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With a Preface by Federico Vercellone

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THE USE OF ANIMAL IMAGERY IN TED HUGHES'S ANIMAL POEMS

Pier Paolo Piciucco
(University of Turin)

It is indeed remarkable that Ted Hughes, the poet who has so impressively written about animals and the animal world in the 20th century, was at the same time so fond of fishing as to deserve, according to a critic's humorous definition, the title of 'evangelist of fishing.'¹ Nor should one come to the hurried conclusion that Hughes was incoherent about his ways of conceiving art. On the contrary, Ted Hughes fostered an impressively vivid and dramatic visionary universe that is in line with his inclinations and interests in his everyday life. However, his perspective can reasonably be said to be quite different from the average view, so that his thought has been at times misconstrued.

Considerations about his artistic output apart, there has been little doubt about Hughes's fondness for animals in general. It is not a secret in fact that he was always captivated — or as he himself writes in *The Jaguar* 'mesmerized'² — by animals for their aptitude to manifest a particular form of wild energy that he always found irresistible. '[M]y interest in animals began when I began,'³ overtly claims the poet in a book that collects a series of reflections and suggestions for students about the ways in which a poet follows the path of imagination towards the process of creative writing. Nevertheless, what at the beginning he simply calls 'interest' evolves into a major concern for him, a force he

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- 1 Mark Wormald, 'Fishing for Ted', in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. by Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 119.
 - 2 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 19.
 - 3 Ted Hughes, *Poetry in the Making* (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), p. 15.

seeks direct identification with and that therefore develops into more than a mere passion. An anthropologist, a poet, an initiate into the world of magic practices and, essentially, a human being, Ted Hughes gradually steps into the animal world — that in his case may be said to be an instinctive dimension as well as, and most importantly, a personal projection — and strives to find identification with it. He mirrors himself in animals and studies them in order to spot common elements enabling him to intersect the two distinct natures: his human spirit and the animal soul. The material proof of his relentless pursuit of a common thread connecting man to animal is a striking element in his literary production: language. To an interviewer, he once explained that

Since I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about [animals] more or less, they became a language — a symbolic language which is also the language of my whole life. It was... part of the machinery of my mind from the beginning. They are a way of connecting all my deepest feelings together.⁴

And, needless to say, language — or the elaborate process that Danny O'Connor aptly calls 'Hughes's translation of animals into language'⁵ — plays a pivotal role in Hughes's poems dealing with animal creatures. Even though it is hardly recognizable for a fixed register, this poetic voice has an amazing evocative power — and consequently it was criticized by some readers because of its excessive dramatic resonance — a passionate musicality and rhythm (particularly evident when recited aloud), an elaborate wording often playing on simultaneous levels of meaning, a loose sentence structure and a piquant, effective imagery. The resulting phrasing is a balanced mixture combining rational control with sharp and piercing animal instinct. A typical reader's reaction to the poems may also swing between tenderness and horror within a few lines. Gifford and Roberts are clearly not overstating its

4 Drue Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', *Paris Review*, 134 (1995), p. 81.

5 Danny O'Connor, *Ted Hughes and Trauma. Burning the Foxes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 4.

intensity when they declare that in Ted Hughes's hands 'our language is both familiar and different from anything we had thought possible.'⁶ Likewise, they reveal perceptiveness when they stress how it is the elaborate outcome of a complex work blending a number of distinct discursive levels together. 'Rhythm, syntax, imagery and repetition work together,'⁷ they appropriately claim. It is therefore essential to analyse the language employed by Hughes in the animal poems in strict relation with the topic of the poems, because one of the main reasons of its recognizable and suggestive pathos lies in the interrelatedness of form and content.

What exactly Ted Hughes found alluring in animals, and why animal instinct and nature exerted such a magnetic attraction on him, has already been the subject of studies by a number of different scholars so that the present analysis cannot claim to offer an original interpretation to the case. Nonetheless, while other commentators have generally suggested a single explanation to the issue, sometimes offering very elaborate and sophisticated theories, I believe that Ted Hughes's intellectual proclivities, his cultural orientations and his commanding personality, all concur to offer an extremely complex picture of his captivating fascination for the animal world in general. Hence, I propose to explain his drive towards the animal dimension in terms of a combination of distinct factors, that may also overlap, mix and blur with one another at some point, but that originate from separate sources and respond to diverse premises. Digging into Ted Hughes's absorption in animals will further our discourse on his peculiar use of language, as well as offering us the chance to bring his personal adoption of animal imagery in his poems into focus.

If one has to open a debate on what Ted Hughes really meant as 'animal energy,' one cannot avoid starting by bringing one's attention to the topic of violence, if only that was the earliest widely-spread interpretation adopted by literary critics. In 1957,

6 Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 11.

7 Gifford and Roberts, p. 43.

just after the first collection of poems had appeared, Edwin Muir praised the ‘admirable violence’⁸ celebrated in these compositions, and since then a long critical tradition has followed. The success of this formula clearly owes to the striking, almost oxymoronic contrast between the two terms, that readers more inclined to evaluate literary texts in the light of an ethical code rejected. However, it describes admirably the feelings after the reading of *The Jaguar*, a poem that is a trademark of Hughes’s poetic output and that also brought the critic Dennis Walder to gently ironize on the poet, described as ‘a kind of Zoo Laureate.’⁹ This is the well-known story of a zoo-caged jaguar, the only captive animal in the structure that shows verve and does not surrender to its condition of imprisonment. After moving from cage to cage and watching lifeless beasts that do not provoke emotions, the visitors are suddenly ‘mesmerized’¹⁰ at the sight of a jaguar that restlessly moves up and down the cage, seemingly threatening the crowds in front of it with its blazing looks. Craig Robinson possibly has this poem in mind when he writes that ‘[t]he nature poems of the first volume seemed mostly to work at creating a sense of awe at the power of the elements and animals. Awe remains an appropriate word to use of *Lupercal*, but the poems now remind us that awe includes horror.’¹¹ The poet shares with his readers a kind of a sinister fascination for animals whose action is evidently mischievous: in tune with these creatures, he seems to gloat at their malice and for instance praises the pikes for their being ‘killers from the eggs,’¹² or remains enthralled at a captive jaguar who looks like a ‘gangster’ ‘Muttering some mantra, some drum-song of murder.’¹³ One of the strategies employed by the poet in order to celebrate violence is to lay stress on the animals’ body parts that are designed to eat, devour and kill such as teeth, jaws

8 Edwin Muir, ‘Kinds of Poetry’, *New Statesman*, 54 (28 September 1957).

9 Dennis Walder, *Ted Hughes* (Open: Open University Press, 1987), p. 4.

10 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 19.

11 Craig Robinson, *Ted Hughes as Shepherd of Being* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 23–24.

12 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 84.

13 Ivi, p. 151.

and claws by way of comparing them with perfect mechanical instruments and/or weapons. It is for this reason that the jaguar's eyes are said to be 'drills' 'On a short fierce fuse,'¹⁴ whereas later on, in its sequel, its body is compared to 'an engine.'¹⁵ The same technique also recurs when the narrator describes the gnash of the pike's jaws as 'vice locks'¹⁶ or when eulogizing the thrushes' sudden movements fascinated at 'this bullet and automatic | Purpose.'¹⁷

It is well-known that the animal that best epitomizes violence, even in a markedly arrogant and insolent way, is the protagonist of *Hawk Roosting*. The scornful raptor is both the protagonist and the narrator in this brief poem that relies on a limited, essential phrasing with the result that the spotlight remains fixed on the bird's self-complacency and tyrannical disposition. The hawk, that has been comprehensibly mistaken for a personification (or a caricature?) of Hitler, never actually kills but spends its time fantasizing about killing other animals. The awareness of its supremacy is such that it viciously claims 'I kill where I please because it is all mine,'¹⁸ one of Hughes's most powerful verses. Yet, it feels comfortably sheltered in a permanently static situation that preserves its privilege: 'Nothing has changed since I began. | My eye has permitted no change,'¹⁹ and by so claiming it shares a common element with the pike, in whose case the narrating voice celebrates 'The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs | Not to be changed at this date.'²⁰

However, when confronted with the interpretations of his poems dealing with violent animals, Ted Hughes seemed more prone to consider this to be a wrong turn rather than a correct reading: 'Any form of violence — any form of vehement activity — invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of

14 Ivi, p. 19.

15 Ibid.

16 Ivi, p. 85.

17 Ivi, p. 82.

18 Ivi, p. 19.

19 Ibid.

20 Ivi, p. 85.

the Universe. Once the contact has been made — it becomes difficult to control.²¹ According to another credited interpretation of Hughes's poems, in fact, animals do not exactly occupy the centre of the stage but simply play a subsidiary role: Hughes's palpable attraction is not ultimately driving him to the animals but to the energy that animates them. In this perspective, animals would simply be pawns, moved by an uncompromising puppet-master, the law of nature, whose dictates and will remain out of range for living beings, and that Dennis Walder fittingly tags 'the ruthless predatoriness of nature.'²²

A poem like *Hawk in the Rain*, for instance, provides an excellent example of this natural element in full sweep. The dramatic frame to the story presents a nightmarish scenario with an unnamed narrator absorbed in the view of a hawk 'effortlessly'²³ flying in the stormy sky at the moment in which he is gradually sinking into a farmland. The sense of awe for the bird of prey however is suddenly removed when the weather agents, called 'master- | Fulcrum of violence,'²⁴ smash the bird to the ground in a final description that rivals with a pulp fiction. Animal and natural energy in this composition clearly take distinct routes, showing, in addition, that the latter does not always, or not necessarily, work in favour of the former. Laura Webb makes an acute observation when she stresses that 'To Hughes, the cruelty of nature is a living, breathing, necessity, in which both humans and animals play their part.'²⁵

It is within this context that Ted Hughes's austere dramatic vision shows its full potential: death — and, more to the point, a violent one — becomes a possible and a natural evolution to his story. From his perspective, death may also seem to be a part

21 Ekbert Faas, 'An Interview with Ted Hughes,' *Sydney Studies in English*, 2 (1976–77), p. 87.

22 Walder, p. 93.

23 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 19.

24 Ibid.

25 Laura Webb, 'Mythology, Mortality and Memorialization: Animal and Human Endurance in Hughes' Poetry?', in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, ed. by Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 44.

of life, a sort of inescapable conclusive chapter, and that returns quite regularly in the animal poems. The trajectory 'from life to death' becomes a sort of a cliché in Hughes's poems and it also shapes *An Otter*, where the animal, 'neither fish nor beast,'²⁶ is initially described in full activity: after the reader has started sympathizing with it, the author briefly concludes the poem describing its violent death by means of a pack of hounds, in a surprising matter-of-fact way. *View of a Pig*, instead, inverts this order and illustrates a path 'from death to life.' It describes the narrator's feeling as he watches a 'less than lifeless'²⁷ pig that has just been killed, carried away on a wheelbarrow, and moves to compare its present state with what it once used to be when it 'was faster and nimbler than a cat.'²⁸ Of course, according to the details in the poem, it is evident that the animal has not met a natural death, but it has been slaughtered.

What is remarkable about Hughes's poems, and that proves the oneness of form and content in his poems, is that some of them also move toward an extinction point at the end. In a sense, not only are animals carried on a path 'from life to death' in these stories, but the rhetoric itself of these compositions adjusts itself to a rhythm that slowly exhausts its tempo as the conclusion — should one say the death? — of the work approaches. Stuart Hirschberg acutely detects a similar process shaping the writing of *The Bear*: 'Hughes conveys the bear's assimilation of everything ("his price is everything") by having each new stanza consist of one less line than the preceding stanza; the poem is, as it were, being devoured until nothing is left.'²⁹ *Pike*, a poem that has shocked many readers for its potentially apologetic message on cannibalism, may be said to be a further case in point. Following a first description of the fish in its natural context, three brief anecdotes are narrated. In the first one, three pikes appear in a glass fish bowl: 'Three we kept behind glass, | Jungled in weed:

26 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 79.

27 Ivi, p. 76.

28 Ibid.

29 Stuart Hirschberg, *Myth in the Poetry of Ted Hughes: a Guide to the Poems* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1981), p. 36.

three inches, four, | And four and a half: red fry to them- | Suddenly there were two. Finally one | With a sag belly and the grin it was born with. | And indeed they spare nobody.³⁰ The three-two-one countdown seems to be a pattern in this poem, because also the second story narrated focuses on two (battling) pikes. In the last episode, a single pike comes to the surface of a pond at night, exchanging a look with the child-narrator who is angling, and in this way it provides the surprising epiphanic conclusion in which the young fisherman identifies with the pike. The sense of an ending pervading the last lines of the poem is reinforced by the slowed-down pace conveyed by the diction in the concluding phrasing and culminating in a critical pause before the last word: 'Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed, | That rose slowly toward me, watching.'³¹ This downshifting rhythm occurring at the conclusion of the poem also memorably characterises the end of *Second Glance at a Jaguar*, among others.

It is in fact true that the insatiable and rapacious essence of Mother Nature victimises non only men but also animals, and this fact emerges quite clearly in some of Hughes's verses, apart from *Hawk in the Rain*. In some situations, animals seem to be subject to a rule they cannot eschew, in particular in matter of voracity and ferocity. *Pike*, for instance, as well as celebrating the cannibal appetite of the fish, also seems to provide an explanation to this ferocious brutality, when the narrator argues that pikes do not kill for pleasure but simply because they are forced to by the law of nature. Speaking about their jaws, the poet explains that the pike has 'A life subdued to its instrument.'³² Also the shark, in a parenthetical situation in the poem *Thrushes*, suffers from the same destiny: its greed may even reach a point when the activation of its uncontrolled energy turns into pure self-destructiveness: 'the shark's mouth | That hungers down the blood-smell even to a leak of its own | Side and devouring of itself.'³³ Be as it may, the sinister fascination for an uncontrolled form of energy

30 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 85.

31 Ivi, p. 86.

32 Ivi, p. 85.

33 Ivi, p. 82.

exerts a commanding allure on the poet who responds to it with passionate fervour. Steve Ely observes: 'Hughes is fascinated by the mysterious vitality of the universe he describes, and he takes a perverse pleasure in reminding readers of their physical and intellectual frailty in the face of an impenetrable and impersonal nature, red in tooth and claw.'³⁴

Another interpretation of Ted Hughes's interest in animals arises from a statement that the poet himself delivered when interviewed in 1965 by John Horder. In this situation he claims that his 'poems are not about violence but vitality. Animals are not violent, they're so much more completely controlled than men,'³⁵ offering a satisfactory elucidation of the issue from a new perspective, as well as confirming how complex and unsatisfactory the process of translating the concept of violence from his imaginary realm may become. In a way, Hughes seems to stress that he remains mindless of the consequences of an energy's agency, if the release of that energy proves to be amazing: the two poems about the jaguar in the cage, among others, demonstrate the validity of such a theoretical premise. The first can be split into two main sections: initially, the zoo visitors watch the animals in the garden and remain somewhat disappointed. Tiger, lion and boa constrictor are predators that are supposed to stir strong reactions in a person and instead they lie dormant, their wildness totally dissolved. After the description of this scene in an apparently detached tone, the first half of the poem abruptly comes to a halt when the narrator suddenly shows his frustration at this view: the sight is so unimpressive that it would hardly give a fright to anyone and 'It might be painted on a nursery wall.'³⁶ In fact, people quickly move on and all gather in front of the cage with the jaguar, whose intimidating and enthralling energy alone makes the show. It is important to stress here that the jaguar's power is not only a means of capturing the zoo visitors' attention but it is the living force enabling the animal

34 Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire. Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 149–50.

35 John Horder, 'Desk Poet', *The Guardian*, 23 March 1965, p. 9.

36 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 19.

to remain deaf in front of its state of imprisonment. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts's comment that the jaguar 'is objectively caged but subjectively free'³⁷ again seems to be hitting the point. It is in this context that the display of energy (and of violence) may be equated to vitality. Ten years later the poet returns to this forceful image and writes *Second Glance at a Jaguar*, an evolution of the previous composition. In this second version of the poem dedicated to the caged wild beast, the zoo visitors have almost completely disappeared and only an apparently casual reference in the title shows their disguised presence. As for the other animals, no trace of them is left. The focus of the whole poem, from the first to the last word, remains stuck on the jaguar's fierce temper and the impeding sense of threat that any zoo visitor (and/or reader) feels when confronted with its glance.

This interpretation widens our discourse to further and crucial areas of analysis. Associating the idea of the animal no longer with a negative concept such as violence, or potentially negative as it may become in Hughes's hands such as the Law of Nature, but with a positive kind of energy and vitality that celebrates the life principle in a raw form, makes the encounter between human and animal nature possible. We know that both Hughes's personal inclinations and his studies in anthropology have encouraged his way into shamanic practices. How far he practically went into them is not exactly clear but if one liked to make an idea about his level of knowledge in that field, his poems provide a considerable amount of material and reveal a significant familiarity with the subject. Briefly speaking, by way of an encounter between a human being — the shaman — and an animal — the animal helper — this kind of magic ensures that a symbiotic relationship is created between the two parts and the animal's inner energy is offered to the human being for a number of purposes. Still in vogue among primitive (and not) societies, it is believed to grant divination powers, to offer cures to particular illnesses, to disturbed states of mind and, more in general, to problems affecting a whole clan or society. In situations such as these, the shaman undertakes a journey into the underworld where

37 Gifford and Roberts, p. 64.

he is given the solution to the case: in order to cross the threshold of the supernatural dimension, and ensure that he has enough energies for his journey back, however, he needs the collaboration of a trusted animal that, by means of a magic transformation, donates the shaman its energy and endows him with the temporary superhuman powers he needs in order to accomplish the whole practice.

A critical theory with a great following owes to this magico-religious ritual Ted Hughes's passion for animals, and becomes a valuable key of interpretation in particular for all those poems in which a man and an animal feature. The (first) story of the zoo-visitor watching a jaguar restlessly walking inside a cage, for instance, enlarges the dimension of the previous interpretation by supplementing the whole context with important additional elements. This would actually be the story of a narrator frustrated by his inability to react to a contrary situation, metaphorically represented by his initial walking through the zoo cages where he only meets animals 'Fatigued with indolence.'³⁸ The encounter with the jaguar, his animal helper, would awaken in him his sense of freedom so that the predator's wild rage would be passed on to him. The images in the last stanza, insisting as they do on airiness and an achieved sense of independence, describe the acquired and final sense of liberty gained by the narrator as a consequence of his meeting with the jaguar. Stuart Hirschberg, the scholar who more than any other has clarified this path in Ted Hughes's creative world, explains the ways in which this magic practice may become useful in order to explain the poet's approach to the animal world.

For Hughes, in his earliest animal poems, the process of writing the poem recreates the rite of blood brotherhood between the Shaman and his animal Helper. Whether hawk, bear, jaguar, or pike, among others, Hughes establishes a mystical alliance and 'exchanges blood' with his animal familiars. Hughes makes contact with a feral energy at the heart of the cosmos, mindless, luxuriant, capable of bringing death and revitalizing the dead, a terrible power to be both summoned and feared.³⁹

38 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 19.

39 Hirschberg, p. 7.

One of the major elements introduced by Hughes's poetry when an encounter between a man and an animal via the shamanic practice is ensured regards the possibility of interpreting the animal as a metaphor of a liberating agency that, obviously, becomes particularly manifest in *The Jaguar*. Among other interpretive paths and allegorical explanations, at stake here is a terrific act of rebellion, symbolically represented by the jaguar's uncontrolled state of rage. The poem, which should be seen in its two constituent parts, as the mismatch between the dormant animals vs. the jaguar, or stillness vs. movement, can also be read in the alternation of repression vs. liberation, a drive whose engine is clearly embodied by the jaguar. The passionate and evocative conclusion of the poem stressing the newly-achieved sense of freedom on the part of the visitor-jaguar helps the reader understand how the first images, disguised behind an apparently flat tone, metaphorically allude to a claustrophobic and oppressive context. This particular key to the reading of the poem becomes still more important in view of the fact that this is the step in which the identification with the wild beast becomes revelatory. At this juncture, the comment by Gifford and Roberts seems particularly incisive: 'This is a poem that has excited many readers and repelled others. The reason for this is undoubtedly an awareness that the poet is in some sense identifying himself with the jaguar.'⁴⁰

What the shamanic practice shows from the basis is that the duo man-animal does not match a system of equal forces together but an unbalanced combination, with the man profiting the most from the encounter. Man's mirroring process in the animal is looked for because it is equated to the state of perfection. Craig Robinson is correct in stressing that 'Hughes sought some human equivalent of what he admired in the animal world.'⁴¹ The forces that these animals embody, rage for the jaguar, permanence for the bear, agility for the thrushes, and even cannibal instinct for the pike, in man's nature work in order to dismantle an entire

40 Gifford and Roberts, p. 64.

41 Robinson, p. 2.

psychic structure based on wrong principles. The change of state in man is never gradual but immediate: therefore, if animals do appear violent in Hughes's poems, this is not only due to their instincts but also to the forceful, sometimes brutal way in which their energy is employed in their interaction with man. Stuart Hirschberg's analysis dedicated to the issue has produced this insightful conclusion:

Although based on shamanistic rites, these poems serve a personal, psychological function so that through violence, primitive contact with suppressed hatred and repressed aggression and even a kind of psychic self-mutilation, the sterile personality created by society is destroyed and the instinctual suppressed self can emerge liberated. In many cases, Hughes's need to liberate the forces symbolized by these animals is revealed in the fact that they are often shown constrained by situations and environments that limit them. The jaguar is caged, the bear is in hibernation, the hawk is seen at the end of a day of hunting. Hughes seeks, as did ancient shamans, an alignment with the unknown forces governing the universe. His work is a journey beyond the rational to the primitive depths of experience to liberate the self.⁴²

Finally, the poem that best exemplifies the encounter between human and animal by the use of an esoteric method is *The Thought-Fox*, one of his most astonishing achievements. Described by Laura Webb as Hughes's 'ars poetica',⁴³ by Dennis Walder 'one of his most characteristic and revealing poems',⁴⁴ by Stephen Ennis 'a kind of signature piece',⁴⁵ it narrates in the first person the story of an uninspired poet who faces his blank page, unable to write, in a starless night. It is midnight, however, the time when a new day replaces the old and — most importantly — the magic time in fairy tales when spells and witchcraft become possible. Through the window, the poet sees — or imagines he sees — a

42 Hirschberg, pp. 12–13.

43 Webb, p. 35.

44 Walder, p. 6.

45 Stephen Ennis, 'Self-Revelation, Self-Concealment & the Making of the Ted Hughes Archive', in *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons*, ed. by Joanny Moulin (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 55.

fox out in the wood that hesitantly and ‘delicately’⁴⁶ walks toward the lonely poet leaving footprints behind in ‘the dark snow.’⁴⁷ The interaction of the two subjects is soon established, so that while the poet follows the fox, the animal approaches him, becoming bigger and bigger in the artist’s mind, until it suddenly leaps into ‘the dark hole of the head.’⁴⁸ Shortly afterwards, the fox-image — Ted Hughes calls it the thought-fox — vanishes but not its magic effect, because the poem is written: in one of the very few bright conclusions among the animal poems, Hughes reaches the conclusion that ‘The page is printed.’ This poem, nicely accounted for as Ted Hughes’s ‘self-mythologizing account of writing a poem’⁴⁹ by Stephen Ennis, firmly creates the premises for the interrelatedness of a complex network of opposite elements that, because of the magic effect of art (or should one say of a quick small animal?), find a harmonizing relationship: all the dichotomies inside-outside, black-white, human-animal, conscious-unconscious, movement-stillness on which the poem creates its systematic texture reach a perfect state of balance in the surprising — and surprisingly brief — conclusion. The poem, that Ted Hughes claims is ‘about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox,’⁵⁰ clearly describes a story that has an esoteric and imaginary framework, placed as it is inside the practice of shamanism. However, in this specific case it is not evidently rage or violence, the predatory or killing instinct that the speaking voice in the poem is after, but a form of a raw energy helping him to accomplish the creative process. In other words, *The Thought-Fox* might be a poem written by a shaman-poet and by a fox-animal helper. Four-hands, one may be tempted to add. The fox is the poem, as well as the poet’s imagination. In *Poetry in the Making*, Ted Hughes explains that as a child no other kind of emotion could match a good catch when he went fishing or hunting and *The Thought-Fox* as well as *Pike* in the final part

46 Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 21.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ennis, p. 54.

50 Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, p. 20.

seem to re-create that feeling, albeit in two distinct situations. Roger Elkin while commenting *The Thought-Fox* returns to this point when he writes about 'Hughes's idea of writing poetry as akin to hunting animals.'⁵¹

In conclusion, this manifold cultural system of potential indications intends to be a further tribute to the weight of the literary production of Ted Hughes who, despite still having a good number of detractors, has already earned a steady collocation in the history of English poetry of the 20th century. Charged as it is with a number of concurrent cultural referents and personal stimuli, the whole output concerning his animal imagery appears to be a canvas with a multiple set of bizarre illustrations and a dazzling array of colours, some of them even apparently mismatching the rest. In my opinion, however, this also wishes to be a credit to the richness, intensity and fertility of a volcanic artistic mind and it strives to offer a reading as close as possible to the original message contained in the poems. At times, I must confess, I have even thought that providing only some five lines of interpretation might to be a little too narrow an explanation if compared with the explosive potential material available in Hughes's poems. In one of his typical turns from creator to critic, he explains the possible readings originated by the image of the jaguar in this way:

A jaguar after all can be received in several different aspects... he is a beautiful, powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is a supercharged piece of cosmic machinery, he is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation, he is an ancient symbol of Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power, he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon... a lump of ectoplasm. A lump of astral energy.⁵²

51 Roger Elkin, 'Neglected Auguries in Recklings', in *The Challenge of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (London: St. Martin's Press, 1994), p. 14.

52 Faas, p. 86.

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