

## Two contemporary poets and the Ted Hughes bestiary

Who was the first poet to write about birds having observed them with the aid of binoculars? The question is posed by naturalist Tim Dee in his foreword to *The Poetry of Birds* (2009), the anthology he co-edited with Simon Armitage. His tentative offering in response is that Edward Thomas ‘may have slung a rudimentary pair around his neck’, but with some more certainty, ‘it is possible to detect binocular-assisted poetry in some of Ted Hughes’s work’<sup>1</sup>. This speculation, verified or not, is useful because it is based on noticing the observational qualities that can be discerned clearly in Hughes’s animal poems. It is this same documentary closeness to the animals observed that Dee and Armitage value most highly in the contemporary poems they select for inclusion in their trans-historical anthology. The best bird poems written recently, Dee notes in praise of work by Michael Longley, Kathleen Jamie, and Peter Reading, are ‘open-eyed meetings that are crammed with ornithological acuity and capture the direct experience of looking at birds today, giving us a comparable quickening to that which leaps up around any encounter we have with the real things.’<sup>2</sup> In this alignment of what both Hughes and contemporary poets bring to the fore, we can begin to see one of the chief ways in which Hughes’s legacy is felt in poetry today.

Of contemporary A-list poets, Armitage is perhaps the most obviously influenced by Ted Hughes’s legacy. As long ago as 2000, he made a selection of Hughes’s poems for Faber’s ‘Poet to Poet’ series (in which ‘a contemporary poet selects and introduces another poet of a different generation whom they have particularly admired’).<sup>3</sup> Since then, he has spoken numerous times about the older poet’s impact on his own work. This article does not deal with Hughes’s particular influence on Armitage, but his thoughts do sound a keynote for the ways in which Hughes’s legacy is felt by a wide range of poets writing now. In his introductory essay for Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, and Terry Gifford’s edited volume *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, Armitage provides a revealing overview of why Hughes remains a compelling figure for him. Singling out *Remains of Elmet* as Hughes’s signature collection – a ‘concordance’ to the whole oeuvre – Armitage

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Dee, ‘Foreword’, *The Poetry of Birds*, eds. Simon Armitage and Tim Dee (London: Penguin, 2011), p. xix.

<sup>2</sup> Dee, p. xxii.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Hughes, *Poems Selected by Simon Armitage* (London: Faber & Faber, 2000), back cover.

argues that ‘as well as responding to his environment, Hughes demonstrated an equal capacity for imposing his views upon it too, moulding and mythologizing what lay in front of him to suit his needs. It works both ways.’<sup>4</sup> Hughes’s poetry, he continues, is ‘the poetry of conflict’: ‘Whether writing about animal, vegetable or mineral, rival and opposing energies are always felt to be at work in a Hughes poem.’<sup>5</sup> These are, in a way, simple observations but the two elements that make up the tension Armitage describes – recording experiences of the world (‘responding’) and making metaphors out of them (‘moulding’) – have not always received equal attention in Hughes scholarship. Particularly with regard to Hughes’s animal poems, critical accounts have often emphasised their metaphoric potential as accounts of *human* life, sometimes at the expense of giving credit to their observational attention to encounters with real animals. This is perhaps due in part to important precedents set at the very beginning of critical consideration of Hughes’s poetry. If Hughes’s legacy for contemporary poetry is to be more fully understood, it is necessary for scholars to follow where Armitage and many others lead.

Considering the body of work as a whole, Hughes’s animal poetry seems, at first, to oscillate back and forward between two poles: creatures recorded in lyric, observational mode (*The Hawk in the Rain, Remains of Elmet, Moortown Diary*) and sometimes-mythical beasts carrying the heavy metaphorical burden of the spirit world and creation myth (*Wodwo, Crow, Adam and the Sacred Nine*). This article examines contemporary poets’ debt to both of these aspects; it finds that those who work with Hughes’s legacy often combine the two. As a full appraisal of Hughes’s presence in the work of contemporary poets would need to be a book-length undertaking, for this article poems by Alice Oswald and John Burnside provide the sample material to test this case. Oswald has selected the poems for Faber’s publication of *A Ted Hughes Bestiary* (2014) and her introduction to that volume provides a key document of her engagement with Hughes’s animals. Her poetry from this period also bears the mark of his influence. John Burnside is, in many ways, the heir to Hughes’s depiction of animals and human animality across a long period. Both poets write half-observational, half-imaginative poems that, following Hughes, embody rather than only describe animals. From noticing a combinatory approach in the work of these

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Armitage, ‘The Ascent of Ted Hughes: Conquering the Calder Valley’, in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, eds. Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 7–8.

<sup>5</sup> Armitage, pp. 8–9.

two contemporary poets, the article then turns back to the Hughes oeuvre and argues that even the most subjective renderings of animals there have their basis in objective reference to experience. Thus, charting Hughes's place in contemporary writing returns attention anew to his own poetry and refocuses his place in literary history more broadly conceived. The Hughes that is of most interest today might not be quite the same Hughes as before.

As a prelude to this study, it is perhaps helpful to give a brief account of how certain aspects of Hughes's animal poems have tended to be read and where certain assumptions about them have come from. Al Alvarez was the critic who shaped Hughes's critical reception most forcefully from the outset of his career onwards, and it is his mode of reading the animal poems that has become pervasive. In the late 1950s, Alvarez was poetry editor at the *Observer* and the most influential reviewer of new collections. Jonathan Bate notes that Alvarez's 1957 review of Hughes's debut collection, *The Hawk in the Rain*, identified him as 'a real poet', particularly praising a number of animal poems (the title poem, 'Jaguar', 'The Thought-Fox', 'The Horses').<sup>6</sup> This review signifies the beginning of defining Hughes's place in the poetry world: Alvarez went on to formulate the terms on which a group of young poets came to be thought of as a new generation, distinct and tonally very different to their forebears. As William Wootten has shown,

Alvarez was one of the first to identify the promise of Gunn, Hill, Hughes, Plath and Porter, and, more than the academic critics who followed him, Alvarez it was who helped establish their reputations, Plath's and Hughes's in particular. Whether as commentator, populariser, or provocateur, Alvarez not only helped create the taste by which these poets were enjoyed, his prose affected how they would regard their own and each other's work.<sup>7</sup>

Alvarez's influence was felt most forcefully, at the time and since, in his editorship of *The New Poetry* (1962, expanded edition 1966), which Wootten calls 'the key

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<sup>6</sup> Alvarez, cited in Jonathan Bate, *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* (London: William Collins, 2015), pp. 136–7.

<sup>7</sup> William Wootten, *The Alvarez Generation: Thom Gunn, Geoffrey Hill, Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath and Peter Porter* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. xii.

document' around or against which almost all subsequent accounts of British poetry have oriented themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Alvarez's introduction to *The New Poetry*, championing Hughes as the poster-boy for a necessary 'new seriousness' in poetry, and comparing him favourably with the supposed gentility of the Movement and Philip Larkin in particular, establishes a powerful and influential mode of reading Hughes that has perhaps insufficiently examined repercussions for the animal poems.<sup>9</sup> This has to do with metaphor and anthropomorphism. Alvarez wanted to present Hughes as being at the forefront of a newly engaged and worldly generation of poets who, coming of age in the wake of the Second World War, confront the twin problems of evil in the post-holocaust world and libido in a modern perception of self informed by recent psychoanalytic thinking. The extent to which the poems are said to be analogically 'about' these things implicitly diminishes the extent to which they are about the things (often, the creatures) they ostensibly appear to be about. The poems that Alvarez selects for the introduction's comparison with Larkin are, interestingly, animal poems: Larkin's 'At Grass' and Hughes's 'A Dream of Horses'. The title of the latter – not horses, but dreams of horses – indicates that Alvarez has a point, but his conclusions elide the creatures to a large degree. He finds the poem to be 'a serious attempt to recreate and so clarify, unfalsified and in the strongest imaginative terms possible, a powerful complex of emotions and sensations.' Observation of creatures is present, but only as a means to an end: 'through the sharp details which bring them [the horses] so threateningly to life, they reach back, as in a dream, into an nexus of fear and sensation.'<sup>10</sup>

In light of this introduction, it is more difficult to read the Hughes poems that Alvarez selects for inclusion in *The New Poetry* without an anthropomorphising tendency (and one, I argue, that only tells part of the story). Thus, 'Pike', describing 'killers from the egg' with 'malevolent aged grin[s]' becomes less about fish and more about human brutality in a disintegrated post-war world (*CP* 84). To suggest otherwise would, for Alvarez, likely be absurd, notwithstanding the fact that the poem is lyric in voice, draws on personal experience and a passion for angling now well established in Hughes biography and criticism, and culminates in an eerie reversal of

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<sup>8</sup> Wootten, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup> Al Alvarez, ed., *The New Poetry*, revised edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Alvarez, p. 31.

human perspective with the fish, and not the angler, possessing the verb ‘watching’ with which the poem concludes. Alvarez’s selections confer attention on the animal poems, presumably as they lend themselves to this kind of interpretation: of the twenty-one Hughes poems chosen in 1962, eleven are certainly animal poems whilst almost all of the rest involve animals in some way; in the 1966 edition, the proportion is eight out of eighteen. Alvarez’s near-allegorical reading practice, integral as it is to the first attempt to establish Hughes’s importance as a genuinely new voice in modern poetry, has been a paradigm that many have followed. And yet, it tends to (over)emphasise one undeniable part of Hughes’s animal poetry at the expense of another. The poise between ‘responding’ and ‘moulding’ that Armitage so admires in Hughes’s poetry is not present here.

Two points might authorise the degree to which Alvarez elects to read Hughes’s animals as metaphors. First, Hughes has lent weight to this approach in his discussions of the animal poems. Second, Hughes’s early animals poems – those that Alvarez is considering when he is writing in the early 1960s – are perhaps more metaphoric than later, more observational work. In a well-known *Paris Review* interview, Hughes gives a typical account of his animal poems:

Since I spent my first seventeen or eighteen years constantly thinking about them [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 [...] So when I look for, or get hold of a feeling [...] it tends to bring up the image of an animal or animals simply because that’s the deepest, earliest language that my imagination learned.<sup>11</sup>

This has most often been read as an uncomplicated signifier/signified relationship whereby animals provide the means by which to address the real subject matter, which lies behind or beneath. Nonetheless, a more modern approach, in light of poststructuralist ideas of textuality, might question this whole linguistic economy, preferring the words on the page to the contextually derived subtext. In any case, what is clear is that Hughes associates this mode of thinking with his youth. He leaves open the possibility that he would move away from this mode of composition towards a

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<sup>11</sup> Drue Heinz, ‘Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI’, *Paris Review* 134 (1995), p. 81.

different way of looking at animals. Indeed, the very next sentence following the passage I have just quoted sees Hughes revising the idea that animals are the *only* language of the imagination – now they become ‘*one of* the deepest, earliest languages’ (my italics).<sup>12</sup> Elsewhere, Hughes has also made the counterargument himself: asked by Ekbert Faas about charges that his two jaguar poems celebrate violence, he responds ‘I prefer to think of them as first, descriptions of a jaguar’ and only after that as ‘invocations of a jaguar-like body of elemental force, demonic force.’<sup>13</sup>

Alvarez’s perceptions and mode of reading the poems inform and colour a broad swath of responses to Hughes (popular and scholarly). They can be felt in the titans of Hughes scholarship – Keith Sagar affirming plainly that ‘Hughes’s imaginative world was deeply mythic’ – and in Hughes’s contemporaries – Seamus Heaney, at Hughes’s memorial service in Westminster Abbey, declaring that ‘myth is the poetic code for the human spirit’.<sup>14</sup> Sean O’Brien repeats the interpretive lines that Alvarez runs along even more closely: ‘a set of associations grew up around [Hughes’s] work: nature–violence–the Holocaust–psychic crisis’.<sup>15</sup> Neil Corcoran’s chapter on Hughes and Geoffrey Hill in his *English Poetry since 1940*, a common entry point into critical accounts of Hughes for many an undergraduate, is astoundingly similar to Alvarez in situating these poets (and in the language used to do so): ‘they came to maturity during the immediately post-war period when Europeans were faced with the two realities which have been most signally formative of the modern historical consciousness and conscience: the Nazi concentration camps and the atomic bomb. [...] This involvement in modern European history may be read as the originating impulse behind much in the poetries of Hughes and Hill.’<sup>16</sup> The implications of this context for the animal poems are the same: Hughes ‘revises a tradition of English “nature” poetry, and specifically animal poetry, towards a discovery within the natural world of forces, energies which always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, criticize the rational human intellect.’<sup>17</sup> In summary, ‘the

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<sup>12</sup> Heinz, p. 81.

<sup>13</sup> Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe; With Selected Critical Writings by Ted Hughes & Two Interviews* (Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), p. 199.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. ix; Heaney, cited in Sagar, p. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Sean O’Brien, *The Deregulated Muse* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1998), p. 35.

<sup>16</sup> Neil Corcoran, *English Poetry since 1940* (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Corcoran, p. 116.

anthropomorphisms suggest, of course, that Hughes's animal poems are also human allegories'.<sup>18</sup>

To be clear, though my argument might appear to be an attack on Alvarez's mode of reading, it is not. The point I am making is not that he is wrong but rather to acknowledge that his judgements are of a particular historical moment. In the 1960s, it was the case that Hughes's importance was in his articulations of the human psyche in a post-war, nuclear, Jungian world. After all, *The New Poetry* was first published in the same year as Eichmann's execution and the Cuban missile crisis. That Alvarez's opinions held such sway is testament to their continued relevance for years, decades even. But these historical determinants are not the same ones today. In the anthropocene era, environmental concerns are the most pressing issue for poets writing of nature and animals. Alvarez's anthropocentric Hughes is being replaced in the critical and creative imagination with a biocentric Hughes, whose poems express a perspective of mutuality between human and animal and evoke a network of ecological connections. Another way to put this is to suggest that Hughes was well ahead of his time in terms of environmental awareness and the articulation of a poetics to reflect this. Scholars are only now catching up with him. Two recent examples: Yvonne Reddick's work on Hughes as an ecopoet brings to focus his longstanding engagement with ideas of 'ecopsychology'; and Steve Ely's case for the importance of South Yorkshire to Hughes's development tracks his honing of 'observational skills' in relation to animals at Old Denaby.<sup>19</sup>

Writing much more recently than Alvarez, after Hughes's death and therefore with the whole of his poetry in sight, Laura Webb has traced a trajectory of Hughes's writing on animals. She suggests a development can be discerned 'from discursive animal subjects, located "outside" of time, towards empirical animal subjects, located within the present moment.'<sup>20</sup> If, as Webb argues, 'Hughes has shed mythological, omnipotent narrative in favour of a real-time record of events' over the course of his career, then the repercussion for animal poems is a shift away from the animals as

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<sup>18</sup> Corcoran, p. 117.

<sup>19</sup> Yvonne Reddick, *Ted Hughes: Environmentalist and Ecopoet* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 89–91; Steve Ely, *Ted Hughes's South Yorkshire: Made in Mexborough* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 59–75.

<sup>20</sup> Laura Webb, 'Mythology, Mortality and Memorialization: Animal and Human Endurance in Hughes' Poetry', in *Ted Hughes: From Cambridge to Collected*, eds. Mark Wormald, Neil Roberts, and Terry Gifford (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 34.

icons towards being ‘taken as subjects in their own right’.<sup>21</sup> I concur with Webb’s suggestion that this happens most forcefully in *Moortown Diary*, but would note that even very different poems written in other phases of Hughes’s development take inspiration from an individual and empirical experience of a particular creature, and that they consistently retain the mark of this engagement in their linguistic fabric, even where they mythologise via metaphor. Even in *Crow*, the description of the avian protagonist ‘spraddled head-down in the beach-garbage, guzzling a dropped ice-cream’ feels ornithologically correct, especially given that Hughes would have had opportunity to observe this characteristic behaviour of the American crow (distinct from the Carrion crow in Europe) on the eastern seaboard of the US during his time in Boston (*CP* 210).

Keith Sagar’s work on the composition process for ‘The Dove Came’ might provide a further case in point. This poem from *Adam and the Sacred Nine* – thought of as one of the collections most concerned with myth and departing from recorded experience – begins with, and retains, observed ornithological details though its concerns move far beyond description: ‘All the drafts, though they play many variations with the phrasing, begin with the dove’s breast, its bulbous shape and its distinctive colouring.’<sup>22</sup> Though the dove is a bird freighted with symbolism from at least as far back as the book of Genesis, Sagar’s comments on Hughes’s redraftings show how observed detail is the poem’s essential element surviving through a process of scaling back on early drafts: ‘it was a matter of throwing out all that could be thrown out, leaving only that which imperiously proves itself, the simplicity on the far side of complexity, the essential.’<sup>23</sup> In Hughes then, detailed observation is always the anchor of metaphor no matter how much else is going on around it. In this poem, and almost everywhere else in his poetry, Hughes is attentive to the process of making metaphor and retaining creaturely experience in poetic language.<sup>24</sup> It is this, I suggest, that contemporary poets – writing with the whole oeuvre available to them – take from his animal poems.

Alice Oswald’s short introduction to her selection for *A Ted Hughes Bestiary* draws attention to the multifaceted nature of Hughes’s engagement with animals,

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<sup>21</sup> Webb, p. 43, p. 39.

<sup>22</sup> Sagar, p. 95. For ‘The Dove Came’, see *CP* 449.

<sup>23</sup> Sagar, p. 103.

<sup>24</sup> For a more detailed treatment of the ‘creaturely’ in Hughes, see Danny O’Connor, *Ted Hughes and Trauma: Burning the Foxes* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), esp. chapter two, ‘Hughes’s Creaturely Creatures’, pp. 23–40.



initially through an exploration of the bestiary as a genre or type of book. She characterises the medieval Christian tradition of the bestiary as ‘a book of animals sketchily recorded and then reduced to emblems’, which is ‘inimical’ to Hughes’s version of the same, where ‘animals are so radiantly themselves’.<sup>25</sup> The observational qualities of his poems are clearly central to her conception of his importance, but there is no tension here with their potential to also tell us something about ourselves, to carry the weight of analogy. She quotes Hughes on these two sides of his writing, first from his notes to *Moortown Diary* where he advocates ‘getting close to what is going on, and staying close, and [...] excluding everything else that might be pressing to interfere with the watching eye’; but also his desire to do more than simply watch when he writes to his brother Gerald that ‘when a man becomes simply a mirror, he just ceases to be interesting to men.’<sup>26</sup> Oswald writes that ‘from one collection to the next, he oscillates between these extremes’ and the variety of her selections testify that she is equally compelled by both of these aspects. They are, in her selection of poems, variously emphasised characteristics present in almost all of the poems rather than mutually exclusive features. It is fitting, then, that the first of the four short prose excerpts that Oswald includes in the *Bestiary* is Hughes’s configuration of these elements from the ‘Capturing Animals’ chapter of *Poetry in the Making*. Here, he describes how he ‘think[s] of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author’. He expands: ‘Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own outside mine.’<sup>27</sup> The gesture here is not one of moving away from the grammatical lyricism of the poem (first-person narration is, of course, often Hughes’s *modus operandi*), but rather to play down the subjective, interpretive involvement of that ‘I’, instead observing to give voice to something true about the animal.

Hughes’s influence can be clearly traced in particular poems by Oswald from a period contemporary to her work on the *Bestiary*. ‘Fox’, from her collection *Falling Awake* (2016) writes back to Hughes’s ‘The Thought-Fox’. At a recent event at the London Review Bookshop in which Oswald introduced and discussed recordings of Hughes reading his work, she noted that Hughes’s own introduction to this poem

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<sup>25</sup> Alice Oswald, ‘Introduction’, *A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Poems Selected by Alice Oswald* (London: Faber, 2014), p. xiii.

<sup>26</sup> Oswald, *Ted Hughes Bestiary*, p. xiii. For originals, see CP 1205, LTH 18.

<sup>27</sup> Oswald, *Ted Hughes Bestiary*, p. xvii. For original, see PM 15.

describes a half-man half-fox entering his bedroom. She draws attention to this detail, she explains, because it demonstrates that he was a ‘preternatural’ poet rather than simply a nature poet (and ‘that is so much more interesting’).<sup>28</sup> She is echoing Hughes’s own sense of the poem’s ambiguity: in *Poetry in the Making*, he describes the creature in quick succession as ‘both a fox and not a fox’, ‘a fox and a spirit’, and ‘a real fox’. His conclusion on its status maintains this suppleness rather than resolving the tension: ‘the words have made a body for it and given it somewhere to walk’ (*PM* 20). The poem bears this out with its attentive descriptive focus on the fox’s tentative, careful and concentrated movement that is also an analogy for writing poetry – the fox’s steps placed ‘again now, and now, and now’ are echoed in the line’s iambic metre and its ‘neat prints’ mimicked by the printed page in the final line (*CP* 21). The poem is an act of conjuring and poetry is an instinctual behaviour.

Oswald’s poem retains and yet dismantles these energies. It is more simply titled, emphasising the animal in the world (without a definite or indefinite pronoun) and not the composite one half-created in the mind (i.e. ‘Fox’ rather than ‘The Thought-Fox’). It tells of a nocturnal encounter with a vixen, whose bark wakens the narrator. It imagines possibilities for interpreting this bark without ever straying far from description – any abstraction is carefully measured. The poem opens with the moment of the encounter and sensory perception in the plainest lyric terms – ‘I heard a cough’ – before slightly complicating things with a simile – ‘as if a thief was there / outside my sleep’ (though this last clause assures us the scenario is really heard not dreamed).<sup>29</sup> The vixen, ‘stepping’ (like Hughes’s fox) into the poem in the second stanza, is ‘abrupt and odd’ but at the same time there is kinship as she goes about her night ‘hungrily asking’ – looking for food it is perhaps to be assumed, but looking for something that the poem does not encroach to name. Her bark is delivered in ‘the heart’s thick accent’, but this accent could be that of animal, human, and/or poet. The poem certainly imagines possibilities for the vixen’s symbolic significance but ends tentatively with a surmise as to how her bark might be interpreted:

as if to say: it’s midnight  
and my life  
is laid beneath my children

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<sup>28</sup> ‘Alice Oswald on Ted Hughes’, London Review Bookshop, 7 March 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Alice Oswald, *Falling Awake* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2016), p. 5.

like gold leaf<sup>30</sup>

This final stanza opens by repeating the earlier qualification of uncertainty ('as if') before emphasising a characteristic – care for offspring – broadly shared across species.

The encounter is presented in terms that undoubtedly signal Hughes's poem in both content and form: not least in the pointed midnight timing of the encounter, but also in the similar, seemingly prosaic, unrhymed quatrains that it deploys. Here, the poet's encroachment on her animal subject matter is presented in more tentative terms. It is telling, in this regard, that though Oswald uses the same quatrain form, her metre is shorter and the poem is made up of five stanzas to Hughes's six – when symbolism is paired back, fewer words are used. In summary, then, Oswald follows Hughes in looking to connect animal and human experience and develops the poetic rendering of this act of translation. Where metaphor is present, her aesthetic builds more hesitancy into the transformation.

I have found only one brief statement of Hughes's influence on the part of John Burnside but nonetheless the kinship between the two poets' writing is perhaps closer still than that between Hughes and Oswald. The period of time during which Hughes overlaps with Burnside as a practising poet is longer: his first collection *The Hoop* appeared in 1988 and he published a further five collections before Hughes's death, whilst Oswald's debut *The Thing in the Stone-Gap Stile* came out in 1996 and her next book-length publication, *Dart*, was not until 2002. On the announcement in 2010 that Hughes was to be commemorated with a memorial in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey, Burnside wrote a piece for the *Guardian* commending this decision. He opens with a recollection of the formative experience of first hearing a Hughes poem read aloud by a college tutor and 'thinking, even then, that everything would be different from that moment on.'<sup>31</sup> What is important in Hughes's work, he continues, is philosophical more than formal:

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<sup>30</sup> Oswald, *Falling Awake*, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> John Burnside, 'Ted Hughes's poetry enriches us spiritually and mentally', *The Guardian*, 23 March 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2010/mar/23/ted-hughes-poets-corner>, accessed 9 January 2018.

What mattered, more than formal skill, more than clever effects or knowingness, more even than the all too frequently sociological ‘meaning’ of the work, was how keenly and completely a poet reimagined language and the world and, by extension, how that vision revived the language and experiences of others.<sup>32</sup>

It is by this quality that ‘Hughes’s poetry enriched (and continues to enrich) our mental and spiritual habitat’, and for which he has ‘won a lasting place in the collective imagination.’<sup>33</sup> More than confirming that Hughes is an influence on Burnside, this statement indicates something about the nature of that influence. First, Burnside’s *weltanschauung* shares characteristics with that of Hughes. Second, in part because of this first, intertextualities in Burnside’s writing are likely to be pervasive – philosophical stances or positions – more often than specific – direct allusions. This is certainly the case in the poem I have selected to illustrate the dialogue (though I will also draw attention to a couple of more precise points of comparison).

Burnside’s writing about animals is as vast and diverse as Hughes’s, a similarity that undermines the sense of attempting to give anything like a comprehensive statement on what they share and how they differ in the limited space here. I propose instead then, as with Oswald, to look at a paradigmatic single poem. From an embarrassment of riches, I have selected Burnside’s ‘Animals’, from *The Light Trap* (2002), as its broad title seems to gesture towards a definitive statement on the topic (though one that is actually extremely tentative), and because it bears certain resemblances – in scenario, in voice and form, in philosophy – to ‘The Thought-Fox’. It takes its genesis, like the Hughes and Oswald poems discussed, from nocturnal encounters with wild creatures (plural rather than singular here, with an eye to offering a synthesis of this kind of moment drawn from numerous actual events):

There are nights when we cannot name  
the animals that flit across our headlights

[...]

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<sup>32</sup> Burnside, ‘Ted Hughes’.

<sup>33</sup> Burnside, ‘Ted Hughes’.

they cross our path, unnameable and bright  
as any in the sudden heat of Eden.

Mostly, it's rabbit, or fox, though we've sometimes caught  
a glimpse of powder blue, or Chinese white,

or chanced upon a mystery of eyes  
and passed the last few miles in wonderment.<sup>34</sup>

Here, 'a glimpse' of colour or part anatomy of the 'unnameable' prompts 'wonderment'. These fleeting observations are, at this point in the poem, pointedly not expanded upon – there is no attempt to complete a narrative, filling in the gaps with speculation, but rather, to allow a partial sighting to register tonally. Though concrete, these observations are nonetheless strongly evocative, perhaps because they are (initially at least) not elaborated on.

The second half of the poem turns attention to an unoccupied house, empty since a neighbour's death, in which similarly unnameable creatures move or live: 'In time, we came to think that house contained / a presence'. From here, observation is reversed: it is the 'presence', 'more animal than ghost', in the dilapidating, isolated house rather than the narrating 'we' that does the watching. This is a tactic reminiscent of several Hughes poems: the pike 'watching', the otter whose 'self under the eye lies, / Attendant and withdrawn', both in eponymous poems, or the trout that 'forces a final curve wide, getting / a long look at me' in 'Stealing Trout on a May Morning' (*CP* 86, 79, 140). In Burnside's poem, the animal presence in the house is 'a kindred shape' but it is so because the direction of travel here is not to anthropomorphise the creature (it explicitly refuses to make the dream of an animal into 'the self', an idea that is questioned by its enclosing quotation marks) but rather to recognise the creaturely in the human:

though what I sense in this, and cannot tell  
is not the continuity we understand

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<sup>34</sup> John Burnside, *The Light Trap* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2002), p. 18.

as self, but life, beyond the life we live  
on purpose: one broad presence that proceeds

by craft and guesswork,  
shadowing our love.<sup>35</sup>

Dreams and senses have a significant role to play in the relinquishing of a certain idea of rational selfhood that the poem enacts. Instead, at its conclusion it comes to articulate a vision of human animality, termed ‘life’ rather than ‘self’. Crucially, what is offered here is not a metaphor of symbolic order but rather an analogue. To notice that this comes, in part, from Hughes is to be aware that his poetry too does not employ animals in any mechanistic way. For Burnside and for Oswald, as well as for very many others, Hughes offers a model for thinking through, and for complicating, our sense of animals and our own creatureliness.

At a key point in *The Alvarez Generation*, William Wootten takes stock of the critical history he has presented and offers a corrective to what he sees as the oversight involved in a mode of reading Hughes’s poems almost as allegories that originated in Alvarez and became pervasive:

[W]hat gives many of the early poems their considerable power, and a power both to unsettle readers and their human assumptions and to evoke the natural world, is Hughes’s ability to both keep up a strong attendance on the specifics of the life before him, to be the empirical observer and nature poet whilst also manifesting considerable psychic energy and disturbance.<sup>36</sup>

Alvarez, ‘by viewing only one side of this, misses the whole picture’. These remarks serve not only in relation to the criticism of the past but also provide an indication as to how Hughes’s poems are important to those who are writing now. Hughes’s poetry provides an important example of the careful balance of experience and metaphor that contemporary poets are searching for. The philosophical principle that underpins this balance, present in Hughes and ever more accentuated in our current climate (in several senses of the word) is one that places human life on a continuum with animal

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<sup>35</sup> Burnside, *The Light Trap*, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> Wootten, p. 96.

life and within a common ecological web. In his recent prose text *Havergey* (2017), Burnside articulates the idea of ‘interanimation’, a key tenet of the inhabitants of the eponymous utopia. Wandering amongst cattle on a foggy evening, ‘you cannot help wondering how they see the world, and what, if anything, such mysteries as a foggy evening [...] could possibly mean to them, in their seemingly separate world, a world that, for you, seems stolid and patient and, for the most part, near silent.’ In response, ‘you try to imagine yourself as them, in some form of kinship’ that is ‘something you can experience as a sensation – *not* an idea – but a sensory experience of a common soul, shared, but not divided, between all living things.’<sup>37</sup> Notwithstanding the idealism that is naturally part of writing a utopia, this kind of awareness informs Burnside’s poetry, Oswald’s, and, I have argued, Hughes’s. Via his legacy, we can look back to Hughes’s work and notice anew that the process of making metaphor is an intricate one – animal does not stand in as referent for human in any straightforward way. Rather, human creatureliness comes to the fore as the analogue of poems that observe animals.

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<sup>37</sup> John Burnside, *Havergey* (Toller Fratrum: Little Toller Books, 2017), pp.50–1.