

Words as Game: The Writing and Reading of Poetry

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«L'artiste (...) sait que rien n'est simple et que l'autre existe.»
Albert Camus, "Témoin de la liberté" (November 1948)

1. The writer as hunter

Some time ago I had to make a selection of texts to include in a textbook for a literary propaedeutics with a view to illustrating one of the discussion items in the programme, namely, the peculiar relation writers in general and poets in particular, hold with language. My purpose was to make students aware of the contrast Jean-Paul Sartre established back in 1948 between the poet's attitude to language and that of the common speaker. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Sartre writes:

En fait, le poète s'est retiré d'un seul coup du langage-instrument; il a choisi une fois pour toutes l'attitude poétique qui considère les mots comme des choses et non comme des signes. Car l'ambiguïté du signe implique qu'on puisse à son gré le traverser comme une vitre et poursuivre à travers lui la chose signifiée ou tourner son regard vers sa *réalité* et le considérer comme objet. L'homme qui parle est au-delà des mots, près de l'objet; le poète est en deçà. Pour le premier, ils sont domestiques; pour le second ils restent à l'état sauvage. Pour celui-là, ce sont des conventions utiles, des outils qui s'usent peu à peu et qu'on jette quand ils ne peuvent plus servir; pour le second, ce sont des choses naturelles qui croissent naturellement sur la terre comme l'herbe et les arbres. (Sartre 18)

The instrumental attitude of the speaker in relation to language here, is contrasted with the poet's in metaphorical terms that, at a certain point, rely on the distinction between domestic and wild as applied to

words, implicitly likened to animals («Pour le premier [l'homme qui parle], ils sont *domestiques*; pour le second [le poète] ils restent *à l'état sauvage*» – my emphasis). In my search for texts (both in verse and prose, and written both by Portuguese and English writers and critics) to illustrate and discuss this issue, I was surprised to find the recurrent metaphor of words as wild game the writer had to chase and capture. So much so that in my textbook there came to be a section containing poems and parts of essays that you could aptly call “On Hunting.” I will give you some examples before focusing on the one I have selected for my talk today. Let me start with an essayistic text. The critic Manuel Poppe, for instance, commenting on artistic activity in general writes: “O artista é um caçador de palavras, de cores, de símbolos. E, muitas vezes, um esbanjador e um caçador frustrado. Nem todas as palavras, nem todos os símbolos servem.”¹

Twentieth-century poets as diverse as Ruy Belo, Eugénio de Andrade, Alexandre O'Neill and Carlos de Oliveira have written on this hunting activity in various tones and styles. Let's take Oliveira's short poem, entitled “Vento” (“Wind”). There we read:

As palavras
cintilam
na floresta do sono
e o seu rumor
de corças perseguidas
ágil e esquivo
como o vento
fala de amor
e solidão:
quem vos ferir
não fere em vão,
palavras. (Oliveira 192)²

¹ “The artist is a hunter of words, of colours, of symbols. And he is often a spendthrift and a frustrated hunter. Not every word, not every symbol suits him.” All translations are mine, unless otherwise signalled.

² “The words / twinkle / in sleep's forest / and their whisper / whirring by as does in the chase / agile and wild / like the wind / speaks of love / and loneliness: / whoever hurts you, / won't hurt in vain, / words.”

Eugénio de Andrade, for his part, complains that words obey him much less now than they used to in the past: “obedecem-me agora muito menos, / as palavras,” he says in “Agora as palavras” (“Now Words”), a poem where he implicitly likens them to animals that react against his previous short leash (“rédea curta”); fortunately or unfortunately enough he seems to prefer the most capricious of them all, those that resist him most. He concludes his poem with a question: “Ou será que / já só procuro as mais encabritadas?” (“Or is it that / I only look for the most capricious?”). (Andrade 527-28)

In the case of Ruy Belo, even though his intimacy with words would apparently allow him to cast himself in the role of a “word tamer” (“domador de palavras”), he knows better and recognises words’ ascendancy and their power over him. In his prose poem “Não sei nada” (“I know nothing”), referring to words, he writes: “Mas só eu – eu e os meus irmãos – sei em que medida sou eu que sou domado por elas. A iniciativa pertence-lhes. São elas que conduzem o meu trenó sem chicote, nem rédeas, nem caminho determinado antes da grande aventura.” (Belo 258-59)³ This ironic role reversal, however, should not blind us to the challenge posed by words to the poet and the way in which, most of the time, instead of reducing him to passivity they trigger in him the need to react and give them chase.

In another instance, words are seen as being sick, as in O’Neill’s poem entitled “Sick animals” (“Animais doentes”), and it is the poet’s role to heal them and bring them to life again. He sees them as all sorts of animals from insects, such as wasps, ants or grasshoppers to sheep or doves, lizards or even “stupid, commonplace chicken” (O’Neill 82)⁴ Here it is not so much the poet as hunter as the poet as healer that is at stake.

As can be deduced from the examples given (and I can assure you that I could multiply them if need be)⁵, one should ponder on this

³ “But only I – I and my brothers – know how far I am indeed tamed by them. The initiative is theirs. They drive my sleigh without whip or reins, or a predetermined route before the great adventure.”

⁴ “estúpidas galinhas corriqueiras.”

⁵ Another way of referring to words metaphorically is associating them with women

widespread insistence on words as animals and the poet as their hunter, as a metaphor for expressing the writer's obsession with language as his prime material – something to be both admired and tamed, chased and captured or possessed. Maybe it is no accident that all my examples come from male writers. As far as my research went I could not find similar poems written by women. No wonder, since hunting is traditionally a predominantly masculine activity. Another topic for further research and another paper, then, would be to look for the metaphors used by women writers when referring to their privileged relation with language...

But it is now time to turn your attention to the English poet I have included in this section of my textbook on poets as hunters. As many of you may have guessed by now the one I have in mind is Ted Hughes and the poem, "The Thought-Fox." It so happens that besides being an adequate illustration of the poet as a hunter, the poem also functions at other important levels and helps us understand other issues involved in the creation and the reading of poetry, thus outwitting the Portuguese poems so far alluded to and allowing me to make students aware of those other issues as well.

2. Creating the other: Ted Hughes's "The Thought-Fox"

A lot has been written on this most famous of Hughes's poems and I won't pretend to say anything particularly new, unless to the extent that I will use it for a reading that, in the environment of a literary propaedeutics class, aims at illustrating the concepts of literary production and reception together with the relevance of language for both.

One of the most striking features of this text is the fact that while it stages the poet in the act of writing the poem it also invites a perfor-

the poet has to pursue, another type of "hunt." This is the case with Portuguese poet Manuel Alegre in poems like the 9th in his book *Com que pena: Vinte poemas para Camões*, 25. The same had already occurred in his poem "As Palavras" in the earlier *O canto e as armas*, 122.

mative reading⁶ of it that highlights the essence of the reading process as essentially creative and shows how reading is the symmetrical counterpart of writing. In other words, it calls attention to reading as a sort of “mimetic practice,” as Geoffrey Galt Harpham has recently put it, whereby through an imaginative effort the reader tries “to grasp the process by which this particular text came to be.” (Harpham 9) If indeed Hughes’s poem can be experienced as, to use Derek Attridge’s words: “an act, an event, of reading, never entirely separable from the act-event (...) of writing that brought it into being,” (Attridge 59) then what confronts us in this text is a staging of the singularity of the literary work as it has been described by Prof. Attridge in his latest book, *The Singularity of Literature*. This is precisely what I will try to illustrate through my reading of “The Thought-Fox.”

The first line of the poem clearly states its starting point, by emphasizing the originating imaginative act that creates it. The opening words, “I imagine,” are the unequivocal statement of a deliberate creative act. The rest of the line: “this midnight moment’s forest” – being the object of the initial verbal clause, already curiously fuses the realistic setting of creation, “this midnight moment,” with the created setting where the imagined action will take place, the “forest.” Moreover, by insisting on a certain inescapable alliterative pattern: “**imagine...midnight moment’s**” interlocked with: “**midnight moment’s forest**”, the language reinforces the sense that we are both witnessing the author’s act of writing and co-creating its product, by immediately visualizing a forest, thus figuring ourselves as actively contributing to the emergence of the text as an imagined other. Therefore when we reach the second line: “Something else is alive,” we are willing to receive and host this unknown presence that, by its liveliness, seems to compensate for the environmental conditions of the creative act, aptly characterised by an overall sense of absence or loss: “the clock’s loneliness,” the “blank page,” “the window” with “no star.” Yet, at this stage, the poet’s presence is still there to be reckoned with by the reader: actively, in the movement of his fingers (“this blank page where *my* fingers move”

⁶ I here take the notion of performative reading in the sense developed by Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature*. See especially Attridge 95-106.

– my emphasis), a sign of liveliness that is significantly aligned with the aliveness of “something else,” but also, in a more passive way, in the expectant attitude of looking through the window (“through the window *I* see no star” – my emphasis),⁷ as though waiting for the arrival of some external entity. Noticeable also is how the blankness of the page is echoed in the starless window, thus mixing the space of the text with that of its context, in still another fusion of planes.

But when we reach the sixth line of the poem: “Something more near,” we lose sight of the author’s presence and confidently accept the verbal and imaginative game that invites us to mentally rehearse the gradual approach of a newcomer. The apparent paradox in “more near / though deeper within darkness” is still a reminder that we are invited to inhabit two planes simultaneously: that of the external darkness of the night which has been described as the immediate context of the poetic subject and that of “the deeper and more intimate darkness of the poet’s imagination in whose depths an idea is mysteriously stirring.” (Webster 2)

But by the third stanza it is not only the figment of the author’s and our imagination that “is entering the loneliness,” we as readers have been caught up in the verbal and imaginative game that the text has led us to endorse: we are also decidedly “entering the loneliness” as well, and fully prepared for an encounter. At first the reader is denied full visual contact with the other being. The adjective, followed by an adverb, plus simile (whose first term is still missing) – “Cold, delicately as the dark snow,” all tend to postpone the moment of recognition, and when the subject is finally revealed it is still elusive, only “a fox’s nose.” But its reality is nevertheless strongly suggested by the gentle, cautious movement of its cold nose as it twitches against “twig” and “leaf.” As Richard Webster has aptly noticed: “by inverting the natural order of the simile, and withholding the subject of the sentence, the poet succeeds in blurring its distinctness so that the fox emerges only slowly out of formlessness, leading the shadowy movement of its body as it comes closer.” (Webster 2) After the nose, come the eyes but again these are not presences in

⁷ According to Attridge, there is an element of passivity in the creation of the other. Cf. Attridge 23ss.

themselves, nor do they define the animal's form but rather, like the nose, they are subsidiary to underlining the body movement, still cautious and rhythmically slow though sure: "Two eyes serve a movement, that now / And again now, and now, and now // Sets neat prints into the snow / Between trees,...". The decisive alliteration of "t" combined with "n" (also reinforced by assonances), contributes towards defining and stressing the broken cadence that characterises the clear imprinting of the animal's paws on the snow, one after the other, a movement and a rhythm also supported by the punctuation and the line-endings.⁸

These lines are also intimately linked by the rhyme, but the rhyme-scheme suddenly collapses thus miming an abrupt change in the progression of the animal: "...and warily a lame / Shadow lags by stump and in hollow / Of a body..." It is as if the fox, hesitantly, has suddenly slowed down its course – and here the adverb "warily" together with the alliterated "l" in significant words as "lame" and "lags" decisively check the onward progressive rhythm of the previous lines. The suspicion inherent in this new retarded rhythm is also suggested by the clandestine connotation of the word "shadow". The fox, or what we sense of it, has stopped to check the terrain before boldly darting forward through a clearing: "... a body that is bold to come // Across clearings, ..." – the rhythm has suddenly accelerated again, the quick recurrence of alliterated sounds stamping the rapid cadence of a deliberate run. It is as though we've glimpsed the lightning appearance of the fox's body, suddenly shooting across a clearing in the forest, the gap between the stanzas being itself the prosodic equivalent of the clearing which the fox, after a wary hesitation, will then quickly cross.⁹

⁸ Curiously, in one of his two "Myth and Education" papers, Hughes compares his own method for writing poetry to that of musical composition: "The way I do this, as I believe, is by using something like the method of a musical composer. I might say that I turn every combatant into a bit of music, then resolve the whole uproar into as formal and balanced a figure of melody and rhythm as I can. When all the words are hearing each other clearly, and every stress is feeling every other stress, and all are contented – the poem is finished." (Ekbert 163)

⁹ I found this idea of the correspondence between the stanza-break and the clearing in the imagined forest in Webster's article already mentioned. Cf. Webster 3.

But already the length of a word like “clearings” anticipates a new step in the poem, marked by a sequence of words longer than before: “...an eye, / A widening, deepening greenness, / Brilliantly, concentratedly, / Coming about its own business”. Our eye is now zooming in and as the words become longer the targeted eye becomes larger, more vivid and seems to advance towards us, in a movement that is surer than ever.

This expansive highly visual, chromatic movement almost threatens to engulf us, but again the last stanza introduces a sequence of brief, incisive words marked by sharp alliterative effects and a staccato rhythm: “Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox / It enters the dark hole of the head.” There’s no escape, the fox’s unmistakable smell is upon us. It was too quick for us: we’re caught! As though mesmerized by the vivid, shining greenness of the fox’s eyes, we’ve inadvertently slackened alertness and were off our guard, at the mercy of this unexpected onslaught. The last two lines, however, break the spell, calling us back to reality, reintroducing the familiar images of the beginning: “The window is starless still; the clock ticks, / The page is printed.” We’re back at the poet’s room, where the clock is still ticking, and outside everything is also the same: the window remains “starless still.” “The page”, however, “is printed.” The prints in the snow have become the printed page, the fox is ensnared in the lair (or is it the trap?) of the poem. “The fox is the poem, and the poem is the fox.” (Webster 3)

3. The reader as prey and rescuer

In performing the text in this way, I hope to have shown how the reader here has been prey to a linguistic game that to a certain extent renders him powerless against the final onslaught of the fox/poem, but also how, without the specific act of imaginative cooperation triggered in him by the language of the text which he feels compelled to endorse and whose effects he undergoes, the poem/fox would never come into being. The act of reading is then defined simultaneously as the passive perception of the work and its creation. Again, Sartre calls our attention to this double edge of reading:

La lecture, en effet, semble la synthèse de la perception et de la création; elle pose à la fois l'essentialité du sujet et celle de l'objet; l'objet est essentiel parce qu'il est rigoureusement transcendant, qu'il impose ses structures propres et qu'on doit l'attendre et l'observer; mais le sujet est essentiel aussi parce qu'il est requis non seulement pour dévoiler (c'est-à-dire faire qu'il y ait un objet) mais encore pour ce que cet objet *soit* absolument (c'est-à-dire pour le produire). En un mot, le lecteur a conscience de dévoiler et de créer à la fois, de dévoiler en créant, de créer par dévoilement. (Sartre 55)

The interesting thing about this is how both movements are inextricably interrelated, how, by my act of endorsing the words of the text, by my act of disinterested generosity or genuine hospitality to this other's language, by my readiness to undergo its effects, I become the subject of its creation as I perform it. It is precisely this double movement of turning the reader into both passive spectator and active creator that Hughes's poem sets into motion, so much so that by the end of it, the pertinent question which comes to mind is: Who is it that was caught, then, the reader or the fox, or both?

"The Thought-Fox" stages the emergence of the other in a literary work, in this case, metaphorically represented by the fox, as the product of an act of creation performed at the same time by both writer and reader. Both have their allotted roles to play and they play them in close interdependence in Hughes's poem. The writer's skilful handling of words unavoidably engages the reader in a linguistic experience, a progressive experience that demands cognitive, emotional, and physical responses, thus implicating him fully in the creative process described by the poem from the start. The other that is gradually created along the lines of the poem is the product of the creative act the poet has launched. For his part, by vividly concentrating in or reliving his past experience with foxes, the author is both faithfully responding to memories and previous experienced sensations¹⁰ and, at the same time, by using newly found words,

¹⁰ Cf. Ted Hughes's essay "Capturing Animals" in his *Poetry in the Making*, 15-35. Keith Sagar, a specialist on Hughes's work who was also a friend of the poet, argued

images, rhythms, alliterative effects, etc, he is creating it anew, thus giving rise to an unprecedented image of the fox and, therefore, to an entirely new or inventive text.¹¹

In *Poetry in the Making*, a collection of essays published in 1967, Ted Hughes significantly alludes to his poetry writing in terms explicitly identified with hunting:

The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerized and quite involuntary concentration with which you make out the stirrings of a new poem in your mind, then the outline, the mass and colour and clear final form of it, the unique living reality of it in the midst of the general lifelessness, all that is too familiar to mistake. This is hunting and the poem is a new species of creature, a new specimen of the life outside your own. (Hughes, *Poetry Making* 17)

Himself a hunter in his youth, he further explains how he started writing poetry when his enthusiasm for capturing animals started to abate, and how he became convinced that the two activities were somehow similar:

that the origin of the poem was a real life episode that took place during the poet's childhood: "When Hughes was a schoolboy in Mexborough he would often set off at dawn and walk along a stretch of the river where the soft soil between the tree roots had been scooped out by the river in spate, leaving a series of humps and hollows. He found that if he crept up the side of one of the humps very quietly and peeped over, he might 'catch' some wildlife in the next hollow. One time, unknown to him, as he crept up one side of a hump, a fox was creeping up the other side. They arrived at the top simultaneously, and gazed into each other's eyes from a distance of about nine inches. After a split second, which could have been an eternity, the fox fled. But for that second it felt as though the intense being of the fox had entered his head, displacing, shouldering out, his own weaker, provisional, sense of selfhood." (Quoted from private correspondence between Keith Sagar and myself).

¹¹ Attridge's notion of verbal creation should be invoked here: "[I]t is a handling of language whereby something we might call 'otherness' or 'alterity', or 'the other', is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual's mental world." (Cf. Attridge 19).

You might not think that these two interests, capturing animals and writing poems, have much in common. But the more I think back the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest (...) In a way, I suppose, I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. (Hughes, *Poetry Making* 15)

This vulnerability of animals and poems is precisely what becomes apparent in our reading of the text, where the precarious though vivid emergence of the sketchy fox is one of the things the reader registers: reduced to the dimension of merely “something”, a “nose”, “two eyes”, a “lame shadow”, “a body”, “an eye” and finally “a sudden sharp hot stink”, the fox is from the start in serious danger of becoming no more than prints on a page, forever imprisoned in the mere sounds and shapes of printed words – no more than the sign of an absence.¹² It is here that the role of the reader becomes crucial. For, as Derek Attridge has recognised, the pertinent obligation the reader has towards the text is not to look for its immanent meaning but the challenge is rather: “how best to perform a text’s engagement with linguistic power.” (Attridge 98)

This performative or performing character of the reading process which involves awareness and an individual’s experience of the specific sequence of words found in the poem is what constitutes for Attridge the essence of literary reading as an inherently creative act that responds and corresponds to the act-event of literary writing. An act that occurs each

¹² Attridge calls attention to this formal side inherent in literature but at the same time to the way in which it should be viewed primarily not so much as a static entity (“empirical structure”) but rather as a dialogical one (“performed mobility”): “Clearly, the literary work involves a great deal more than form but it is as written form – which is to say as the encrypted image of an act-event of invention, waiting to be re-enacted in a reading – that it identifies itself as literature.” Cf. Attridge 111. Without readers and the reading process, the fox risks being simply “encrypted image” or prints on a page.

time a reader, any proficient reader, takes up a text and by performing its language creates it anew and is him/herself somehow affected by this experience. And here lies the ethical dimension of reading in general and of criticism in particular, since it presupposes an ability to attend and respond to the demands made upon the reader by the text as other. The reader then becomes responsible for it, in the sense of being obliged to fully respond, accommodate and nurture that which is not familiar and welcome it as such, without trying to translate it into totally known terms, but rather registering its resistance and irreducibility. The recalcitrant otherness of the fox is exactly what the reader of the poem is made to experience through his/her performing of the text's language. And this is the reason why, by the end of it, s/he no longer knows whether his/her is an active or a passive role, whether s/he is the hunter or the prey. For in reading both dimensions are simultaneously present: you have to succumb, to let-go, *and* to create, to let-go *in order to* create.¹³

The fox as other, created by Hughes's poem and by its readers' performance of it, is at once challenging and vulnerable – its power, like literature's power, lies in its frailty, since without readers the fox will for ever remain in captivity.¹⁴ This was exactly what Ted Hughes had in mind in this other passage taken from *Poetry in the Making*: "And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out of the darkness and come walking towards them." (Hughes, *Poetry Making* 20)

¹³ As Harpham has argued: "... every critical act includes an experience of creative freedom, the experience of 'moving forward in unanticipated ways'. It is the distinctive combination of its obligations – to accuracy, fidelity, and veritable truth on the one hand, and speculation, imagination, interpretive freedom, and creation on the other – that produces the character of criticism." Harpham 9.

¹⁴ Contrary to Webster's argument, I do not believe that Hughes's fox is characterised by "deadness", as opposed, for instance, to the alleged aliveness of D. H. Lawrence's creatures in his animal poetry (Cf. Webster 4). Rather it is Hughes's specific achievement (a step ahead of Lawrence) to realize in this extraordinary poem the peculiar nature of literary creation and literary reading, by giving us an unforgettable vivid portrait of a fox that comes alive every time we take up the poem and read it.

The reader here is seen implicitly as indispensable for responding to and accommodating the otherness of the fox and thereby granting it its wildness and preventing its domestication.¹⁵ By realizing and sustaining the fox's otherness, the reader is thus seen as the instance that enables the fox to be released from captivity and given back to freedom, to the teeming wilderness of the poet's and the reader's imagination because: "(...) it is in this apprehension of otherness and in the demands it makes that the peculiar pleasure of the literary response (...) is to be experienced"; "[l]iterature for all the force which it is capable of exercising can achieve nothing without readers – responsible readers (...)." (Attridge 131)

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¹⁵ Attridge defines "otherness" precisely as that which defies or "prohibit[s] appropriation and domestication". Cf. Attridge 125.

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