry in *Crow* – is notorious for the raging intensity of its violence, a violence which, by some critics at least, has been seen as destructive of all artistic and human values. Hughes himself seems consistently to see his own poetic sensitivity as 'feminine' and his poetry frequently gives the impression that he can allow

himself to indulge this sensitivity only within a protective shell of hard, steely 'masculine' violence.

In 'The thought-fox' itself this conflict of sensibility appears in such an attenuated or suppressed form that it is by no means the most striking feature of the poem. But, as I have tried to show, the conflict may still be discerned. It is present above all in the tension between the extraordinary sensuous delicacy of the image which Hughes uses to describe the fox's nose and the predatory, impulse which seems to underlie the poem – an impulse to which Hughes has himself drawn attention by repeatedly comparing the act of poetic creation to the process of capturing or killing small animals.[3] Indeed it might be suggested that the last stanza of the poem records what is, in effect, a ritual of tough 'manly' posturing. For in it the poet might be seen as playing a kind of imaginative game in which he attempts to outstare the fox – looking straight into its eyes as it comes closer and closer and refusing to move, refusing to flinch, refusing to show any sign of 'feminine' weakness. The fox itself does not flinch or deviate from its course. It is almost as though, in doing this, it has successfully come through an initiation-ritual to which the poet has unconsciously submitted it; the fox which is initially nervous, circumspect, and as soft and delicate as the dark snow, has proved that it is not 'feminine' after all but tough, manly and steely willed 'brilliantly, concentratedly, coming about its own business'. It is on these conditions alone, perhaps, that its sensuality can be accepted by the poet without anxiety.

The conflict between violence and tenderness which is present in an oblique form throughout Hughes' early poetry is one that is in no sense healed or resolved in his later work. Indeed it might be suggested that much of the poetic and emotional charge of this later work comes directly from an intensification of this conflict and an increasingly explicit polarization of its terms. The repressed tenderness of 'Snowdrop' or the tough steely sensibility which is expressed in 'Thrushes', with its idealization of the 'bullet and automatic / Purpose' of instinctual life, is seemingly very different to the all but unprotected sensuous delicacy of 'Littleblood', the poem with which Hughes ends Crow:

O littleblood, little boneless little skinless

Ploughing with a linnet's carcase
Reaping the wind and threshing the stones.

.....

Sit on my finger, sing in my ear, O littleblood.

But this poem must ultimately be located within the larger context which is provided by the Crow poems. This context is one of a massive unleashing of sadistic violence -a violence which is never endorsed by Hughes but which, nevertheless, seems to provide a kind of necessary psychological armour within which alone tenderness can be liberated without anxiety.

In pointing to the role which is played by a particular conflict of sensibility in Hughes's poetry I am not in any way seeking to undermine the case which can – and should – be made for what would conventionally be called Hughes's poetic 'greatness'. Indeed, my intention is almost the reverse of this. For it seems to me that one of the factors which moderates or diminishes the imaginative power of some of Hughes's early poetry is precisely the way in which an acute conflict which is central to his own poetic sensibility tends to be disguised or, suppressed. In *Crow*, which I take to be Hughes's most extraordinary poetic achievement to date, Hughes, almost for the first time, assumes imaginative responsibility for the puritanical violence which is present in his poetry from the very beginnings. In doing so he seems to take full possession of his own poetic powers. It is as though a conflict which had, until that point, led a shadowy and underworld existence, is suddenly cracked open in order to disgorge not only its own violence but also all that imaginative wealth and vitality which had been half locked up within it.

The most obvious precedent for such a violent eruption of imaginative powers is that which is provided by Shakespeare, and perhaps above all by *King Lear*. *Lear* is a play of extraordinary violence whose persistent image, as Caroline Spurgeon has observed, is that 'of a human body in anguished movement, tugged, wrenched, beaten, pierced, stung, scourged, dislocated, flayed, gashed, scalded, tortured, and finally broken on the rack'.^[5] But at the same time it is a play about a man who struggles to repossess his own tenderness and emotional vitality and to weep those tears which, at the beginning of the play, he contemptuously dismisses as soft, weak and womanly. The same conflict reappears throughout Shakespeare's poetry. We have only to recall

Lady Macbeth's renunciation of her own 'soft' maternal impulses in order to appreciate the fluency of Shakespeare's own imaginative access to this conflict and the disturbing cruelty of its terms:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I. vii)

The intense conflict between violence and tenderness which is expressed in these lines is, of course, in no sense one which will be found only in the poetic vision of Hughes and Shakespeare. It is present in poetry from the Old Testament onwards and indeed it might reasonably be regarded as a universal conflict, within which are contained and expressed some of the most fundamental characteristics of the human identity.

Any full investigation of the conflict and of its cultural significance would inevitably need to take account both of what Mark Spilka has called 'Lawrence's quarrel with tenderness' and of Ian Suttie's discussion of the extent and rigour of the 'taboo on tenderness' in our own culture.[6] But such an investigation would also need to take into consideration a much larger cultural context, and perhaps above all to examine the way in which the Christian ideal of love has itself traditionally been expressed within the medium of violent apocalyptic fantasies.

The investigation which I describe is clearly beyond the scope of this essay. My more modest aim here has been to draw attention to the role which is played by this conflict in two of the most hauntingly powerful of Ted Hughes's early poems and to suggest that Hughes's poetic powers are fully realized not when this conflict is resolved but when it is unleashed in its most violent form.

In taking this approach I am motivated in part by the feeling that the discussion of Hughes's poetry has sometimes been too much in thrall to a powerful cultural image of Hughes's poetic personality – one which he himself has tended to project. In this image Hughes is above all an isolated and embattled figure who has set himself against the entire course both of modern poetry and of modern history. He is rather like the hero in one of his most powerful poems 'Stealing trout on a May morning', resolutely and stubbornly wading upstream, his feet rooted

in the primeval strength of the river's bed as the whole course of modern history and modern puritanical rationalism floods violently past him in the opposite direction, bearing with it what Hughes himself has called 'mental disintegration ... under the super-ego of Moses ... and the self-anaesthetizing schizophrenia of St Paul', and leaving him in secure possession of that ancient and archaic imaginative energy which he invokes in his poetry.

The alternative to this Romantic view of Hughes's poetic personality is to see Hughes's poetry as essentially the poetry of an intellectual, an intellectual who is subject to the rigours of 'puritanical rationalism' just as much as any other intellectual but who, instead of submitting to those rigours, fights against them with that stubborn and intransigent resolution which belongs only to the puritan soul.

In reality perhaps neither of these views is wholly appropriate, and the truth comes somewhere between the two. But what does seem clear is that when Hughes talks of modern civilization as consisting in 'mental disintegration. ..under the super-ego of Moses ... and the self-anaesthetizing schizophrenia of St Paul' he is once again engaging in that characteristic strategy of externalizing a conflict of sensibility which is profoundly internal. For it must be suggested that Paul's own 'schizophrenia' consisted in an acute conflict between the impulse towards tenderness, abundance and generosity and the impulse towards puritanical violence – the violence of chastity. It is precisely this conflict which seems to be buried in Hughes's early poetry and which, as I have suggested, eventually erupts in the poetry of Crow. If, in Crow, Hughes is able to explore and express the internalized violence of the rationalist sensibility with more imaginative power than any other modern poet, it is perhaps because he does so from within a poetic sensibility which is itself profoundly intellectual, and deeply marked by that very puritanical rationalism which he so frequently – and I believe justifiably – attacks.