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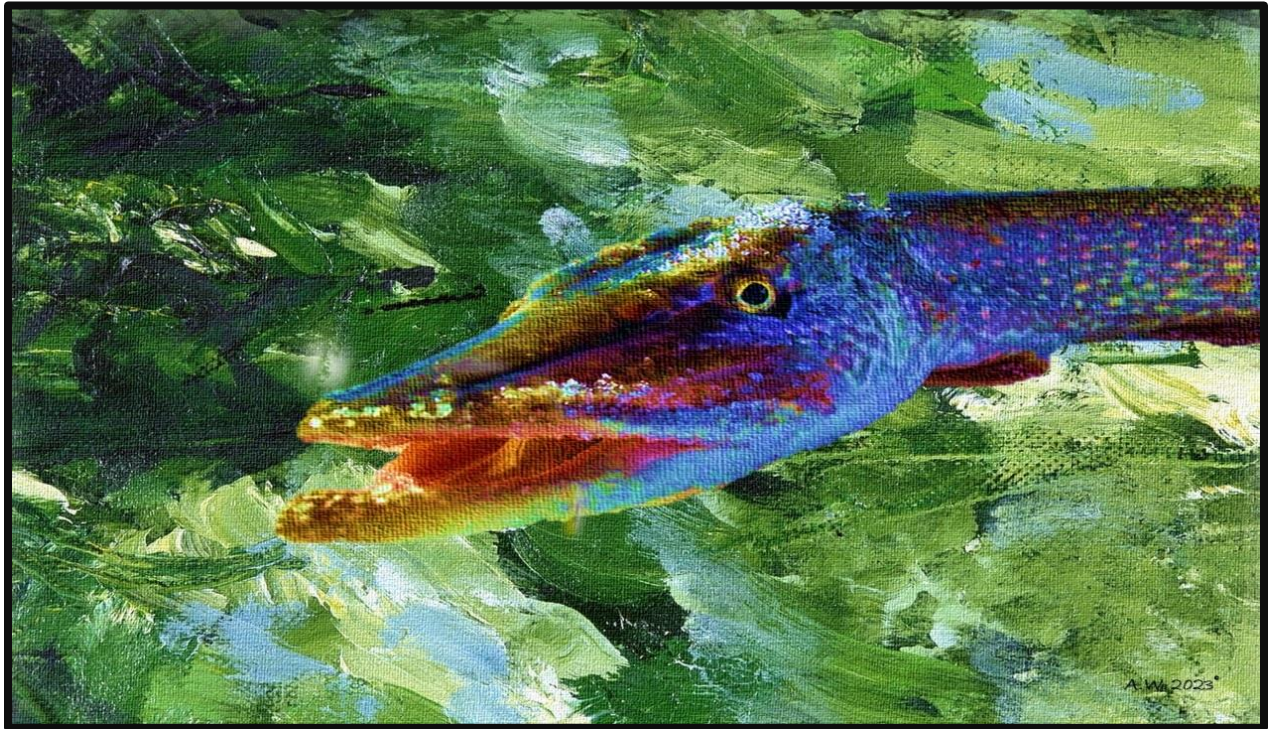
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Poems From the Interval: Violence in Ted Hughes's Animal Still-Lives

Cover Page Footnote

To my mother...



Poems From the Interval: Violence in Ted Hughes's Animal Still-Lives

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Abstract

In his verbal still-lives, Ted Hughes reverses the traditional dynamics of scopophilia by putting the human eye under the dying beast's petrifying gaze. So doing, the poem entwines human and animal into an interval creature entangling human language and animal body, thriving between life and death, in a dimension akin to the bardo—in Tibetan, the “interval between two states” where the shaman is violently put to death by an animal demon to be resurrected as a new lifeform. Hence Hughes's still-lives are not only from the interval, but also for the interval period we are going through—the pivotal era known as the Anthropocene, and whose *denouement* could be self-destructive for our civilization—: they propose profound transformations in our relationship to nature before we reach the point of no return. This paper will illustrate the triple process (reversed scopophilia, human-animal entanglement, dying as a regenerating experience) through three of Ted Hughes's most violent animal still-lives: “Pike,” “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.”

Keywords: interval, scopophilia, human-animal entanglement, life and death drives, bardo, shaman, metamorphosis, mantra, dance

Introduction

Traditional still-life, be it with live or dead animals, serves anthropocentrism with relentless visual voracity. Through this kind of artwork, the human eye fixes and devours animals with “unregulated gluttony” (Haraway 1991, 189), and the viewer stares in wonder at man’s artistic, scientific, consumerist conquest of the natural world, admiring the “self-satiated eye of the master [artist]” (ibid. 192) in its flawless rendering of scales, feather and fur either in paintings of piled-up dead game on the table of wealthy families, or in taxonomic illustrations, or in taxidermies whether they be displayed as trophies or in natural history museums.

In his verbal still-lives, Ted Hughes reverses the dynamics of this scopophilia (or visual violence) by putting the human eye—therefore the reader’s eye—under the beast’s petrifying gaze, anticipating Derrida’s seminal realization that “the animal [...] can look at me [...], has its point of view regarding me” (Derrida 14). In the art of Ted Hughes, this power struggle between the human and animal gaze entails another transformation of the still-life motif: the beast is no longer flatly laid on the page; even the dying or dead animal “jump[s] to life as you read” (Hughes 1967, 17), after a writing process which Hughes once implicitly described as a gestation period:

You make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness [...]. The poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own (ibid.).

Except that this new “life” is not exactly “outside your own,” since poet and reader, absorbed by the “creature’s” gaze, are caught up in the artwork. In other words, the poem entwines and transforms human and animal into an “interval” lifeform—“interval” in a sense close to what Haraway calls a “figure,” that is a “material-semiotic node” entangling human language and animal body:

Figures [...] are not representations or didactic illustrations, but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings coshape one another [...], where the biological and literary or artistic come together with all of the force of lived reality (Haraway 2008, 4).

The “[co]lived reality” of death is what Hughes’s dying “figures” challenge us to experience, hence the next reason why they can be qualified as “interval”: as a “species” that thrives between life and death. Hence a third way of understanding the word: this in-between in which the creature forms and thrives is akin to the *bardo*, a Tibetan word which means “interval between two states” and refers to the locus of shamanic ecstasy—which notoriously inspired Hughes in his poetry-making. In the *bardo*, the shaman undergoes a violent, magical death by an animal demon in order to

be resurrected as a new being.

Thus it is that Hughes's challenging still-lives are not only poems from the interval (in the senses aforementioned), but also for the interval period we are going through: the pivotal era of the Anthropocene, deemed to have started in the 1800s when the human impact on the environment began to rival the forces of nature, and whose denouement could lead our civilization to self-destruction.¹ Ted Hughes's still-lives enact and propose profound transformations in our relationship to nature before we reach the point of no return. This paper aims at illustrating the triple process—reversed scopophilia, human-animal entanglement in the dying “figure,” dying as a regenerating experience—through three of the most violent animal still-lives composed by Ted Hughes between 1957 and 1967: “Pike,” “The Jaguar” and “Second Glance at a Jaguar.”

Pike

The first two quatrains of “Pike” are a vision, in full day-light, of the freshwater predator-fish dancing near the surface of their natural habitat.² A human eye—the speaker's eye—devours them in their smallest details, and self-righteously anthropomorphizes them as fables of humanity's most inhuman behaviours: the shapes of hundred-foot-long war “submarines” show through the pikes' silhouettes and the fish are a satire of grinning, megalomaniac dictators “in their world” (emphasis mine), a possessive meant to highlight the tyrants' stranglehold over the world, but also to dissociate the speaker from it—a speaker who, in this moment of dramatic irony, is unaware of his own visual voracity:

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.
Or move, stunned by their own grandeur,
Over a bed of emerald, silhouette
Of submarine delicacy and horror.
A hundred feet long in their world.

In the next two quatrains, the fish have sunk deep underwater and no longer dance. They are completely still, except for their pulsing, intimidating “pectorals” and for their eyes flashing from the depths of the pond, “watching upwards”—towards the eye which has been staring at them all along?

In ponds, under the heat-struck lily pads—
Gloom of their stillness:
Logged on last year's black leaves, watching upwards.

Or hung in an amber cavern of weeds
The jaws' hooked clamp and fangs
Not to be changed at this date;
A life subdued to its instrument;
The gills kneading quietly, and the pectorals.

In the next three quatrains, the pikes are subtracted from their natural habitat,² confined in a fish-tank and now devoured by several pairs of human eyes transfixed by the cannibalism of the animals dying one by one:

Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed 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.
Two, six pounds each, over two feet long
High and dry and dead in the willow-herb—

The second, dying pike, with its head still protruding from its congener's gluttonous jaws, locks its gaze like a vice on the staring humans. In the freeze-frame of this petrifying moment, Death looks man in the eye, turning round on him his own voracity, but also epiphanizing man's own cannibalism as he preys upon the natural world, foreshadowing the potentially self-destructive end of the human species:

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:
The outside eye stared: as a vice locks—
The same iron in this eye
Though its film shrank in death.

The last four stanzas are a new, more explicit vision of this self-predation: the human protagonist is caught up in this vision as a fisherman preyed upon by "Pike too immense to stir," a final tableau which takes us back to the natural habitat of the pond, "past nightfall"—perhaps in doomsday darkness. The human predator is now "frozen," petrified by the animals' gaze:

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them—
Stilled legendary depth:
It was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old

That past nightfall I dared not cast
But silently cast and fished
With the hair frozen on my head
For what might move, for what eye might move.
The still splashes on the dark pond
Owls hushing the floating woods
Frail on my ear against the dream
Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
That rose slowly toward me, watching.

Out of the dark, the hooked pike “jump[s] to life” (PM 17) in slow-motion. But how to read the last two words, “me, watching”? Is the pike watching “me,” or is it “me, watching” the “Pike, three inches long, perfect / Pike in all parts...”? What if the ultimate verb were also transitive, its object to be found in the first word of the poem? As noticed by Christian La Cassagnère,

The usually transitive use of the verb ‘watching’ conditions us to expect an accompanying object (or at least an adverb, as in ‘watching upward,’ l.11). Something is missing after the final ‘watching’: ‘watching’ what? However, reading the poem anew can fill in this void—this interval—by closing the circle between this final ‘watching’ and the opening ‘Pike, three inches long, perfect / Pike in all parts,’ thus turning ‘Pike’ into the missing object.³

The “missing object” being the fascinating devouring drive—the Pike’s and mine. This double, “pycanthropic”⁴ perspective, signals the human-animal entanglement, therefore the birth of the interval creature between killing and being killed, between the stillness and the “dancing,” a figure embodying Freud’s theory that the two fundamental drives of life and death combine in an “alloy” which is the essence of the living (Freud 2001, 105). The reader, the listener is also caught in the interval, in the toing and froing between two interpretations that pulse through the veins of the anamorphic poem...

Very much like the mythical ouroboros—the serpent devouring its own tail in endless regeneration—, the poem comes full circle, regenerates by meeting its beginning in its end, calling for new readings at each cycle. For instance, how to read the problematic statement which overflows from quatrains 9 to 10, “I dared not cast / But silently cast and fished” (36-37)? Is it simply action winning out over hesitation, or could it be that at some level of the irrational, mutating syntax, “fished” is morphing into the passive voice (a past participle), whilst an elided auxiliary (“was”) slides into the interval between “But” and “silently”? Is not the human predator “fished” in the sense that his organism is intertwined with that of his prey? Following this “silence” that speaks volumes, the sonorous ambivalence of the key diphthong and signifier /ai/ begs the

same question: “For what might move, for what eye [I] might move” (39). The pond is simultaneously perceived from either side of the water surface, from an interbeing (or interval) perspective: seen and heard from above the surface (by the human angler), “The still splashes on the dark pond” (40) are the pike’s dorsal breaking water; while perceived by the pike from underwater, they are the fisherman’s float landing on the surface. As for “the floating woods” (41), from above they are the wooded land reflected upon on the water-surface; while from underwater, they are seen through, and distorted by, the rippling surface. The opening quatrain, to which the final words return, is now an up-close view of the Pike, arguably generated by the same interval perspective. The fish “danc[ing] on the surface among the flies” (4) may well be watched from above the surface by the angler, but also from the bottom of the pond by the creature itself lying in wait on the “black leaves” (11), hidden “in an amber cavern of weeds” (12), “watching upwards” (11), ready to jump, to kill or to be killed.

This interval figure in between being devoured and devouring is reminiscent of the shaman in the bardo, or “interval between two states.” To enter this interval, the shaman dances himself into a trance or “dream”—a recurrent word in Hughes’s poems (see “Pike” 42)—while uttering a mantra, that is a “poetic creation” (Eliade 510) which aims at conjuring up an animal demon to whom he surrenders in a magical death in order to be resurrected as a transformed being. The phonic sequence of the mantra, as it puts the demon into sound, or “in-vocates” it, can be said to materialize it into the mouth of the shaman⁵; a point of entry from which the animal is hosted by the dancer’s entire body. This sequence of mutual absorption no longer has to do with man parasitizing or cannibalizing nature, but with the human’s “long, patient observation of the animal other,” with being “possessed by the carnal intelligence of the creature,” with making the latter “feel safe to [return] in our midst.”⁶ The first three lines of “Pike,” rhymed by violent dentals, gutturals, plosives, consonances and alliterations in /p/, /k/, /t/, /g/, /d/, are such a mantra.

The ouroboric “Pike,” ever and always returning to the present tense of the first quatrains, does away with the linearity of what we usually call “time”: the poem thrives in the natural “curvature of time” (Abram 2017, 186) where life and death converge—and which our literate cultures have replaced by the destructive Chronos and its tragic time-line.⁷ The Pike’s death-“dance” shocks us into rediscovering “the ceaseless round dance of the cosmos” (ibid. 186)...

Jaguars

A round dance to which Hughes’s dying Jaguars also invite us. These two poems (composed ten years apart) convey the beasts in a dying phase, and yet as spinning, cosmic bursts of energy; as if the two Jaguars were manifestations of one and the same

figure returning cyclically—and even feline metamorphoses of the “tiger[ish]” pike (“Pike” 2). In this, Hughes could find his 21st century brother-in-art in Vincent Munier, the self-effacing wildlife photographer who can lie in wait for days, months, years between the rare “apparitions” (Tesson 8) of a snow-leopard, regarding these creatures as returning fragments of the primordial matter, “fractals of the same poem” (ibid. 67).⁸ The first “apparition” of Hughes’s Jaguar (in the 1957 poem) introduces the beast caged alongside other exotic and wild animals at a zoo, subjected to the scopophilia of a thousand-eyed human crowd. Unlike the other prisoners who are anthropomorphized as unsavoury individuals, and broken down by life in captivity, the sun-eyed Jaguar turns round the violence of the human eye a hundredfold upon itself in the poem’s central and longest line—line 11 out of 21, counting sixteen syllables versus the nine to thirteen syllables found elsewhere:

The apes yawn and adore their fleas in the sun.
The parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or strut
Like cheap tarts to attract the stroller with the nut.
Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion
Lie still as the sun. The boa-constrictor’s coil
Is a fossil. Cage after cage seems empty, or
Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.
It might be painted on a nursery wall.
But who runs like the rest past these arrives
At a cage where the crowd stands, stares, mesmerized,
As a child at a dream, at a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse [...].

The turning point of line 11 initiates the mantra with pounding, drum-like, accelerating alliterations as the death-dance gives birth to the figure and causes a shift of focalisation: from this moment on, things pass through the animal’s perceptions. With him we hear the blood pulsing in, and swishing through, the brain; with him we are “blind” to the cage, with him we run on the spot, spinning the planet:

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,
By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—
He spins from the bars, but there’s no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.
Over the cage floor the horizons come.

With him we hurtle around something akin to T.S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world [...], where past and future [death and life] are gathered" in "the dance"⁹; but with a difference: whereas Eliot senses "neither movement from nor towards" in "the dance," Hughes's Jaguar "spins from the bars" (17, emphasis mine) in a centrifugal dynamics which, interestingly enough, takes him in the opposite direction to the centripetal spiral of Rainer Maria Rilke's Panther in the following poem.

His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars; and behind the bars, no world.
As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.
Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly—. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tensed, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.¹⁰

The Panther spirals inward, towards death plain and simple—"a center / in which a mighty will stands paralyzed" (7-8)—whilst the Jaguar "hurri[es]" towards "the horizons." What the Panther sees "plunges into the heart and is gone" (12), absorbed by the pure, unalloyed death drive of his heart. No rebirth is involved in the agony of this beast: his is a "dance" (7) in "soft strides" (6) towards "arrested muscles" (11); by contrast, the Jaguar's "strides of wildernesses" are "thrusts" towards "freedom." In a lecture given at an American college, John Maxwell's Coetzee's eponymous heroine, Australian writer Elizabeth Costello, highlights the difference between the two poems thus: "Hughes is writing against Rilke [...]. He uses the same staging in the zoo, but [...] the jaguar's vision, unlike the panther's, is not blunted [...]." (Coetzee 95). Indeed, there is no reversed scopophilia in "The Panther": "a thousand bars" (4) are pressing against the beast who neither sees the "world" behind them, nor the humans who locked him in—unless the odd "image" that "enters in" (10) were of his staring torturers'. The Panther's vision is "weary" (2), his "pupils curtain[ed]" and "quiet" (9-10), whilst the Jaguar's are "drill[ing] eyes." Nor is there, in Rilke's text, any human-animal entanglement in the making: whereas "The Jaguar" enacts the vision-shift from human to animal focalization in its crucial, central lines, nothing of the sort happens in "The Panther" where the death-bound experience clearly passes through the animal's eyes from beginning ("His vision") to end ("An image [...] gone").

Sharing bodies, imagining dream-like or nightmarish hybridizations; sharing territories or fighting over them; building friendships, establishing contacts,

triggering conflicts; mutual fascination... Hybridity, metamorphosis, the ability to look for, to reach for, to negotiate, are successful ways of accessing alterity. Human language can meet alterity by conveying metamorphoses and mutations in the making, as unfinished processes between ebb and flow, to and fro. Texts about ambiguous beings, liminal creatures, shape-shifters in constant movement across thresholds, are more interesting than those conveying achieved transformations. We are traversed and traversing beings. Ovid was fascinated by metamorphoses in the making when he described growing ears or hairs, extending arms and legs (Anne Simon, my translation).¹¹

No such “liminal” creature in Rilke’s text: no metamorphosing in the interval, nor regenerating hybridization. “The Panther” is a still-life in the traditional sense, albeit presented from the unusual perspective of the animal—to which Coetzee’s Elizabeth Costello would object that Rilke’s animal but stands for the human condition: ‘In that kind of poetry,’ she is saying, ‘animals stand for human qualities; the lion for courage, the owl for wisdom, and so forth. Even in Rilke’s poem the panther is a stand-in for something else [...]. Hughes is feeling his way towards a different kind of being in the world [...]. With Hughes it is a matter [...] of inhabiting another body [...]. By bodying forth the jaguar, Hughes shows us that we too can embody animals —by the process called poetic invention that mingles breath and sense in a way that no one has explained and no one ever will [...]. When we read the jaguar poem [...], we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, he is us’” (Coetzee, 94-98).

With the “rippling” Jaguar, we see uncommonly plural “horizons” (20); these are recurrent in the habitats of Hughes’s creatures¹²: are they the “mingled” human and animal horizons, a more-than-human perception of the space-time curvature beyond which, according to the peoples who live in harmony with animals and the natural world, death and life merge?

For oral peoples [...] the vitality of one who dies is often thought to journey just beyond the visible horizon [...], from whence [the dead] may return among the living in the guise of animals and other natural elements. Indeed, for many hunting peoples, the realm beyond the mountains, or beyond the ocean, was where various animal species resided when they were not evident in the present landscape, a realm where [they] were thought to remove their animal guises and to live in quasi-human form (Abram 2017, 219).

The whirling Jaguar revisits us in the second poem (“Second Glance at a Jaguar”), arguably at a further stage of combustion, still “turn[ing]” (16), spiralling outwards in the “urgency of his hurry” (3): expanding “like a butterfly” (15), “shoving [his body] forward” (19) “from the inside” (28), “The head dragging forward” (30), “coil[ing],

flourish[ing]” (31).

Skinful of bowl, he bowls them,
The hip going in and out of joint, dropping the spine
With the urgency of his hurry
Like a cat going along under thrown stones, under cover,
Glancing sideways, running
Under his spine. A terrible, stump-legged waddle
Like a thick Aztec disemboweller,
Club-swinging, trying to grind some square
Socket between his hind legs round,
Carrying his head like a brazier of spilling embers,
And the black bit of his mouth, he takes it
Between his back teeth, he has to wear his skin out,
He swipes a lap at the water-trough as he turns,
Swivelling the ball of his heel on the polished spot,
Showing his belly like a butterfly
At every stride he has to turn a corner
In himself and correct it. His head
Is like the worn down stump of another whole jaguar,
His body is just the engine shoving it forward,
Lifting the air up and shoving on under,
The weight of his fangs hanging the mouth open,
Bottom jaw combing the ground. A gorged look,
Gangster, club-tail lumped along behind gracelessly,
He's wearing himself to heavy ovals,
Muttering some mantra, some drum-song of murder
To keep his rage brightening, making his skin
Intolerable, spurred by the rosettes, the Cain-brands,
Wearing the spots from the inside,
Rounding some revenge. Going like a prayer-wheel,
The head dragging forward, the body keeping up,
The hind legs lagging. He coils, he flourishes
The blackjack tail as if looking for a target,
Hurrying through the underworld, soundless.

As signalled by the title, the Jaguar has become impossible to look at more than at a “glance”; he is burning too bright—“brazier of spilling embers” (10), “his rage brightening” (26)—spinning too fast for the human eye, try as it may to project onto the beast glimpses of human vice, sin and violence: “skinful” (or drunk, 1), “like a thick Aztec disemboweller, / Club-swinging” (7-8), “Gangster”-like (23), its spots like “Cain-brands” (27), with a “blackjack tail” (32). Vain branding, vain stigmatization: these anthropomorphic fantasies are exploded, along with the “square” (8) and “corner[s]”

(16) of the cage, by the beast's spiralling dance: "he bowls them" (1), "his hind legs round" (9), "he turns, / Swivelling the ball of his heel" (13-14), "At every stride he has to turn a corner" (16), "heavy ovals" (24), "rosettes" (27), "Rounding some revenge. Going like a prayer wheel" (29), "he coils" (31). He is spinning into something greater than himself, "Showing his belly like a butterfly" (15), dislocating the chrysalis of his former body: "The hip [...] in and out of joint, dropping the spine" (2), "stump-legged" (6), "His head / Is like the worn down stump of another whole Jaguar" (16-17), "Bottom jaw combing the ground" (22). As he is "glancing sideways" (5), we come to understand that he is the other subject of the title's "Glance," that he is his own "target" (32), his own "murder[er]" (25) in self-immolation and transformation: "the black bit of his mouth, he takes it / Between his back teeth, he has to wear his skin out" (11-12), "making his [own] skin / intolerable" (26-27), "Wearing [his own] spots from the inside" (28). "Muttering some mantra" (25), he is the ecstatic shaman about to "see himself as a skeleton" (Eliade 62):

the [shaman's] ability to see [him]self as a skeleton [...] indicates a passing beyond the profane human condition [...], a deliverance from it [...]. Bone represents the very source of life, both human and animal. To reduce oneself to the skeleton condition is equivalent to re-entering the womb of this primordial life, that is, to a complete renewal, a mystical rebirth [...], to attain a transtemporal perspective [...] —a certain recovery of [...] at once "truth" and "life" (ibid. 62-64).

Still, life!

As the poem comes to a close, the formerly "muttering" creature disappears past the horizons, "soundless" (33)—a stunning, final silence which contradicts the gamut of sonorous effects running through the poem. Such is the paradox of the interval creature: dead and still alive, mute and still clamorous—a fragment of the Freudian death-life "alloy": "the death instincts are by their nature mute and [...] the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros" (Freud 1960, 46). Silently roaring, like Paul Valery's "great sea, gifted with feverish dreams, / Panther skin [...] / Who in a roar that is at one with silence / Over and over catch your glittering tail¹³."

Further, the creature's ultimate muteness makes us wonder, just like Munier's travelling companion in the wilderness of Tibet, about

being born, running, dying, rotting, rejoining the game in some other form. I could understand the Mongol desire to leave their dead to rot on the steppes. If my mother had so wished, I would have liked us to lay her body in a valley in the Kunlun Mountains. The carrion birds would have devoured her, only to be devoured in turn by other jaws and dispersed through other bodies—rats, lammergeyers, snakes—leaving an orphaned son to imagine his mother in the beat of a wing, the ripple of snakeskin, the quiver of a fleece (Tesson 34),

or the “flourish” of a tail... The Second Jaguar’s soundless cadence also leaves us reconsidering the “glances,” the visual impressions lingering after such a poem, and more particularly visions of a flower-like Jaguar covered in “rosettes” (27), “flourish[ing]” his tail (31), an interval creature which never ceases to amaze—a “flower-guar” to be found, interestingly enough, in the same collection (Wodwo) as a poem entitled “Still-Life” and featuring a deceptively small, fragile flower. Although this “Still-Life” does not feature any dying animal, it reverses—just like the main poems under study in this paper—a traditional motif of death into one of immortality: its final lines (16-22) reveal eternity in a wild flower¹⁴—a “trembling” harebell which shelters the god of the sea.

Outcrop stone is miserly
With the wind. Hoarding its nothings,
Letting wind run through its fingers,
It pretends to be dead of lack.
Even its grimace is empty,
Warted with quartz pebbles from the sea’s womb.
It thinks it pays no rent,
Expansive in the sun’s summerly reckoning.
Under rain, it gleams exultation blackly
As if receiving interest.
Similarly, it bears snow well
Wakeful and missing little and landmarking
The fly-like dance of the planets,
The landscape moving in sleep,
It expects to be in at the finish.
Being ignorant of this other, this harebell,
That trembles, as under threats of death,
In the summer turf’s heat-rise,
And in which—filling veins
Any known name of blue would bruise
Out of existence—sleeps, recovering,
The maker of the sea.

As for this “grimac[ing]” (5), “ignorant” (16), skull-like “stone” (1), are not its (significantly elided) empty sockets a Hughesian emblem for humanity’s eye-nucleation—or reversed scopophilia?

Whether the Second Jaguar’s silence be that of the interval during which he dreams off, and “recovers” from, his death prior to being reborn as a flower, or the roaring silence of a feline sea, or the deafening death-cry of nature in our grip, or our own muteness

while deeply rethinking our relationship to nature, or the birth-cry of the new life originating from this transformed relationship, or the sound of the ecological whirl bringing back the dead in some other form, depends on which “horizon(s)” we choose in the adventurous and ever renewed reading work Ted Hughes's poetry involves us in.



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Endnotes

1. "The ultimate drivers of the Anthropocene [...], if they continue unabated through this century, may well threaten the viability of contemporary civilization and perhaps even the future existence of Homo sapiens" (Steffen, Grinevald, Crutzen and McNeill, 862).
2. Incidentally, freshwater habitats are among the most damaged by acid rains (ibid. 858).
3. La Cassagnère 60 (my translation, with kind permission of the author).
4. My neologism, in reference to lycanthropy which, in myths and legends, is the magical ability of a human to morph into a wolf.

5. The sonorous effects of Hughes's poetry, Sagar explains, have "sinew" and "weight"; in other words, they have the power to generate something carnal: "in [English] verse the courtly [...] iamb drove the trochee underground after Langland's last stand. In Hughes the old [trochaic] rhythms surface again [...] and we see what we had lost in weight, sinew and urgency in all those centuries of artifice and gentility" (Sagar 34). A. S. Crehan adds that Hughes's verse, onomatopoeic, alliterative, trochaic, spondaic, is "lead-weighted," "earth bound." It "pounds," "pummels" and "bludgeons." It "beats out of us" the disincarnated language which has been the norm of the past centuries: "It is a return to an alliterative poetry [...], pounding, brutal and earth-bound [...]. The pummelling trochees and lead-weighted, bludgeoning spondees have a mesmeric effect, beating and rooting out of us those once apparently safe underlying rhythms of rhetorical and philosophical discourse, mental scene-painting and nostalgic or evocative reflection, with which the iamb meter is so closely associated. Quite literally, by asserting the naked, deeper rhythms of our Germanic (and also onomatopoeic) heritage, Ted Hughes is taking the English language back to its roots" ("Natural Rhythms and Poetic Metre," an unpublished essay by A. S. Crehan, quoted in the notes of Sagar's *Art of Ted Hughes*, p. 229).

6. D. Abram, who has observed the shamanic craft throughout the world, testifies: "In every case, a subtle change came upon the dancer as she gave herself over to the animal to let herself be possessed, raising goose bumps as I watched. The carefully articulated movements, and the stylized but eerily precise renderings of the other's behavior, were clearly the fruit of long patient observation of the animal other, steadily inviting its alien gestures into one's muscles [...]. A key element in such [...] invocations of another animal is the magician's ability to dream himself into the wild physicality of that Other, allowing his senses to heighten and intensify as he becomes possessed by the carnal intelligence of the creature [...]. One must unbind the human arrangement of one's senses, and those of any humans watching, if the animal is to feel safe enough to arrive in our midst" (Abram 2010, 239).

7. "To indigenous, oral cultures, the ceaseless flux that we call "time" is overwhelmingly cyclical in character [...]. Time, in such a world, is not separable from the circular life of the sun and the moon [...], from the death and rebirth of the animals [...]. According to anthropologist Åke Hulkrantz: 'Western time concepts include a beginning and an end [...]. Some Indian languages lack terms for the past and the future; everything is resting in the present.' [...] The curvature of time [...] is very difficult to articulate on the page, for it defies the linearity of the printed line" (Abram 2017, 185-186).

8. "[Munier] had spoken to me about the [...] the supreme virtue: patience. He had told me about his life as a wildlife photographer, and explained the technique of lying in wait. It was a delicate and rarefied art that involved hiding in the wild and waiting for an animal that could not be guaranteed to appear. There was a strong chance of coming away empty-handed. This acceptance of uncertainty seemed to me to be very noble—and by the same token anti-modern" (Tesson 10).

9. At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless; / Neither from nor towards; / at the still point, there the dance is, / But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,

/ Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards, / Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point, / There would be no dance, and there is only the dance. / I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say where. / And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time (“Burnt Norton,” T.S. Eliot 191).

10. Stephen Mitchell’s translation of “The Panther” in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, 79.

11. “Entretien sur la zoopoétique” (Fabula – Les Colloques).

12. For instance, the horses’ “hung heads patient as the horizons” (in “The Horses,” 1.32); the chilling experience of “Hearing the stones cry out under the horizons” (in “Wind,” 1.24), or “a wind howling all / Visible horizons” (in “Public Bar TV,” 1.5); the apparition of “A wet-footed god of the horizons” (in “Curlews II,” 1.19), a vertiginous “tangle of horizons” (in “Walt II,” 1.89)...

13. “The cemetery by the sea” (Paul Valéry 273).

14. In reference to the first quatrain of William Blake’s “Auguries of Innocence”: “To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower / Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand / And Eternity in an hour Blake 90). Ted Hughes mentioned his affinity with the art of William Blake in an interview given to Ekbert Faas, in which he confided: “Blake I connect inwardly to Beethoven, and if I could dig to the bottom of my strata maybe their names and works would be the deepest traces” (Faas 202).

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