

Imaginary Forests with Real Foxes in Them

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Under a title unerringly reminiscent of Marianne Moore’s modernist manifesto in “Poetry” (1921) – good, real modern poets should give us “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” –, this paper follows the journey or quest of the fox (particularly *Vulpes vulpes*) from Aesop (tentatively) to the “fox poems” of Mark Jarman, Lucille Clifton, Philip Levine, John Clare, Kenneth Patchen, W.S. Merwin, Mary Oliver, Rita Dove, Adrienne Rich, Ted Hughes (whose “Thought-Fox” may have been the starting point – “I imagine this... forest...” – of our own quest) and Brendan Kennelly; a journey that takes us from the image of the real animal, its many lives and deaths (metempsychosis is evoked), to that of dreams, thoughts, and poems embodying it (or simply mentioning it). The succession of authors and poems is not chronological, but rather as required by the various stages of this fictional journey.

Keywords: fox; journey/quest; dream; thought; imagination.

Animal literature, by which we mean literature with or about animals, is too vast a subject to accept the confines of a limited paper. So what we had to do from the very beginning was to operate a number of “narrowings-down”: the first was that of choosing just one animal – a choice made easier by the multitude of occurrences the fox has had in world literature and world cultures; the second consisted in the decision of focusing on more or less recent literature (19th century to the present); and the third brought us down to poetry, though a few highly challenging works in other genres could have claimed one’s attention; suffice it to mention, for instance, D.H. Lawrence’s 1922 extremely interesting novella *The Fox* or Lillian Hellman’s 1939 play *The Little Foxes*, that has its thematic clue in a passage (about little foxes, naturally) from the Biblical “Song of Solomon” (2:15) – “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom”.

Even so, we found ourselves confronted with a host of fox or fox-related poems in English: an Internet search gave us no less than fifty results with the tag “FOX” (as poems), and “The Fox” as a title used by fifteen or so authors (from Walter Scott, Robert Burns, John Clare, J.G. Whittier, to Emily Dickinson, a couple of poems William Butler Yeats, Walter de la Mare, Siegfried Sassoon, a cat poem – “Old Deuteronomy” – by T.S. Eliot, Sexton’s “The Double Image”, Geoffrey Dutton, Kenneth Patchen, Roger Mitchell, Dean Young, Richard Jones, Gregory Corso, Amy Newman or Susan Stewart, and the list continues). Plus there are four La Fontaine “fox fables” (in case we ignore the temporal and linguistic self-imposed restrictions), “The Swamp Fox” by William Gilmore Simms, “The Crow and the Fox” by Robert Graves, “Fox Blood” by James Dickey, “Fox Farm” by Jim Harrison, “The Grey Fox” by Gregory Orr, “Fox Sleep” by W. S. Merwin...

Becoming a little more systematic, especially after having come upon the name of Jean de la Fontaine (1621-1695), translated into English, among others, by none other than Marianne Moore, we felt we needed to go as far back as Aesop (who may or may not have lived c. 620-564 B.C.), but whose name appears, nonetheless, in Herodotus, Plutarch, Sophocles, Aristophanes and Ar-

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istotle and is the hero of at least three 20th century novels by George S. Hellman, A. D. White and John Vornholt.

In Aesop's "tales" the fox appears again many more times than his other animals (frog, lion, snake, wolf, ass, bear, mouse, dog or crow) and is the protagonist of such famous fables as "The Fox and the Weasel", "The Ape and the Fox", "The Fox and the Sick Lion", "The Fox and the Stork", "The Fox and the Mask", "The Fox, the Cock, and the Dog", "The Fox and the Mosquitoes", "The Fox without a Tail", "The Fox and the Goat", "The Lion, the Fox, and the Beasts", and the best known of them all, "The Fox and the Crow" and "The Fox and the Grapes". One also remembers Chaucer's nun's and priest's tales, Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, Jean de la Fontaine again and his refashioned Aesop fables, Brer (sic) Fox in J. Chandler Harris' *Uncle Remus*, then Frank Baum (*The Road to Oz*, 1909), David Garnett (*Lady into Fox*, 1922), Elizabeth Hand, Phillip Donnelly, George Saunders... "The Fox and the Grapes" has come, for instance, to be seen as illustrating the concept of cognitive dissonance (one cannot help taking a bow here), two big words for a moral that simply says "It is easy to despise what you cannot get". (In 1983 Jon Ester published a whole scholarly volume on *Sour Grapes. Studies in the Subversion of Rationality*.)

As far as the concept of "fable" is concerned, one could arguably sustain that all poetry has a fable component in it, even when it does not feature animals (a must for real, classical fables); here we can conveniently remember that William Faulkner decided to spend more than a decade to write *A Fable* (1954), a novel about Jesus during World War II under the guise of Corporal Stephan. Other well-known "fabulists" would have to include, in the Anglo-American space, Ambrose Bierce, James Thurber, George Orwell, George Ade, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Richard Adams, Bill Willingham, William March, Ramsey Wood... ; or, elsewhere, Hans Christian Andersen, Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka, Sholem Aleichem, Jose Saramago, Italo Calvino... Very good company, indeed.

Our own "fables" for this paper are thus chosen as to present an imaginary journey or quest that the fox (the concept, the image, the archetype, the projection) takes in poems as different as those of Mark Jarman, Lucille Clifton, Philip Levine, John Clare, Kenneth Patchen, W. S. Merwin, Dean Young, Mary Oliver, Rita Dove, Adrienne Rich, Ted Hughes, and Brendan Kennelly (the order was dictated by the various aspects of the quest itself). Here, again, discriminations are in order. Not only do fox species differ in color (from pearly white to black-and-white, to grey, red and auburn; but never completely black, though), but they also change pelts according to the change in seasons (by molting) and to stages of its life; so the real fox goes through many forms, colors, ages and... lives.

If in real life (whatever that may be or mean) foxes are assimilated to dogs, or jackals, or wolves and some of their seven genera and twenty-five species may appear as endangered, in fiction their journey is a magical one, because such a character goes from being a wild or urban fox, it can enter the life of a man – or poet, for that matter –, survive hunts and other pursuits, live several lives itself and turn into a dream, a memory, a thought, or... a poem.

Appropriately enough, this fictional fox's journey begins in the morning – or so thinks Mark Jarman (b. 1952) in his 1990 "Fox Days":

The fox appears on brisk, uncluttered mornings
And hops over the neighbor's wall with a cat's grace
And looks back from the bottom of the drive
On four red legs and trots off down the street.

This is one of the red foxes (*Vulpes vulpes*) that have been inhabiting and breeding in human populated areas since the 20th century; i.e. what several authors decided to call "urban foxes" (see, for instance, a thirty-year old book titled *Urban Foxes*, 1986, by Stephen Harris).

Once the quest is on its way, it can go on until evening and night – African-American Lucille Clifton (1936-2010) in "Telling Our Stories":

The fox came every evening to my door
 asking for nothing, my fear
 trapped me inside, hoping to dismiss her
 but she sat till morning, waiting.

A vixen, therefore, in a woman's poem; appearing in many cultures, especially in folklore, foxes have been depicted as symbols of cunning and trickery (with magical powers very often), or as mystical and sacred creatures (Asian folklore); so, no wonder the speaker in the poem is scared:

Child, I tell you it was not
 the animal blood I was hiding from,
 it was the poet in her, the poet and
 the terrible stories she could tell.

And that poem could also have been Philip Levine's (1928-2015):

I think I must have lived
 once before, not as a man or woman
 but as a small, quick fox pursued
 through fields of grass and grain
 by ladies and gentlemen on horseback...
 ...Yes,

I must have been that unseen fox
 whose breath sears the thick bushes
 and whose eyes burn like opals
 in the darkness, who humps...
 softened by moonlight and goes on
 feeling the steady measured beat
 of his foxheart like a wordless
 delicate song, and the quick forepaws
 choosing the way unerringly
 and the thick furred body following
 while the tail flows upward.

Levine's fox already takes us into the mysterious world of metempsychosis or palingenesis ("being born again"), the religion and theosophy of reincarnation or Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy, into that of Orphism, post-life recall or Carl Gustav Jung's cryptomnesia. As a 19th century peasant poet had shown (John Clare, 1793-1864, in his "The Fox", 1820), the fox's life journey can take him/her into old age (even more cunning and more of a survivor then), but it does not die, except in disguise, only to be "born again":

The old fox started from his dead disguise:
 And while the dog lay panting in the sedge
 He up and snapt and bolted through the hedge...
 He scampered to the bushes far away.

Pursued by dog, ploughman, shepherd, and woodman, the eternal fox finds a badger hole, goes underground, only to get resurrected soon:

They tried to dig, but, safe from danger's way,
 He lived to chase the hounds another day.

Another form of rebirth is imagined by Kenneth Patchen (1911-1972) in, of course, his "The Fox":

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...[S]he limps a little bleeds
Where they shot her

Because hunters have guns
And dogs have hangman's legs

Because I'd like to take her in my arms
And tend her wound

Because she can't afford to die
Killing the young in her belly...

W. S. Merwin (b.1927), in his turn, finds no difficulty in seeing himself as a reincarnation of a fox in "Fox Sleep":

...I have been a fox for five hundred lives
and now I have come to ask you to say what will
free me from the body of a fox please tell me
when someone has wakened to what is really there
is that person free of the chain of consequences
and this time the answer was That person sees it as it is
then the old man said Thank you for waking me
you have set me free of the body of the fox
which you will find on the other side of the mountain...

In this lengthier poem (107 lines), the men find the dead fox (now reincarnated as the poet), whom "they buried as one of them", while the animal turns out to be a pretext for writing – for writing poetry, in fact, as the protagonist looks, in the end –

and there beyond the valley above the rim of the wall
the line of mountains I recognize like a line of writing
that has come back when I had thought it was forgotten.

However, the fox cannot be forgotten as, being eternal, it also becomes fully aware of its identity, as Mary Oliver (b.1935) makes her/him say in "Straight Talk from the Fox":

What I am, and I know it, is
responsible, joyful, thankful [and arrogant]. I would not
give my life for a thousand of yours.

And this already opens a dialogue with both Rita Dove (b. 1952) and Ted Hughes (*infra*); Dove's "Fox":

She knew what
she was and so
was capable
of anything
anyone
could imagine. [even Hughes]
She loved what
she was...

Unlike Hughes –

She imagined
 nothing,
 She loved
 nothing more
 than what she had,
 which was enough
 for her,
 which was more
 than any man
 could handle.

Or, as stories and tales (not only children's, like Beatrix Potter's "Mr. Tod" in her *24 Tales*, or David Garnett's *Lady into Fox*, N. M. Browne's *Hunted* or Elizabeth Hand's *Last Summer at Mars Hills*) about anthropomorphic animals imbued with such human characteristics as trickery, resourcefulness, cunning, intelligence, magic powers would inform us, one could be in want of a fox to recognize his/her identity, like our three final poets, in search for theirs by means of dream (Young), memory (Rich) or imagination (Hughes). So here is Dean Young's (b.1950) "The Fox" as a dream:

One day, the fox doesn't show.
 That's as close as you'll ever get
 but she's already figured out
 how to appear in your dreams, just
 not yet, not until you've stopped
 being nervous at twilight... –

or as memory (the Darwinian memory of the species?) in Adrienne Rich's (1929-2012) "Fox":

I needed fox Badly I needed
 a vixen for the long time none had come near me
 I needed recognition from a
 triangulated face burnt-yellow eyes
 fronting the long body the fierce and sacrificial tail
 I needed history of fox briars of legend it was said she had run through
 I was in want of fox

And the truth of briars she had to have run through
 I craved to feel on her pelt if my hands could even slide
 past or her body slide between them sharp truth distressing surfaces of
 fur
 lacerated skin calling legend to account
 a vixen's courage in vixen terms

For a human animal to call for help
 on another animal
 is the most riven the most revolted cry on earth
 come a long way down
 Go back far enough it means tearing and torn endless and sudden
 back far enough it blurts
 into the birth-yell of the yet-to-be human child
 pushed out of a female yet-to-be woman

or as a thought (where one becomes aware of "thought" as a noun, or as a past participle) in "The Thought Fox", which we have decided to also quote in full:

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I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And the blank page where my fingers move.

Through the window I see no star:
Something more near
Though deeper within darkness
Is entering the loneliness:

Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf;
Two eyes serve a movement, that now
And again now, and now, and now

Sets neat prints into the snow
Between tress, and warily a lame
Shadow lags by stump and in hollow
Of a body that is bold to come

Across clearings, an eye,
A widening deepening greenness,
Brilliantly, concentratedly,
Coming about its business

Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The window is starless still; the clock ticks,
The page is printed.

And so are these pages we are covering with words about imaginary and dream foxes that tend to become real; Ted Hughes (1930-1989): "...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" (*apud* Sagar, 1983: 271). Published in his first 1957 collection *The Hawk in the Rain* (whose manuscript was typed by Sylvia Plath, his wife), the poem and his "prophecy" are directly reminiscent of Marianne Moore's 1921 modernist manifesto "Poetry"; what she says, in a text full of quotations (Tolstoy, Yeats, Blake...) and paradoxes, is that the real poets (as opposed to "half poets") should be able to "present/for inspection, 'imaginary gardens with real toads in them'"¹.

It is this very statement – a quotation in the poem, but most likely a false one or one from Marianne Moore herself – that Ted Hughes seems to have had in mind as a way of answering her hope to see a new generation of "modernist poets" who can produce such imaginary gardens/forests with real toads/foxes in them. Moore's "Poetry" (an *ars poetica*, i.e. a poem about poetry, is paralleled by Hughes' poem about the writing of that very poem) defines poets as "literalists of the imagination", (another quote, from a Yeats essay on Blake), with imagination placed in opposition to intellection and with "the genuine" as the most essential attribute of good art, whose goal, as with Stevens', is reality, i.e. human existence and experience, that can also rely on the dullness of "business documents [businessman Wallace Stevens?] and school books" (Tolstoy quote); the only dull *and* useless thing is bad poetry, poetry of the "trivial" and the "insolent"; by "real toads" (or foxes in Hughes) Moore meant the poet's attempt to render the abstract into the concrete – an unattainable goal, after all, so Hughes' fox can be seen as the reality of his thought. Moreover, Moore's fifteen or so revisions of the poem (between 1919 and 1967, i.e. over a period

¹ See also our "Modernist Poetic Manifestoes" in *Revenge of the Intellect* (2016: 16-26).

of half a century and varying in length from thirty, to thirteen and fifteen, to three/four lines) turn it into an Protean process poem, rather than a simple text (see also Hugh Kenner), and so we can more easily read “The Thought-Fox” as a process (of writing poetry), or an open system (see M. L. Rosenthal), or an open text.

But there is more in Hughes’ real “thought fox”; though in (Marianne Moore’s) reality there is no fox at all, we can still see it emerging slowly from the formlessness of the snow only to be caught forever in the words of the poem, on the real white page; Keith Sagar inappropriately (we think) describes this as “a simple trick”: “Suddenly, out of the unknown, there it is, with all the characteristics of a living thing [*sic*]...” (1979: 19); what we have here is a poem about the composition of the poem itself (see also Mishra, 2015), and see the poet as what a poet etymologically is, i.e. a maker – of his imaginative universe, of his own *realities*, of his poem, with the poem and the fox proclaiming only the reality of its/their omnipotent creator (see Richard Webster, 1984); and so, as in Adrienne Rich again, the fox is part of the poet’s identity; an identity that consists in his capacity of capturing the imagination, while exploring his imaginary forest in search of his real-poetic fox.

The “magic journey” of our “real poetic fox” begins in the morning, with the picture of an almost real urban fox jumping over a fence and trotting down the street and ends at midnight in a poet’s mind; in the meantime, it dies and comes back to life and thus lives several lives, fools its hunters and pursuers, moves from summer to autumn and winter in its mythopoeic quest and ends on pages “printed” between the seventh century B. C. and the present, i.e. 2017.

Otherwise, the *real foxes* are small, carnivorous/omnivorous mammals of the “dog” family, with “red foxes” as the largest among them (2.5–6.5 kg). They are common in farming and [imaginary] wooded areas almost everywhere. They eat [real] rodents, insects, frogs, seeds, fruit, eggs and some poultry. They breed usually four to five cubs in January – February and become independent at about six months. Once more, they prefer wooded or broken country, live in hollow logs or overhangs, often climb trees, enjoy sunning themselves and are not strictly nocturnal, as some poets would have them (see *The Canadian Encyclopedia*). On the other hand, the *imaginary forests* – or towns and villages, fields and plains, valleys and hills, gardens, farms and orchards – can readily come into being, as soon as a white page presents itself in front of the poet, whether he be Aesop or Hughes or any other one; so, what we have been dealing with, after all, are imaginary poetic forests and real poetic foxes, both of which are no more than words in literary and scholarly texts.

And the explanation comes as an afterthought: “In the beginning was the Word. In the end will be the Word...; language is a human miracle always in danger of drowning in a sea of familiarity” (see Kennelly, *Penny’s poetry pages*); this is how prolific Irish poet Brendan Kennelly (b. 1936) can help us in the end – a perfect ending, in fact: “Dream of a Black Fox”, the title poem of his 1968 collection:

Dream of a Black Fox

The black fox loped out of the hills
 And circled for several hours,
 Eyes bright with menace, teeth
 White in the light, tail dragging the ground.
 The woman in my arms cringed with fear,
 Collapsed crying, her head hurting my neck.
 She became dumb fear.

The black fox, big as a pony,
 Circled and circled,
 Whimsical executioner,
 Tormented dripping like saliva from its jaws

Too afraid to show my fear,
 I watched it as it circled;
 Then it leaped across me
 It great black body breaking the air,
 Landing on a wall above my head.

Turning then, it looked at me.

And I saw it was magnificent,
 Ruling the darkness, lord of its element,
 Scorning all who are afraid,
 Seeming even to smile
 At human pettiness and fear.

The woman in my arms looked up
 At this lord of darkness
 And as quickly hid her head again.
 Then the fox turned and was gone
 Leaving us with fear
 And safety –
 Every usual illusion.

Quiet now, no longer trembling,
 She lay in my arms,
 Still as a sleeping child.

I knew I had seen fear,
 Fear dispelled by what makes fear
 A part of pure creation.
 It might have taught me
 Mastery of myself,
 Dominion over death,
 But was content to leap
 With ease and majesty
 Across the valleys and the hills of sleep.

A perfect ending with his dream of a salaciously imaginary “lord of darkness” and “whimsical executioner” – a magnificent monster of a fox in man’s forest of fear and illusion, in his “valleys and hills of sleep”; a frightful contemporary and postmodern fable of man’s confrontation with language and thought (a terrible thought-fox this time), by the author of some of the best poetry of our time (when most of the people in this world – like it or not – do not seem to be much interested in the writing and reading of poetry).

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