

Within the Hearing, and Seeing, of Children: Ted Hughes's & Leonard Baskin's Illustrated Books for Young Readers

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Ted Hughes sought collaborators throughout his creative life: from Jim Downer¹ in the fifties, to Sylvia Plath,² Peter Brook,³ Fay Godwin,⁴ Peter Keen,⁵ Seamus Heaney⁶ and Leonard Baskin. But the overwhelming majority of the critical attention that his work receives deals with Hughes in isolation. Indeed, he is popularly perceived as the epitome of the solitary, brooding Romantic artist; and some of the work that Hughes specifically intended to be seen as part of a creative fusion of word and visual image is now re-published without most, or in some cases any, of the original drawings, paintings or photographs.⁷ In fact, if we wish to comprehend the full richness and scope of Hughes's achievement, we need to appreciate the ingenuity and visionary subtleties of his many collaborations with visual artists.

Of these collaborations, there is little doubt that the long collaboration with the American sculptor and graphic artist Leonard Baskin was the most fruitful and the most influential in shaping Hughes' creative trajectory.

In a recorded interview with accompanying images which Hughes's and Baskin's Devon neighbour Noel Chanan published as a DVD in 2010,⁸ both the visual artist and the poet speak of an 'affinity' between them. Hughes goes further, affirming that the examples of Baskin's work that he saw in the early sixties had remained with him throughout his creative life, and were more deeply internalised than 'any other art'. In this interview and in his written appreciations of Baskin's work⁹ it is clear that Hughes never regarded Baskin's as the subsidiary role of a mere illustrator of a written text; he was an integral, equal partner in the creative process. On dust jackets and title pages, it is never 'Illustrated by Leonard Baskin'; it is always 'Poems by Ted Hughes, drawings by Leonard Baskin', or '- pictures by Leonard Baskin'.

So what is it in Baskin's work that moved the young Hughes so profoundly, so permanently? If one considers the work which other artists created to go alongside texts for children and adults, from William Blake, through Havelot Knight Browne ('Phiz'), Randolph Caldecott, Walter Crane, John Tenniel and Gustave Dore in the 19th century, through to Arthur Rackham, David Jones, and Quentin Blake in the 20th and 21st, the most striking common factor in all this variety of work is that the artists are all endeavouring to, in Maurice Sendak's memorable phrase, 'quicken'¹⁰ the text with an accumulation of visual detail: images which interrogate, comment on and extrapolate the humour or pathos of the text with visual clues, visual jokes, visual delights. These are images for the viewer to pore over at leisure, containing a wealth of detail to be cherished. But to turn from this tradition of rich, intricate detail, and look at almost any piece of graphic work by Leonard Baskin, the contrast could not be more stark. From the earliest years of his career, for example *The Hanged Man*¹¹ from the 1950s, or *Dead Crow*¹² from 1961, we can see an approach to visual art in sharp contrast to the work of illustrators of the so-called 'Golden Age'. In Baskin's work there is no intricately created illusions of pictorial depth, no pre-Raphaeliteish meticulous record of minute details of setting. Baskin's concentration is customarily focused on a single subject suspended – literally so in the case of *The Hanged Man* – in

white space. Baskin as an artist appears uninterested in accumulating and cherishing the details of the empirical world; like the sculptor he originally was, in his graphic and illustrative work he pares away the background, environment, context, all the outer layers of his subject, in the quest for a vision of its essence, its core. As with his wood carvings, Baskin is chipping away the outer layers of his material to reveal the essential form.

It is this quality in Baskin's work which arguably appealed so immediately and powerfully to the young Hughes; it matches the qualities which Hughes declared he aspired to in his own poetry and prose, and which he responded to most profoundly in the wide range of poets whose work he most admired. In his introduction to the *Selected Poems* of Keith Douglas, published in 1964, Hughes writes of 'the burning away of all human pretensions in the ray cast by death [...] The truth of a man is the doomed man in him or his dead body'.¹³ The poem and painting 'Leaves', from *Season Songs* exemplify this pared-down quality, and the profound, intricate relationship between poet and artist, as well as any. The poem's narrative depicts the leaves' vitality. There are echoes here of traditional songs which, like 'John Barleycorn', represent the annual cycle of birth-growth-death-rebirth, but the grinding tractor's engine (l.34) keeps one firmly in the here and now. Every element of the poem contributes to the leaves' demise. The relationship between the poem and accompanying is not an obvious one; there is only a sickly yellow wash for background, or context, which might remind one of the colour of dead autumn leaves. But the focal point of the painting is the long, straggly strands of natural growth, which are neither trees nor grasses, but suggestive of both. Crucially, there are negative spaces in between these strands which trace the shapes of leaves; but there is no actual, living leaf in sight. Herein lies the point of poem and painting: the leaf-shaped spaces are negative spaces, absences of leaves.

Baskin's origins as a sculptor, and the importance of the sculptural qualities of his drawings and paintings to the creative relationship with Hughes, have already been noted. An essential quality of sculpture is that thoughts and emotions have to be rendered physically if they are to be expressed at all. And in this, the art Hughes and of Baskin are again at one. In 'Moose', for example, from *Under the North Star*, Hughes evokes a moose 'lost in the forest':

With massy bony thoughts sticking out near his ears-
Reaching out palm upwards, to catch whatever might be
 falling from heaven-
He tries to think,
Leaning their huge weight
On the lectern of his front legs¹⁴

Baskin's painting of the moose offers a stunning counterpart to Hughes's poem. Baskin's animal is too big to fit on the page, and the cranial cavity is so small that the antlers do indeed look like thoughts forced to develop outwards in order to develop at all. It is impossible to tell which came first, poem or painting, such is the depth of correspondence between them.

The mooses are lost creatures who 'can't find the world'. In 'Moon-Shadow Beggars', from *Moon-Whales*, Hughes evokes the vampire-like 'shadows' on 'the

frontier from dark to light', who feed on the blood and bodies of passers-by, and turn them into 'nothing but a skinful of shadows', who like the mooses are lost,

... groping for
 The well-known handle of your own front door
 With fingers that cannot feel it.

Baskin's drawing enhances the horror of this evocation with the stark outline of a crippled, hobbling semi-naked human figure, with a head and cranial cavity far too small to hold thought, just like the moose's. But this time the thoughts and emotions are represented not by anything naturalistic like the moose's antlers, but by a huge, solid, black slab which hangs an inch above the head. No matter what their ostensible subject, Hughes and Baskin are never far from Hughes' perceptions about Keith Douglas: 'The truth of a man is the doomed man in him'.

It is perhaps *Under the North Star* that is Hughes's and Baskin's most successful collaboration for children, embodying the profound fusion of word and image that characterises the creative relationship between poet and artist. *Under The North Star* is situated in a narrative environment midway between adults' and children's hearing and seeing, placing its animal subjects within 'secondary worlds': parallel, layered realities or narrative environments which animals who have been created or re-created in words or visual images may inhabit. In *Poetry in The Making*.¹⁵ Hughes commented on this process when contrasting the fox in 'The Thought Fox' with foxes in the physical world: 'It is both a fox and a spirit. It is a real fox; as I read the poem I see it move, I see it setting its prints, I see its shadow going over the irregular surface of the now. The words show me all this, bringing it nearer and nearer. It is very real to me. The words have made a body for it and given it somewhere to walk.... And all through imagining it clearly enough and finding the living words.'¹⁶

In Noel Chanan's filmed interview, Hughes & Baskin describe *Under The North Star* as their closest collaboration. The initial poems and drawings were composed while they were sharing the same physical and narrative environment of the forests and lakes of New England. The book was also initially a particularly intimate and familial collaboration created as a birthday present for Baskin's daughter Lucretia, and it stands in stark and poignant contrast to that other book of Hughes's poems with a Baskin bird drawing on the cover, *Crow*, which was dedicated to Assia and Shura, Hughes's lost second family.

Of all the Hughes/Baskin collaborations, *Under The North Star* most closely conforms to the 'classic' design of a children's picture book: a series of double page spreads consisting of a large colour image on one side, and large print text on the other. But despite its formatting, *Under The North Star* is far from being a children's picture book. It presents a secondary world or a narrative environment formed or sculpted from 'living words' that needs to be 'sung' into being as the aboriginal Ancestors sang Australia into being. So the first spread in *Under The North Star* can have no image, only the poem 'Amulet',¹⁷ because it is this poem that sings the world of the book into being, and as the author of St John's Gospel so well understood, before the physical making there must be the word alone.

The poem sings the lines and links between the worlds of the different animals whose stories form the narrative environment of the book they can share. Links are

passed from animal to animal, and the end of each poem is a stop only in the sense of a stop or station in a physical or spiritual journey.¹⁸ As Flynn, the defrocked aboriginal priest explained to Bruce Chatwin in *The Songlines*: 'A stop...was the handover point where the song passed out of your ownership; where it was no longer yours to look after and no longer yours to lend.'¹⁹ And like the animals in *Under The North Star*, 'You'd sing to the end of your verses and there lay the boundary....[But] there are no frontiers, only roads and stops.'²⁰

Under The North Star sings into being a world created from words and images rather than atoms and elements, but as Hughes argued in the chapter 'Words & Experience' in *Poetry In The Making*: 'A word is its own little solar system of meaning.' So the narrative environment of *Under The North Star* can literally be 'read' by adults and children – unlike our physical environment which can only be read after mastering a complex algebraic language. In contrast to the empirical world, *Under The North Star* portrays a world or universe in which customary physical notions of space and time are flexible and negotiable, or even, as 'Amulet' suggests, cyclical. This poem recalls the environment of Vasco Popa's *Small Box* the prefatory poem in *Poetry In The Making*:

The small box gets its first teeth
 And its small length
 Its small width and small emptiness...

The small box is growing bigger
 And now the cupboard is in it
 That it was in before....

And now in the small box
 Is the whole world quite tiny
 You can easily put it in your pocket.²¹

'The Wolverine'²² sings his own song, singing himself into being, and demarcating his territorial boundaries, which for him is the entire world. But the Wolverine's voice is entirely without the familiar whimsical anthropomorphism so often a distinguishing feature of the conventional children's picture book; this Wolverine is sociopathic, an ancestral totem, perhaps.

In contrast 'The Snow-Shoe Hare' is mute. He is observed apparently in the moment of being created, as his name suggests, from snow:

In his own sudden blizzard...
 a big lost left behind snowflake...
 looking for a great whiteness to hide in

Or maybe a better way of describing the creation of the hare is symbiogenesis, for:

In his popping eyes
 The whole crowded heaven struggles softly.

Glassy mountains, breathless, brittle forests
 Are frosty aerals

Balanced in his ears.²³

Baskin's images of the Wolverine and the Snow-Shoe Hare depict small, static creatures, reminiscent of the illustrations of animals in medieval bestiaries. It is a comparison which takes on greater significance when we turn to 'The Grizzly Bear'.²⁴

This poem is the only one in the collection written in the first person²⁵. The protagonist has a vision of the bear sculpting itself:

Growing out of a bulb in wet soil licks its black tip
 With a pink tongue its little eyes
 Open....

This act of licking itself into shape is, however, a direct and deliberate link with the most potent literary ancestor behind *Under The North Star*: the medieval bestiary. The Aberdeen Bestiary speaks of the bear thus: 'the bear forms its offspring with its mouth. The female gives birth to a small eyeless piece of flesh which is gradually shaped into a cub by licking'.²⁶ Here, also, the text is accompanied by an illuminated illustration of the female bear doing this.

This connection surely indicates some of the intellectual subtlety and richness of this and other collaborations between Hughes and Baskin. Some readers might see the bestiaries as evidence of the medieval mind being unsophisticated, even childlike, in its credulity. It is equally possible that this text and illustration provide evidence of the opposite: a dialectical ability to know and understand natural processes and the ways of animals in much greater detail than those of us who do not farm livestock can probably now appreciate, while at the same time 'reading' the natural world as a book of divine instruction in which the animal exempla behave in ways often contradictory to their observable (indeed familiar) behaviour in the everyday physical world. As Richard Barber observes in his introduction to the facsimile of the Bodleian Bestiary:

the object of the bestiary is not to document the natural world and to analyse it in order to understand its workings. The writers of bestiaries knew the laws of nature before they began their work.²⁷

But equally they had a faith that told them

that everything in Creation had a purpose, and that the creator had made nothing without an ulterior aim in mind. And they knew, too, what that purpose was: the edification and instruction of sinful man.²⁸

The poems in *Under The North Star* should be appreciated in a similar spirit to the animals described in the medieval bestiaries to which 'The Bear' so clearly refers. Animals such as the Wolverine, the Snow-Shoe Hare, the Moose and the Bear in *Under The North Star* should individually be appreciated as T H White summarised in his afterword to *The Book of Beasts* as: 'a true symbol...not only a badge: it is a brief sermon, a shorthand way of saying something...a metaphor, a parable, a parallelism, a part of a pattern...a hidden message for the eye of faith.'²⁹

If we add to the books discussed in this paper *What is the Truth?*, *The Iron Man* and *The Iron Woman*, the two collections of creation myths: *The Dream Fighter* and *Tales of the Early World*, as well as the early farcical fantasies of *Meet my Folks*, and his groundbreaking *Poetry in the Making*, it's clear that even if he had never written a word for adults, Ted Hughes would be considered to be one of the greatest children's writers of the twentieth century.

His commitment to writing for children, and his Blakean sense of the value of childhood, go to the very core of his work, whether it be for children or adults. Also at the heart of Hughes's achievement are his collaborative books – especially those with Baskin. As Ekbert Faas has observed:

Baskin's suggestion that Hughes should write some poems to illustrate his crow engravings was enough to unleash a flood of totally unprecedented poems much like the spontaneous outpourings of song in which the shaman, when about to be cured, articulates his visions.³⁰

And it is surely significant that it is only through the uncorrupted spirit of a child that the malevolent trickster Crow can finally be defeated – as Hughes himself makes clear in 'Defeat of Crow',³¹ one of the poems which has still to find its rightful place in the *Crow* canon. In this key poem, the Innocence of childhood triumphs over Crow's Experience:

In the little girl's angel gaze
 Crow lost every feather
 In the little boy's wondering eyes
 Crow's bones splintered

In the little's girl's passion
 Crow's bowels fell in the dust
 In the little boy's rosy cheeks
 Crow became a recognizable rag.

Crow got under the brambles, capitulated
 To nothingness eyes closed
 Let these infant feet pound through the universe.³²

Peter Cook has published work on the English romantic poets, written a thesis on the potter Michael Cardew and his Abuja Pottery, and has an abiding fascination with children's literature and its illustration. Peter was instrumental in founding the 'Centre for Children's Book Studies' at Anglia Ruskin University.

Mick Gowar is an academic and children's author. Since 1980, he has written or edited more than 120 books for children and young people, including five collections of poetry, novels, short stories and educational books, many of them for educational series such as OUP's 'Treetops', and Franklin Watts's "Leapfrogs" and "Tadpoles". He has visited schools, libraries, colleges and festivals throughout the UK and abroad to give readings, performances and lead workshops. He has also undertaken educational projects for, among others, the Philharmonia Orchestra, Scottish Chamber Orchestra, Sinfonia 21, and the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettles Yard Gallery in Cambridge. He has taught courses in creative writing and children's literature at the Arvon Foundation, Anglia Ruskin University and the

universities of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Northumbria. He is at present lecturer in Contextual Studies at the Cambridge School of Art and a teaching fellow at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, where he is director of the newly-founded European Storytelling Archive. He was a judge of the W H Smith Young Writers' Competition under the chairmanship of Ted Hughes.

Notes

- ¹ Ted Hughes *Timmy The Tug* (illustrations by Jim Downer), Thames & Hudson, 2009.
- ² see Heather Clark *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, Oxford University Press, 2010.
- ³ See http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/ted_hughes_archive/2009/06/ted-hughes-dramatic-collaborations-in-iran.html for some recent information on Hughes's and Brook's collaboration based on *The Conference of The Birds*
- ⁴ *The Remains of Elmet*, Faber & Faber, 1979; *Elmet*, (2nd revised edition), Faber & Faber, 1994.
- ⁵ *River*, Faber & Faber, 1983.
- ⁶ *The Rattle Bag*, Faber & Faber, 1982; *The School Bag*, Faber & Faber, 1997.
- ⁷ for example Ted Hughes, *Three Books*, Faber & Faber, 1993 – reprints of the texts of *Remains of Elmet*, *Cave Birds* and *River* without illustrations or photographs.
- ⁸ *The Artist & The Poet: Leonard Baskin & Ted Hughes in conversation*, 1983, Noel Chanan, 2009.
- ⁹ In particular, *The Hanged Man & The Dragonfly*, from *The Complete Prints of Leonard Baskin: A Catalogue Raisonne*, New York Graphic Society, 1984.
- ¹⁰ Maurice Sendak, *Caldecott and Co.*, Bodley Head, 1987.
- ¹¹ See <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artwork/?id=38445>
- ¹² http://www.artnet.com/galleries/Artwork_Detail.asp?G=&gid=118842&which=&aid=2067&wid=424626706&source=inventory&rta=http://www.artnet.com
- ¹³ Keith Douglas *Selected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Ted Hughes, Faber & Faber, 1964. p.13.
- ¹⁰ op.cit. pp.42-4.
- ¹⁴ op.cit. p.36.
- ¹⁵ Ted Hughes, *Poetry In The Making* (2nd edition), Faber & Faber, 1969.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid* p.20.
- ¹⁷ op.cit. p.9.
- ¹⁸ Bruce Chatwin *The Songlines*, Vintage, 1998.
- ¹⁹ *ibid.* p.59.
- ²⁰ *ibid.* p.59.
- ²¹ op.cit. p.14.
- ²² op.cit. pp 14-15.
- ²³ op.cit. pp.24-5.
- ²⁴ op.cit. p. 30-31.
- ²⁵ Ted Hughes, *Moon Bells and other poems*, (illus. Felicity Roma Bowers), Bodley Head, 1986. p.11. 'I see a bear' was the original title of the poem when it first appeared in *Moon-Bells and Other Poems*
- ²⁶ <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/translat/15r.hti>
- ²⁷ Richard Barber *Bestiary: MS Bodley 764*, Boydell, 1999. p.7.
- ²⁸ *ibid.* p. 7.
- ²⁹ T H White *The Book of Beasts*, Dover, 1989. p.244.
- ³⁰ Ekbert Faas, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*, Black Sparrow Press, 1980. P 97.
- ³¹ Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, Edited by Paul Keegan, Faber and Faber. p. 267.
- ³² *ibid.*