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# Poetic dynamism, the fox and the urban fox

15 July 2021.

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PREO

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## 1. Critical Perspectives

### 1.1. Zoopoetics and enchantment

- 1 In its own way, poetry—poetry being read and also being written—takes part in the struggle against global threats to life forms, human and non-human; this is why this paper focuses on poetry. This paper’s perspective is broadly speaking ecocritical, more precisely zoopoetic. While ecocriticism examines the general links between the arts and the environment, eco-poetics narrows down to how nat-

ural elements may express themselves and to the links between this expression and human language<sup>1</sup>. Both are biocentric in their outlook, finding all life forms, human and other, to be interrelated and to share a common value and legitimacy in inhabiting the planet.

- 2 The zoopoetic approach adopted here shares this outlook and the poems addressed spring from ecopoesis since they “engage imaginatively with the non-human”, in the words of Jonathan Bate. (Moulin 2018: 2) In this engagement, poetry brings knowledge about life forms and their interrelations which no other source may bring<sup>2</sup>. With language, writers help us “inhabit the world”, a world comprising human politics as well as the non-human; to help us understand and respond to the damage done by human politics, writers can put themselves in the position of all human and non-human animal life forms, perhaps because of the common organic origin of all animals – making for a “hybrid community” of understanding – and of the organic roots of writing<sup>3</sup>. (Simon 2011, 2015) Indeed, literature can communicate the affect and empathy which are missing in a dichotomic worldview separating nature from humanity and ascribing to the former the mere role of an exploitable resource. It is capable too of promoting a holistic view of life forms and, in Jane Bennett’s phrase, of helping to focus on the ever-open possibility of experiencing “enchantment”, even at the heart of this (post-)industrial urban world. (Bennett 2001)
- 3 However, in the present perspective, engagement with non-human life (here, an urban fox’s) does not mean pretending to enter the field of sensations and thoughts experienced by other species, which could lead to interspecies undifferentiation<sup>4</sup>. Rather than representing what the other species themselves feel or think, the process of attention to another life form means entering the “hybrid community” of understanding mentioned and adapting formally to the other species’ movements, paces, attitudes, affects. Verbally, this means a tropism towards animal attitudes thanks to “rhythm, style, points of view, dramatic construction”: then “anthropomorphism is no obstacle to understand animal life and vitality, quite the contrary”<sup>5</sup>. (Simon 2015 : 119, 121–122) Thus I do not seek to find whether poetry represents non-human thought, feeling or sensation and “translat[es an] alter-species semiotics into human discourse”<sup>6</sup> (Gannon 2014: 91) but I will follow Bate’s idea according to which “ecopoesis knows that things have a life, but it also has to recognise that it can only communicate

that knowledge in the form of propositions by using the divided Cartesian language of subject ('we see') and object ('the life of things')". (Bate 2000: 149) Finally, in addressing fox poems, not only formal features (rhythm, etc.) are important but also the situations referred to and their dramatization<sup>7</sup>.

- 4 In poetic creation, the way of "engaging with the non-human" is through attention, which makes poetry especially well-suited to this end: "A poem is the language of an act of attention"<sup>8</sup>. (Hartman: 1996, 12) Whether the poem is supposedly prompted by the contemplation of a concrete object which apparently fills out the scope or whether the referent of the poem is explicitly abstract and mental, the concentration is the same in nature and intensity. Poetic creation is a pursuit in the etymological sense, a chase or reaching out for. As a poem may represent an outer object gazed at, so it also accounts for the work of the 'mind's eye' (according to the age-old correlation between sight and thought). The organic function and the scopic impulse form a dual matrix for the mental impulse exerted in poetic creation. This paper will later refer to the analogy made by the historian Carlo Ginzburg and by the poet Ted Hughes between hunting (which needs the hunter's scopic impulse) and narrating or writing.
- 5 We can also connect the intense (physical and) mental glance at work in poetic creation and the "enchantment" studied by Jane Bennett. Her definition of it fits exactly the poetic glance: a "temporary suspension of chronological time and bodily movement [...] a momentarily immobilizing encounter"; the immobilisation is also mental: Bennett quotes Philip Fisher's explanation that

[T]he moment of pure presence within wonder lies in the object's difference and uniqueness being so striking to the mind that it does not remind us of anything and we find ourselves delaying in its presence for a time in which the mind does not move on by association to something else. (Bennett 2001: 5)

- 6 "Not move on by association": Fisher pinpoints a change in mental functioning. Instead of working along chains depending on controlled ideas and logic (such as definitions of the object or uses for it), the mind 'stops in its tracks' and absorbs itself in the otherness of the ob-

ject; physically, the eyes fixate and mentally, movement is arrested as if spinning in place.

- 7 Otherness is essential. Bennett includes “crossings” in her definition of enchantment; her second chapter, “Cross-Species Encounters”, explores “the encounter with beings, including ourselves, who morph from one category of being to another.” (Bennett 2001: 13) In my readings of (urban) fox poems, scopic impulse and poetic impulse are of equal importance with the idea of a “crossing”, not an inter-species one though there is tropism towards the animal, but an inner crossing into a new existential phase accompanying the crossing from immobilised wonder to poetry-writing. This confluence of language and act of attention is pointed out by Bennett’s remark that to “enchant” is “to surround with song or incantation”, i. e. language. (Bennett 2001: 6).

## 1.2. Disenchantment

- 8 Enchantment also has social and ethical involvements (as pointed out by Bennett’s subtitle: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics). Indeed, attention and wonderment stimulate a benevolence towards the world at large which benefits other beings (witness for instance the parallelism of Whitman’s equalitarian, democratic humanism and of his admiration and respect for nature in *Leaves of Grass* or Wordsworth’s “acts of kindness and of love” owed to nature in “Tintern Abbey”).
- 9 Ethics are aptly approached via the notion of disenchantment originating in Max Weber; he interpreted the history of western societies in terms of a “dis-enchantment” destroying the sense of relatedness with, and agency upon, the world around:

Central to Weber’s conception of Disenchantment of the World is the rejection of the sacramental mediation of salvation [which] is magic [...], since it implies that humans can have influence on the will of God like ancient magicians influenced the will of the gods [...]. (Carroll 2011: 119)

- 10 Westerners thus moved away from magical thinking, in which nature was partner rather than expendable resource. Weber insisted on alienation as involving

a self-alienation which efficiently relays and perpetuates imposed alienation. He traced this modern desacralisation of the world to the rise of the “Protestant ethic” and the success of capitalism and explained how the key to estrangement from nature was an alienating belief in the omnipotence of humans and their scientific and technological tools. (Mazuir 2004: 120–121)

- 11 Weber analyses both public and private life as animated by a complex set of varied modes of rationalisation, each having their values and modes of representation (Mazuir 2004: 120–121) and showed, in *Wissenschaft als Beruf* [Science as a Vocation], that

“the increase in intellectualisation and rationalisation, far from increasing our general knowledge of our life conditions”, rather meant belief in our mastery of things thanks to prevision and anticipation, inasmuch as we decided to master things. (Mazuir 2004: 120–121. Mazuir’s emphasis reproducing Webers’. My translation.)<sup>9</sup>

- 12 Weber famously coined the phrase ‘iron cage’ (*stahlhartes Gehäuse*). Belief in the values of rationality and progress, along with all the images and cultural processes connected with these, form the ‘cage’ of (self-)alienation. Such a culture legitimates the exploitative mindset in which humans are to dominate other life forms and natural resources and nonhuman life may be used as a resource, as well as the human life of socially vulnerable classes. The ‘iron cage’ severs humans from the natural world and from one another; it warps the intellect, the affects and even the psyche. Indeed, in the alienating process the psychic life impulse itself is weakened, for the collaborative sense in which it lives gets bogged down by isolation, exploitation and profit being preferred to collaboration and sharing. Resulting in multiple loss of agency and disempowerment, this is direly unethical. Citizens are pushed to pursue objects which are not chosen out of desire but out of consumer pressure and cultural goods are no exception<sup>10</sup>. In this anti-dynamic environment, individuals may end up intellectually inert, unable to understand and alter their life conditions; existentially empty, dependent on values which are the market’s, and psychically static, passive and discouraged from creativity and bonding.

13 This is why section 3.3 below addresses a psychic process (sublimation) as connected to poetic creation and enchantment in an experience of both psychic and mental empowerment triggered by an encounter with the urban fox. I will draw on psychoanalytic theory to try and demonstrate that urban fox poems result from and reveal an experience of psychic dynamisation, as outlined below in 1.3 and developed in 3.3.

### **1.3. Corpus**

14 The works considered break down into three corpora, the focus being more distant on the first.

15 Due to space limitation, the selection has to be small but I would be pleased to provide more information<sup>11</sup>.

16 The first set (2.2 Anthropomorphic fox characters) concerns fox characters which are most anthropomorphic and often portrayed as human beings with some fox characteristics. I focus on cases which function best as counterexamples to the second and third corpora; in particular, because the third corpus is strictly contemporary and urban, in 2.2 I picked some examples of contemporary urban culture, including songs and comics.

17 The second corpus (2.3 Fox dynamism in contemporary poetry) is used to point out the survival and renewal, over the last decades, of certain features associated with the fox (elusiveness, beauty, significance and the recurrent motif of the mirror situation, interpreted as an avatar of the mythical and agentive value of fox spirits or deities).

18 Finally, the urban fox corpus of section 3.1 allows to examine a point of arrival and transformation of the fox's literary history. This corpus is further discussed here below.

### **1.4. “A site of investigation”**

19 The corpus of section 3.1 was produced in the urban world where alienation is so clearly felt. Not all the authors would consider themselves poets, some work in cultural professions, some do not. In any case, “[e]copoetics is a site where all different kinds of poetry are practiced in common, with non-poets as well. It's a site of investiga-

tion”: thus the ecocritic Jonathan Skinner insists on turning audience (or an absence thereof) into authors, for poetry is known to a tiny minority and makes little impact. (Skinner: 2013) This experimental quality testifies to the ability of ecopoetic themes (or rather zoopoetic, in the present case) to trigger writing and open a path to (re-)enchantment and to a more ethical consideration of the world.

- 20 The corpus is by contemporary British urbans: in Britain, the fox has a high social importance, witness fox hunting and the highly polarised responses to urban foxes<sup>12</sup>, which have attracted attention for about fifty years now<sup>13</sup>.
- 21 Emulating Skinner’s approach, I find that the writing of the poems considered has something experimental and democratic in originating from an unsought, now common occasion, an urban fox sighting, available to anyone in today’s cities; the ‘iron cage’ is very narrow there, but the chance encounter triggers a gratuitous, un-marketed, liberating poetic response.

## 2. Representations of the fox in literature

- 22 This section aims to present the soil out of which current responses to the urban fox have grown; these responses benefit both from the novelty of encountering the animal in the urban environment and from an ancient cultural heritage.

### 2.1. Mythical heritage

- 23 Foxes have been a commensal animal<sup>14</sup> from prehistory; there may even have been prehistoric pet foxes. (Batterman 2018) Commensal species are “an important social and educational resource”, while “human attitude to commensal animals will obviously be highly culture-specific.” (O’Connor 2017: 536) Thus there exists a “complex cultural history of human-fox interactions in England” (Batterman 2017): “urbanisation and industrialisation [...] influenced engagement between humans and foxes and re-shaped attitudes”, making foxes “a proxy for human engagement with the environment”. (Batterman 2019)



- 24 The urban fox therefore takes its place in a long history of culture-bound responses to foxes. The *Dictionnaire des Symboles* of Chevalier and Gheerbrant (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1982 : 805) provides orientation amid the jungle of ancient fox references: the fox emerged as a mythical culture hero, alternately mischievous and benevolent, occasionally connecting humans with the Otherworld, and displaying both intense energy and lusty, irresistible seduction; in myths worldwide, the fox is an image of dynamism.
- 25 A notorious shape-shifter and trickster, the fox thus embodies dynamism of change. This invariant is diversely dramatised thanks to physical movement, metamorphosis or reversal of situation through tricks physical or verbal. Fox protagonists of empowerment or disempowerment challenge established existential and / or social statuses and can use language potently, witness Reynard's *renardie*<sup>15</sup>. (Scheidegger 1989: 19–20, 81) The posterity of *renardie*, too multifarious to detail, confirms the connection between the fox and language, a connection reappearing in fox poems.

## 2.2. Anthropomorphic fox characters

- 26 In Christianised cultures, the changeful fox was demonised as embodying satanic treacherousness<sup>16</sup>. Heavily anthropomorphised fox characters (Reynard has clothes and a sword) lost the magic agency they had in myths but their dynamism of change survived in their roles as breakers of social rules. They have kept embodying charm, elusiveness and the joy of independence, and, in harsher versions, vengeful retaliation against abusers or oppressors.
- 27 In twenty-first century urban culture too, we can trace elements from the invariant dynamism of change. In France, where La Fontaine's animal fable "Le Corbeau et le renard" (The Crow and the Fox") was learnt by heart by generations of schoolchildren, parodies of the fable serve to bridge the cultural gap between popular culture and the classicism of the original, thus breaking cultural hierarchy<sup>17</sup>. Among artists denouncing the difficult life conditions in deprived urban areas, the rapper Guizmo, aka Renard, released with the album *Renard* a video clip whose hero crosses class and ethnicity boundaries<sup>18</sup>. (Guizmo 2018a, 2018b) In such examples, the fox is used to address social injustice and allows the audience to identify with a hero

crossing socio-cultural boundaries. However, this imaginary compensation does not envisage a possible change in the social system or in its relation with the environment, and the lyrics even claim the thirst for money: “we all want dollars” (« tous on veut des dollars »). (Guizmo 2018c). The fox character’s dynamism is here limited to swapping powerless and powerful positions around.

28 Such fox rebels interiorise the laws of consumerism, turning the Weberian ‘iron cage’ into a snug plush shell inside which to curl up, eyes shut<sup>19</sup>.

29 In some contemporary fictions, change of situation is reduced to violent retaliation, fox characters just emulating the violence of the world around them. On the globalised cultural market, American comics are symptomatic of this. The characters Fox and Vixen, from different comics series, exert violence in criminal revenge or with the excuse of being a crimefighter.<sup>20</sup>

### **2.3. Fox dynamism in contemporary poetry**

30 This brief perusal of the evolution of the fox character shows a move from dynamism to staticity – from the dynamism of fox spirits to compliance with consumer life, the fox characters being absorbed by mass culture. However, another branch of evolution is less bankable and preserves some of the fundamental features (charm, elusiveness, enjoyment, verbal creativity and the breaking or re-setting of rules), adding to them the motif of the mirror relation.

31 Parallel with Romanticism rose environmental sensitivity and the critique of modern capitalist society; the medieval demonisation of the fox subsided and the symmetrical projection of affects onto the fox as endearing creature rose, as in the great Romantic poet John Clare’s “The Fox” (Clare 2004: 245)<sup>21</sup> No longer physically anthropomorphised nor a mere figure for human cunning, the animal became interesting as such.

32 The following examples are from the later 20th century, when environmental consciousness was rising. Without believing they can enter the animal’s inner life, poets pay intense attention to it. Animal motions appeal to the imagination and lead poets into an imaginary

metamorphosis in which they cross out from the stillness of the writing desk to dynamic existence in the outer world.

- 33 Norman MacCaig's "Movements" is a good illustration: "I think these movements and become them, here, / In this room's stillness, none of them about, / And relish them all". The poem delineates the motions of animals, from lark to eel. As for MacCaig's fox, it is explosive: "Fox, smouldering through the heather bushes, bursts / A bomb of grouse." The comparison to fuel in combustion and exploding matter corresponds to the features of changefulness and dynamism. Combustion, not a substance but a process (a transfer of electrons, i. e. motion), symbolises disembodied energy; the element of insubstantiality will reappear in urban fox poems. The border-crossing between animal movement and human writing is clear when a snake's crawling is compared to an act of handwriting: "the cursive adder writes / Quick V's and Q's in the dust and rubs them out". (MacCaig 1990 [1965]: 131)<sup>22</sup>
- 34 In Margaret Atwood (Atwood: 1995), the fox is "a lean vixen", guileful but strongly driven. The lines enhance wilfulness as well as the pull for identification: "The red fox crosses the ice / intent on none of my business" – "my" replacing the expected 'its/her'. The speaker gazes in vulpine stealth: "pretending to watch birds, / but really watching the fox". Symmetrically the vixen "knows I'm there" and speaks in her turn: "To survive / we'd all turn thief / and rascal, or so says the fox".
- 35 The symmetricalness and the theme of survival highlight the existential nature of the encounter, the vixen's vital quest being sensed by the poet. The encounter is both confrontation with animal otherness and union in intimacy.
- 36 The poet absorbed in outward contemplation and inward concentration, like the fox which "[s]tarts at his own alertness" (Mitchell 2003: 84), have their senses so tensely open that excitement produces existential openness to possible transformation.
- 37 The fox image is a correlate of poetic attention: "Does not sleep / Completely / or for long. Sleeps on the run" (Mitchell 2003: 84). It is also a correlate of vital meaning and beauty, which Mitchell locates in the tail just glimpsed: "a long, / bushy, *significant* tail which it holds out like a *reason for being*" (Mitchell 2003: 84; my emphasis). As will

be explained in section 3.2, disappearance of the object is key to the writing process. Mitchell narrows in from generalisations in the present simple (“starts [...] sleeps [...] knows [...] loves”) to a singulative face-to-face meeting told in the preterite. The poem ends in mutual approach and final suspension of individual identity, as if the surface of the mirror had been touched: “[The fox] Came once, when called, halfway / across the field. Almost / forgot what we were, where. / The two of us, standing there.” (Mitchell 2003: 84) The unlikelihood of having a fox come like a dog when called underlines the mutual attraction and identification while the eye contact and symmetrical glances so ubiquitous in fox poems manifest the scopic impulse involved in the work of the mind’s eye (Cf. 1.1) and in desire (Cf. 3.3).

- 38 As seen above (1.2, 2.1), ancient fox deities or spirits were intercessors between believers and the world, making it possible to establish with the world a symbolical agentive relation which allowed to hope in and / or act in keeping with the dynamism of change symbolised by the fox spirit and thus to acquire psychic energy and social self-assurance.
- 39 This magical gesture, as Weber theorised, was destroyed by secularisation and disenchantment. The original, mythical possibility for humans to exert agency through the fox spirit has therefore been long lost, but the legacy of fox images has evolved into a new human / fox encounter. Poems reveal this in sensing the importance of uniting non-human and human in a sphere, not of real identity with an animal, but of equality. In the mirror situation, the copresence of animal and human sets the gazing human wondering, leading to introspection and to a psychic and existential reaching out towards the animal which sparks and fuels poetic expression – the unconscious being engaged in the poetic process.
- 40 In this way, Alice Oswald’s subtle dream poem “Fox” (Oswald 2016: 3) introduces a “she”— elegant as she is “stepping across / the grass in her black gloves”. Not only does she have beauty, like a poem, but also self-expression, like a poet: she is a “woman with a man’s voice”. The image is strikingly oxymoronic: the fox is outside on the grass but clings like an outer lining to the poet’s own mind (“outside my sleep”), so close that her breath (or is it the poet’s?) can be heard in “a sharp

intake of air”. Like poetry, she conveys emotion: her “bark” becomes language speaking of her “children” in “the heart’s thick accent”. The twenty-first century poem revives enchantment; the fox’s “abrupt and odd [...] trespass” arrests the human as in Jane Bennett’s definition of enchantment: it “immobilis[es]” the mind which keeps working but remains fixed on the object of fascination. Oswald’s “trespass” is a signature of the instant when “beings, including ourselves, [...] morph from one category of being to another.” (Bennett 2001: 13)

- 41 The poets considered above confirm the continuing strength of fox symbolism in general, but in the urban context fox poems involve more deeply the sociological and the psychic situation of the human.

## **3. Poetic creation and sublimation in urban fox encounters**

### **3.1. Features of the urban fox encounter**

- 42 The mineral, technological urban landscape and the socio-economic and cultural constraints of the capitalistic world deeply contrast with the traditional, rural image of the fox. With the fox becoming more diurnal and city-dwellers more nocturnal, foxes encroach upon human territory and meetings recur. As the fox’s physical elusiveness diminishes, its proximity arouses the imagination. City-dwellers compare themselves with it<sup>23</sup> and grow curious of its inner life. This stimulates mental dynamism and helps to a slip out of the ‘iron cage’ into psychic activity and poetic creation.
- 43 Numerous contemporary British poets publish urban fox poems, in paper form or in blogs and other web support.<sup>24</sup> In comparison to the ‘bankable’ foxes of section 2.2, this poetic expression is less marketable, more gratuitous and more spontaneous; in comparison with the contemporary fox poems of 2.4, the fascination for the fox and its features recurs, augmented with puzzlement and existential questioning.
- 44 The disturbance of real fox screams of excitement is added to the expressiveness evoked in 2.4. So Kelley Swain is startled by “[w]ild pig-squeals” (the alien-species comparison reinforcing the shock) from

foxes mating in broad daylight in her garden (Swain 2009), Ian Dunlop is disturbed by “eerie screeches” (Dunlop 2016) and David Bottomley is

woken in the middle of the night  
by an orgy of wild animal cries  
that would wake the dead,  
a symphony of cry wolf dramas,  
over the top, operatic, communal balletic  
dance, fight, play, display, circus, gavotte,  
punch up, fornicating nocturnal nuptials. (Bottomley 2018)

45 With the humanisation of fox cries into musical genres, vulpine self-expression becomes a more intense equivalent of human cries – of joy or distress: to Dave King, “Weird sounds the foxes make/like babies crying”. (King 2011)

46 When humans stop talking and pay attention, they hear “fox claws scratching at/the brain’s back door”<sup>25</sup> (Mooney-Singh, 2021) and get ready to welcome new creatures as their equals in the building up of an altered worldview, eventually making place for them in language. Thus Gerard Rochford appreciates his small granddaughter’s facing her first urban fox as a foundational event in life and language. Child and fox equally look and sniff at the Glasgow night to make sense of the world around when the child spots the animal and

[...]  
feels  
something is entering her forever  
to settle down in the red lair of her brain.

She then learns the word ‘fox’ and joins us now in a city of words, the city we build together,  
where we can sleep with foxes and call out their name”. (Rochford 2018)

47 Acceptance of the non-human enlarges the shared domain of human and non-human, pushing back the limits of the “city of words” thanks to which we establish our and the animals’ place in the world.

- 48 A frequent aspect of the encounter, combined with humanisation, is a hesitant form of competition: Ian Dunlop (Dunlop 2016), entrenched in a “mansion block” in “nondescript Earls Court”, feels challenged by vulpine “streetwise [...] hoodies”, full of “disdain”, refusing to “bow before authority”. The speaker’s “ancestors” would have “saddled up and followed the hunt” but he starts on a hunt for enchantment:

all I can do  
is stand and stare and marvel at  
the animal’s insolence. [...] It looks at me with evident disdain.

- 49 Bottomley stands up to his fox, addressing it in the second person: “[S]izing up the enemy, / you look me straight in the eye” but he finally ends up relating half-enviously the foxes’ nights of “guffawing” and “fornicating”. (Bottomley 2018)

- 50 Similarly, Simon Zonenblick’s “Midnight Fox” pads through “a frosty Wanstead Flats, which veer into the spiderweb of sliproads / pre-empting the M11” when, the speaker says,

Turning down the High Road, into a block of buildings tightly tucked  
into the bricked in ghetto of east London, I am startled by his stare  
[...]  
What I caught last  
was [...] its shoot-back glance,  
two amber eyes half answering,  
half questioning. (Zonenblick 2019)

- 51 “[H]alf answering, / half questioning”: the instant of competition in eye contact shifts to self-awareness and mental activity, as when Dunlop grows puzzled: the fox is a potential question mark whose appeal drowns the competitive spirit.

- 52 Shedding the I / you enunciative position, Jenny Donnison<sup>26</sup> uses the first person to cross into the fox’s position and try the other place:

sky's eyelid is shut  
I scavenge pickings of light  
pinpricks and thin shine  
torn in the world's tarp

swift lope over glitter cold clods  
wriggle through hedge roots to hard black  
white startle  
metallic animal roars past  
trails miasma of burn

brisk trot along grass path  
ignore swoop of flat-faced owl  
out back all quiet  
nose through heady stink  
mould and rot  
bread and fruit  
manna of fried chicken  
parcelled in plastic  
carry home to den (Donnison 2017)

- 53 The poem, densely imaged, tries to share the animal's perceptions as it gets "pickings" of light to move by from the stars. Images are concrete ("tarp" for the starry sky) to render the physical points of reference. Objects which make no sense to the animal are defamiliarized (the asphalt road is "hard black"), re-building a world image from sensory data. The dynamic vocabulary ("lope", "wriggle") and ellipted determiners and pronouns increase concentration on movement and objects. The lack of capitalisation evokes a reduction to the essentials of life: perceiving, moving, surviving. Elliptic syntax speeds up pace, mimicking the beast's quick, vital quest and detailed sensations: "nos-ing" into garbage concludes with a triumphant isolated noun group, "manna of fried chicken".
- 54 Donnison's fox feels the car to be a "metallic animal", attempting to make sense of it in adaptive instinct, but jumps in fear at the headlights and roar. The divide between adaptation and fear of alien danger pinpoints a liminal experience of finding significance for the unknown, which the speaker emulates from the fox and passes on to the audience.
- 55 Writing this mimetic piece means focusing on animal experience and locating the common ground of survival impulse and perception of the environment where human and non-human animal meet. Seeing and hearing a car pass is no longer part of disenchanted routine, nor



is leftover fried chicken consumption residue: it is divine “manna” sent by a benevolent cosmic magic.

56 Such poems dissolve routine by changing the perspective; they re-enchanted the urban world, fuelling it with life impulse and dynamic change, garbage turning into “manna”. Emulating the animal’s self-determination, they renew self-consciousness and help to break away from humans’ identity as workers and consumers.

57 The breakaway is vital, as seen in Christie-Luke Jones’ “Urban Fox”. It begins in bathetic, sterile self-pity after sentimental breakup:

The soupy June air weighs heavy on my shoulders,  
A cruel curse befitting of a cruel hour.  
I snarl and thrash and seethe.  
I pray for a swift end.

58 Life is at stake (“a swift end”) – or is it? The ridicule of the hyperbole shows the poor human has lost sense of the meaning of death and of the value of life. Jones’s speaker envies posh “Highgate lovers, swathed in crumpled bedsheets” and piles on clichés (“her cascading onyx locks [...] her sculpturesque face”), stifling the reader under syrupy mawkishness, when suddenly the shallow pathos is suspended:

[...] But lo, wrapped in my internal struggle I have omitted another.  
One who neither pines, nor laments, nor regrets.  
A weightless astronaut, he skulks through the night air with a humble grace.  
His sinewy frame, that restless, twitching muzzle,  
An opportunist cat burglar, thriving in his concrete woodland.  
He slows as I approach. A cautious arc. His marble eyes reflecting the street lights above.  
What does he see?  
We halt in unison, we share the stillness.

His keen nose analyses my scent, his pointed ears flinch at my slightest movement.  
Such devotion to the senses is something I’ve long forgotten.

Suddenly I feel my heavy feet beneath me, notice my short, agitated breaths.

This wild animal has coaxed me out of my own head, made me living again. [...] (Jones 2019)

- 59 The human has lost trace of the true meaning of life but the fox knows and shows him. The human is enmeshed in a network of social obligations—having a girlfriend, envying snug lovers in fine apartments—while the urban fox, concentrated on his “keen nose [...] pointed ears”, lives in the sensations of real life. A celestial “astronaut” free from human burdens, it “neither pines, nor laments, nor regrets”. It is “humble”, not seeking to shape relationships to its liking but just to live freely. The eye contact asks an existential question: “What does he see?” asks about what “I” am. The animal’s “devotion to the senses” re-sets the man’s proprioception: suddenly he feels his body weight and his breaths. Reconnecting with sensory life, he is freed from his egocentric preoccupations (“out of my own head”). From an intellectual and emotional entrapment in his disenchanting role as an overgrown spoilt boy, he has crossed into possible self-redefinition, is made “living again”.
- 60 The insubstantiality connoted by the fox’s disembodied aspect (“weightless astronaut”) echoes the ability for disembodiment implied by shape-shifting fox myths, but also points to the psychic process which will come under focus in section 3.3.

## 3.2. Desire and poetic creation

- 61 Whereas the anthropomorphic fox characters of comics and raps (2.2) only offer compensatory fantasy for an audience oppressed by disenchanting urban life, and finally guarantee adaptation to that life, the fox poems above confront disenchantment by accepting the presence of the real fox as an inspiration for artistic creation, in the margins of mainstream culture.
- 62 I will propose an interpretation of the moment of inspiration as connected both to the very nature of poetic writing and to the human / animal relationship.
- 63 As Anne Simon points out<sup>27</sup> (Simon 2011: §4, §20), both reading and writing involve a corporal dimension, the reader moving across a text as across a landscape, and writing being analogous to, and according

to Carlo Ginzburg perhaps derived from, the hunting process<sup>28</sup>. (Simon 2011: n49)

- 64 Animals were once both prey and magical intercessors, as evoked above (1.2). Poetic writing implements a psychic and mental agentive process analogous to the agentive value of the animal-spirit beliefs of our past. In both cases, empowerment is at stake, as confirmed by Simon's assertion that the very "elusiveness" of animals reveals aspects of the human condition, triggers writing and allows literature to engage politics<sup>29</sup> (Simon 2011: §25), indeed a matter of empowerment and disempowerment.
- 65 The fox excellently plays this role which, Simon points out, Bailly calls "absented presence"<sup>30</sup>, as in Derrida's cat confrontation (Derrida 2006) and Captain Ahab's chase of Moby-Dick, the writing whale — not because it holds a pen with its fin, but because its absented presence makes you write, creates the semantic void for new meaning to be generated. As the white whale is the "paradigm of animality and of man's desire for otherness" (Simon 2011: §7) (my translation)<sup>31</sup>, its whiteness figuring the blank page of the unwritten and the attraction for the impossible mastery of meaning, so also the fox, with its ancient associations of shape-shifting and elusiveness, stands for an igniter of the desire for self-expression — the spirit fox a shape-shift of the whale's "spirit-spout".<sup>32</sup>
- 66 Ginzburg's hypothesis about narration is strikingly paralleled in the work of an immense practitioner of poetry, Ted Hughes, as he sheds light on the impulsive dimension of the process.
- 67 Hughes' elder brother being a poacher, the poet spent his own childhood capturing animals, later realising that when he started writing poetry, he only resumed the former activity:

[...] it occurred to me that my writing poems might be partly a continuation of my earlier pursuit. Now I have no doubt. The special kind of excitement, the slightly mesmerised 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 clean final form of it, the unique living reality of it in 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 1967 : 17)

- 68 “Life outside your own”: the hunting impulse is after alien life but in the poetic fox experience this is also one’s own life, whose limits are pushed back to incorporate a measure of alienness. At stake is the generation of new “life” in the “general lifelessness”, a fit definition for poetic re-enchantment in the disenchanted urban world. The “mesmerised and quite involuntary concentration” answers the mental immobilisation noted by Bennett (Cf. 1.1). We note, too, the oxymoronic image of gestating something which is both intensely ours and totally alien (“the stirrings of a new poem in your mind [...] a new specimen of the life outside your own.”) Hunting, as a development of the scopical and narrative impulse of the hunter, becomes a matrix for poetic creation. The fusion of self and otherness is to re-emerge in my final interpretation of the poetic process, read as psychic sublimation, in which desire for an outer object and self-desire combine.
- 69 Hughes’ marvellous poem “The Thought-Fox” dramatizes the dialectic between animal elusiveness and writing. The poet captures the moment of capture when the fox goes mental and triggers human discourse:

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

[...] 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 [...]

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. (Hughes [1957] 1995 : 3)

- 70 This strikingly images the crossover between physical reality and mental life: “forest” is the actual woods (etymologically the “outside” of controlled spaces) as well as the depths of the mind’s activity, evoking spiritual Dantean disorientation and perhaps the psychic at-

traction of Freud's scary 'dark continent', feminine sexuality. This is not the place to start a broad interpretation but simply to point out the dynamics of change expressed. From physical animal described in sensory detail, the fox hybridises with the poet's activity (it leaves "prints" in the snow and the page is "printed") before collapsing into insubstantiality: it turns into an idea "enter[ing] the dark hole of the head" as symmetrically the head, seat of disembodied ideas, itself turns into the earthy "dark hole" of a den.

- 71 As in urban fox poems, here the fox's eyes, movements and sensory perception are the anchors of animal presence in the imagination (the "nose touches", the "eyes serve a movement"), a presence felt in sensory terms in turn by the human in due exchange of experience ("sharp hot stink of fox"). As in poems like Christie-Luke Jones' and Jenny Donnison's, a common ground of sensory experience is established.
- 72 Like a physical hunt, the poetic hunt implies motion and a reach for an object. However, it does not kill but effects vital metamorphosis. A good poem captures images from physical life and turns them into verbal significance, but more than this, the scopic impulse and the mental poetic impulse function analogously, and, in poems accounting for a real glance on a real object or a being, dialectically.

### **3.3. The urban fox and sublimation**

- 73 Most of the urban fox poems I have found are the outcome of a real mutual fox / human glance. Poets then find strength to resist the proxy living tendered by mass cultural goods—an essential part of the disenchantment which suppressing our agentive relation and affective involvement with the world—and they respond in poetic creation.
- 74 While disenchantment severs one from one's sense of connection with the world, re-enchantment means repossessing one's individual value while beginning to share again in the world's value. The urban fox, a correlate for the life impulse in its adaptiveness and disinhibited enjoyment (witness mating cries and other vulpine pleasures), is a perfect goal for poetic identification and for displaced narcissistic desire.<sup>33</sup>

- 75 Freudian theory is psychodynamic, it studies the psyche as a system of movements or impulses: “movement is the primordial property of the psyche”<sup>34</sup>. (Mancini 2004: 289) This is why absence is the condition of desire: “absence and deprivation are the very condition and locus of desire”.<sup>35</sup> (Péruchon/Orgiazzi 2005: 230) As in Hughes’s allegory, the elusiveness of the goal triggers motion.
- 76 In desire for a loved person, our psyche constructs this person not as presence but as a goal to be reached, even should we hold the person in our arms. In artistic creation, sublimation replaces the object of erotic impulse by a secondary object having greater social value: thus art is an “avatar of sexuality”. Besides, desire is narcissistic since it aims at self-satisfaction.<sup>36</sup> (Péruchon / Orgiazzi 2005: 227, 231) In these conditions, “the ego removes the libido from the sexual object, turns it towards itself and finally ascribes the libido a new, non-sexual goal [...] it is the artist’s narcissism which conditions and facilitates the creative activity of his sublimated impulse”. (Nasio 2001: 129–130) (my translation)<sup>37</sup>
- 77 In the contemporary city, the life of urban humans is saturated with informational overload and goods forced on consumers as the answer to their desires, smothering the scopophilic impulse which could lead to desire. In its otherness, the fox’s sudden, unsought, unplanned appearance opens a new space for this impulse and when it slinks away, deprivation is felt as attraction towards a desirable object. Sublimated desire then develops, seizing and capitalising on the cultural value of the fox image. The encountered fox is turned into the secondary object of desire in the narcissistic self-loving creative impulse, making the fox a purveyor of self-love.
- 78 In the urban fox poems that I have examined, the dynamism of change is twice active. The authors carry out their verbal hunt, turning the encounter into words expressing the beauty, significance and vitality of non-human life and of the human / non-human meeting, and the fox makes vital change possible as poets cross into renewal of self-narration: urban humans can now start hunting again, after new selves.

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1 Bénédicte Meillon et Margot Lauwers, « Lieux d'enchantement : approches écocritiques et éco-poét(h)iques des liens entre humains et non-humains », *Crossways Journal*, N° 2.1 (2018) <https://crossways.lib.uoguelph.ca/index.php/crossways/article/view/4686/4659>

2 « Les écrivains apportent sur le vivant, et sur les animaux en particulier, des perspectives que nulle autre discipline ou activité ne peut faire apparaître. » (Simon 2015 : 118)

3 « Les écrivains nous aident avec la langue à habiter le monde. Et leur manière de rendre compte du côté terrifiant de ce que l'on est en train de faire aujourd'hui à la planète, ainsi qu'à ces vivants de toutes sortes que sont les humains, les animaux et les plantes, c'est de se mettre dans la peau des premiers, et de renouer avec les éléments. » (Simon 2015 : 122)

4 « Tout se passe comme si l'approche d'une autre espèce, pour être opérante, devait s'effectuer non pas dans l'abolition de la distance entre le sujet humain et l'« animal singulier », mais grâce à elle et avec elle. » (Simon 2011 : § 3-4) Footnote 7 to « l'animal singulier » refers to (Lestel 2004).

5 « [...] je ne pense pas qu'on puisse vraiment avoir accès aux représentations des autres espèces, ou alors par transposition [...] se mettre dans la peau d'une bête, dans ses tempos, dans ses affects, dans ses allures, est possible. Je pense donc que c'est au niveau formel, rythmique, syntaxique, phrastique, que la littérature peut donner à entendre ces êtres réputés muets que sont les animaux. » (Simon 2015 : 121-122)

6 Gannon explains that Aaron Moe's Zoopoetics worthily grapples with difficult abstractions such as Kristeva's preverbal "semiotic chora" to argue for an interspecies semiotics manifested in Whitman's poems but that, independently from the value of the theory in itself, interpreting zoopoetic pieces in terms of animal semiotics is risky, given the variety of animal species and of functions of animal motion: "As admirable as the goal of Moe and others is, of bridging the species gap, acknowledging the reality of that barrier may often be the best way of giving other animals their true due." (Gannon 2014 : 95)

7 My perspective being narrowed to fox poems, especially urban fox poems, I have not found much material which is both significant and formally ex-

ceptional (Donnison standing out) (Donnison 2017). Form is more varied if the scope broadens to all animal poems.

8 Charles Hartman's definition of poetry "will provide a reasonable basis for a theory of prosody: A poem is the language of an act of attention". This act motivates a poem, and the poem "in this sense 'represents' it". The written poem becomes the "cue" to the reader's own act of attention, its "opportunity". (Hartman 1996 : 12)

9 « 'l'intellectualisation et la rationalisation croissantes ne signifient [donc] nullement une connaissance générale croissante des conditions dans lesquelles nous vivons', mais plutôt notre croyance en la maîtrise des choses par la prévision, l'anticipation et ce pour autant que nous le voulions. » (Mazuir 2004 : 120-121) Mazuir's emphasis reproducing Weber's emphasis.

10 In section 2.2, I discuss the un-emancipating value of cultural goods such as certain comics.

11 For details about authors (including the artists of 2.2), cultural networks, sources and poems not included here, readers may write to [guillaume@univ-perp.fr](mailto:guillaume@univ-perp.fr).

12 While numerous citizens protect and admire foxes (the National Fox Welfare Society foremost), "fox control" companies "cull" (destroy) urban foxes "humanely", e. g. the company Environ <https://www.environpestcontrol.co.uk/fox-removal-london/>.

13 For a recent popularisation of studies on fox-related cultural phenomena, see for instance the British nature writer and journalist Lucy Jones's *Foxes Unearthed: A Story of Love and Loathing in Modern Britain* and <http://lucyfjones.com/>

14 In rural or urban zones, commensal species share living space and resources with humans.

15 The medieval scholar Jean Scheidegger studies *renardie* (foxiness), the verbal art which, mothering rhetoric, reverses power relationships, as reflected by the text of the *Roman de Renart* [The Romance of Reynard the Fox]: the text subverts ideologies, demonstrating the lawlessness of writing and its ability to set its own laws (Scheidegger 19–20).

16 In the *Bestiaire* of Pierre de Beauvais, "[T]he fox stands for the Devil, for the latter feigns death in order to deceive those who live according to the flesh." I translate from « Le renard représente le Diable, car celui-ci feint

d'être mort pour tromper ceux qui vivent selon la chair. » (Bianciotto 1995 : 33)

17 The French comedian Félix Tout Court [Félix Djhan] uses La Fontaine's fox to mix elite culture with street culture in a YouTube rap pastiche: La Fontaine, the crow and the fox sing and dance with a crowd of urban teenagers from a deprived area. (Djhan 2018)

18 Guizmo (Lamine Diakité, born 1991 to a black immigrant family in Paris) fell into drugs and served time in prison before saving himself through music. The videoclip *Renard* (Guizmo 2018b) mixes cartoon and gaming culture foxes with emblems of highbrow culture and gathers ethnically diverse actors. The lyrics (Guizmo 2018c) tell of the fatherless Renard, growing up in a poor area and turning criminal. He finds safety in his own gang of "foxes", compensating individually for social inequality while symbolically bridging the gaps between blacks and whites and between street culture and elite culture. Guizmo may be paying tribute to the historic band IAM, whose 1993 album contains the track "Fizdou" (slang for "fox") and elaborates on the motif of the foxy criminal rebel. (IAM 1993) Many similar examples exist.

19 A British expression of this interiorisation is found in the album of Phill Vidler, *Urban Foxes*. The existential theme appears in dissatisfaction with consumer life, but in the persona speaking, the hesitation to truly "live" overcomes rebellion against consumerist alienation: "Do you wanna live free, do you wanna live free? / Do you want a nice house in the city? [...] / Get friends, get love, get what you need / Or get money, get clothes, fill yourself with greed / Our generation is fucked indeed / We're urban foxes / Trying to remember how to be wild / We are paradoxes / So don't expect us to smile [...] / We're urban foxes / Trying to learn how to survive / We are paradoxes / There's more to living than being alive [...]" (Vidler 2018)

20 The female Fox from *Wanted* (adult comics picturing sex and violence) is a selfish supervillain in spite of her potential for social rebellion (a ghetto child, she chose crime to survive). (Millar and Jones: 2003). Vixen, a crime-fighter, is African and channels animal powers into her body thanks to the spider Anansi. She and other DC Comics theriomorphic characters (Beast Boy, Horsewoman...) are anthropomorphic in psychology and action. They supposedly defend nature but the simplistic themes and style precludes serious reflection on society and on the environment. (Conway 1981) The audience may read the series on the second level as deriding false environmental discourse or find a cathartic outlet for aggression, but this is does

not allow intimate realisations about society and one's place in it and in the environment.

21 “The ploughman ran and gave a hearty shout, / He found a weary fox and beat him out. / The ploughman laughed and would have ploughed him in / But the old shepherd took him for the skin.” (Clare 2004: 245)

22 Cf. Alasdair Macrae's study of the poet (Macrae 2011).

23 Laura Ford's sculpture *Homeless Fox* illustrates the human/animal fusion in urban dereliction (Ford 2009). Cf. <https://www.lauraford.net/>

24 Of abundant web results and authors' details, I must select only a few here but would be pleased to communicate more, Cf. note 11.

25 In “Where they roam”, Chris Mooney-Singh portrays a crowd of foxes popping into view and romping around the neighbourhood like “adolescents” or “hobos” before “scratching at the brain's back door”. (Mooney-Singh 2021)

26 Jenny Donnison, a clinical psychologist and academic, is interested in “creaturely experience”, in Les Murray's phrase, after reading Thomas Nagel on subjectivity and consciousness. (Nagel 1974) With the poets Noel Williams, Angelina Ayers and Helen Cadbury, she participated in the writing and reading of fox poems prompted by the exhibition “12 Heads and the Reynard Diary,” by Susannah Gent at the Bank Street Arts centre at Sheffield. <http://bankstreetarts.co.uk> The readings in turn prompted a video and a musical score, to be found at <https://movingpoems.com/filmmaker/mark-gittins/>

27 « La lecture, autant que la fuite de la bête qui veut sauver sa peau en recourant à la *mêtis*, est ainsi de l'ordre d'un instinct où prédation, déchiffrement et mise en récit se découvrent comme ayant partie liée ». I translate: “Reading, as well as the animal's flight when it tries to save its skin by implementing *metis*, therefore derives from an instinct in which predation, deciphering and narration interconnect”. Simon refers in particular to Michel de Certeau and Carlo Ginzburg and to the opposed hermeneutics, Ginzburg's “Galilean paradigm” versus “Indicial paradigm” (Simon 2011: §4 note 11).

28 Ginzburg hypothesises that prehistoric hunters developed a consciousness of absence while reading the tracks of game; piecing together tracks and beast is a construction of sequential action, the basis of narration. (Ginzburg 1980)

29 « [L]’animal, en tant qu’il est précisément être d’esquive, peut pointer la souffrance humaine et enclencher le processus d’écriture. Il est en effet un usage politique de l’animalité en littérature ». I translate: “Animals, precisely in being elusive, may highlight human suffering and trigger a writing process. For literature may use animality to political ends.”

30 « présence absente » (Simon 2011 : n10, referring to Bailly 2007 : 24, 27).

31 « Moby Dick [...] représente le paradigme de l’animalité et, pour l’homme, du désir d’altérité ».

32 Melville, Herman Moby-Dick chapter 42 “The Whiteness of the Whale”, chapter 51 “The Spirit-Spout”, etc. (Melville : [1851] 1988). See Claude Richard, « La lettre blanche de la baleine ». (Richard 1987).

33 I am indebted to conversations with the psychoanalyst Monique Prieur-Bertrand for confirmation of my intuitions and for precisions in the present psychoanalytic interpretation.

34 « Le mouvement est la première propriété du psychisme. »

35 « [L]’absence, le manque se trouvent être la condition et le lieu mêmes du désir. »

36 « La culture est donc un avatar de la sexualité, détournée et modifiée au profit de la civilisation. [...] si le désir, mû par la pulsion de vie, contient bien une dimension narcissique et régressive (il a pour objectif la satisfaction de soi), il est aussi hautement objectalisé puisque c’est grâce à l’objet que le désir s’accomplit. »

37 « Pour se produire, la sublimation requiert l’intervention du Moi narcissique [...] Le moi retire d’abord la libido de l’objet sexuel puis la retourne sur lui-même et assigne enfin à cette libido un nouveau but non sexuel. [...] C’est bien le narcissisme de l’artiste qui conditionne et favorise l’activité créatrice de sa pulsion sublimée. »

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## English

Starting from the notion of enchantment in ecopoetics and its social and ethical involvement, this paper connects them with Weberian disenchantment (which implies loss of agency) and with psychic life (which disenchantment impairs) and connects these three elements together by taking the encounter with the urban fox as a common denominator. In mythology, the fox embodied a dynamism of change thanks to which, symbolically, believers entertained an agentive, empowering relation with the world. The

sense of empowerment was then lost but features of the fox image survived. Certain pseudo-rebellious fox characters have somewhat interiorised social hierarchies and power relations. Contrarily, in contemporary British poetry, the original features of the fox image have been retained and have gradually led to a new space of creativity and existential liberation. The paper then focuses on urban fox poems and on the process of artistic sublimation which they reveal. This process accompanies the animal encounter and the ensuing act of poetic creation. Restoring the self-love missing from a disenchanting world, it encourages humans to re-empower themselves and re-connect empathically with the world.

### **Français**

Cet article part de la notion écopoétique d'enchantement et de ses implications sociales et éthiques pour les relier au désenchantement wébérien (qui affaiblit l'agentivité humaine) et au psychisme (altéré par le désenchantement) et prend la rencontre poétique avec le renard urbain comme point de rencontre de ces trois éléments. Dans la mythologie, le renard incarnait un dynamisme de transformation grâce auquel, symboliquement, les croyants entretenaient avec le monde une relation où ils étaient des agents liés à une puissance. Ce sentiment agentif a disparu mais les traits caractéristiques de l'image du renard ont survécu. Certains personnages de renards pseudo-rebelles ont intériorisé en partie les hiérarchies sociales et les relations de pouvoir. Au contraire, dans la poésie britannique contemporaine, les caractéristiques anciennes ont graduellement évolué vers un espace nouveau de créativité et de libération existentielle. L'article s'intéresse alors aux poèmes suscités par les rencontres avec le renard urbain et au processus de sublimation artistique qu'ils révèlent. Ce processus accompagne la rencontre et l'acte de création qui s'ensuit. Restaurant l'amour de soi qui manque au monde désenchanté, il encourage les humains à reprendre possession de leur puissance et à renouer des liens empathiques avec le monde.

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### **Mots-clés**

zoopoétique, poésie, littérature britannique contemporaine, ré-enchantement, animaux en littérature, écopoétique

### **Keywords**

zoopoetics, poetry, contemporary British literature, re-enchantment, animals in literature, ecopoetics

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