

**Title:** DANNY O’CONNOR. Ted Hughes and Trauma: Burning the Foxes.

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DANNY O’CONNOR. **Ted Hughes and Trauma: Burning the Foxes.** Pp. viii + 204. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Cloth.

Any book which departs from the comforting idea of Ted Hughes the nature poet – less an upstart crow than a kind benign Heathcliff gone soft round the edges, a figure in whom we find confirmed our green credentials – will today stand out. Danny O’Connor’s book, with its theoretical twists and turns, its grappling with the poems not as missives from the earth but as knotty Lacanian problems, which in the process of being unravelled lead only to conceptual impossibilities and contradictions, is admirably perverse. Smart, sceptical, constantly changing tack: O’Connor’s approach – or rather lack of any consistent approach – enables him better to track, but never quite track down, the elusive fox of the book’s subtitle: the burnt fox of Hughes’s famous Cambridge dream, which enters his study to tell him to stop writing academic essays, before re-emerging in ‘The Thought-Fox’, and popping up in spirit again here, there, and, as O’Connor shows, pretty much everywhere. I’m still not sure, after reading this book, what this fox means – something to do with trauma, with Hughes’s mother, with the First World War, yes, but also with a pre- or post-symbolic Real, or should that be preposterous Real – but the chase, with a pack consisting of Lacan, Barthes, Derrida et al, was good fun, and the fox-symbol which continued to escape me at the end was nonetheless richer and more interesting for it.

In the Introduction the author signals his perverse intent: rehearsing Hughes’s well-known antipathy to lit. crit. and (supposedly) to continental theory, as symbolised by his Cambridge fox dream, O’Connor proposes a therefore ‘tyrannical reading’ along just such lines. The idea that Hughes and the French theorists are not such strange bedfellows after all is not new, but equipped with an impressive range of reference, and never sticking to any approach long enough to render his thinking schematic (there is in fact nothing tyrannical about this reading), O’Connor makes the case – or rather an array of multifaceted cases – with renewed gusto.

At the start of chapter 2, on Hughes’s Creaturely Creatures, it is made clear that for the purposes of this book, the usual line – ‘The answer is in one respect a simple one: the dead animals of his poems are an imaginatively sympathetic portrayal of the “reality” of nature’ (p. 23) – will not do. Instead, a poem such as ‘Pike’ ‘short-circuits the semiological order by presenting the imagined pike as real pike, imagined’. Try as we might to unpick that, ‘The knot is inextricable’ (p. 37). The poems then are like a ‘tossed coin’ (p. 25), liable to flip their meanings; or else (via Eric Santner) they are caesuras within meaning, their creaturely life effectively mute and ‘resistant to symbolisation’ (p. 28). Who was it said a poem should resist the intelligence almost successfully? Hughes’s once notorious animals, as O’Connor presents them to us, certainly do that.

So too with Hughes’s landscapes (chapter 3). The stones that cry out under Hughesian horizons are ‘not a Real that was lost’ – the notion again proving unsatisfactorily simplistic – but ‘an imaginary “lost Real”’ (p. 46). Or else landscape in Hughes is a ‘maternal Real’, which also, ‘incidentally, is an example of the presymbolic Real’ (p. 48). We’re being kept on our Lacanian toes here, nature as we thought we knew it falling further away from these poems at every conceptual turn. What is perhaps more of a problem though, given the title of this book, is the way in which the actual traumas of Hughes’s life recede into the background as Hughes now gets the Lacanian treatment, now is tested against Sartre and Camus and Beckett (chapter 4), now Francis Bacon and Deleuze (chapter 5). It is mentioned in passing that *Crow* is dedicated to a deceased child (p. 73); it might also have been worth mentioning at this point that the Crow poems, in Hughes’s own account, became a way of writing himself out of the block he experienced after Plath’s suicide, and that they were blocked in turn by his mother’s death. Instead O’Connor sees Hughes more in relation to ‘the social, anthropological Freud of *Totem and Taboo* rather than the Freud of private trauma’ (p. 38).

The private traumas of Hughes’s life, though, were profound, and there is a case for deconstructing the social, anthropological Hughes, with his determined poetic impersonality and preoccupation with the ‘traumatic’ split between nature and mankind, back into the Hughes of private trauma, ground the poet himself confessed he feared to tread. (Perhaps this, in the final analysis, is the real Hughesian Real.) But this is not that book. Chapter 6, on war in Hughes, is less concerned with Hughes’s traumatized father who survived Gallipoli, than with Hughes’s use of war as ‘a paradigm for all suffering’ (p. 100). After a further reprisal of Hughes’s vexed relationship with lit. crit. in chapter 7, and his equally vexed sense of Englishness in chapter 8, we come in chapter 9 to *Birthday Letters*, and Plath. This volume, the obvious go-to text for any inquiry into Hughes and trauma, O’Connor finds ‘plagued by Sartrean “Bad Faith”’ in its denial of free will (p. 172). But hold on a minute: isn’t trauma theory predicated on a certain denial of free will – on repetition, the impossibility of moving on, as Plath’s poem ‘Daddy’ ironically attests? No doubt I’ve got two quite different takes on free will confused here: suffice it to say that O’Connor, while giving Hughes the widower a brief look in (p. 179), keeps more to the Sartrean high ground.

If its conclusion – that Hughes the late classicist ‘manages to balance “intellect” with “our hunger for release”’ (p. 189) – seems oddly out of sync with the conceptual paradoxes and impossibilities opened up in the poems in previous chapters, this book nevertheless does Hughes a service in re-presenting the poems as creatures moving along the borders of our understanding, and to be intellectually wrestled with.

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