

The Three Foxes: Animal Representation and Forms of Intelligence in Poems by James Baker Hall by Rhonda Pettit

*The poet is the proud snail Billy
We watch him for the whaleroads
he makes on stone & concrete
The waving stalks
of his eyes
in the early light
The rhythmic contractions
of his slimy sidelit body
The colorful wakes
of his secretions*

— *Praeder's Letters*, James Baker Hall

Motherless children have a hard time when the mother is gone.

—“Motherless Children” (Traditional Song)

The fox, like the proverbial cat, has at least nine lives. As an image in literature, the fox has long been associated with the human attributes of artfulness and cunning, with the ability to outwit larger, more powerful opponents. From Native American and European cultures to Russia and the Ch'u Kingdom of China, fox mythology has embraced the creature as hero, healer, and the embodiment of generative power. At the same time, its contrasting role as the prey of the English hunt is both literal and literary. Other literal elements of the fox's life—it hunts alone, conceals itself well, and constructs its den in any available space above or below ground, such as dense branches, hollow trees or unused sheds—round out the creature's natural image. In terms of contemporary American popular culture, the word *fox* has been associated with film and television programming since the mid-twentieth century, and in 1996—a year relevant to this essay's focus—Fox News Channel was launched on cable television, rising to prominence in the late 1990s and establishing a conservative bias. In terms of gender, *fox* has been slang for a sexy female, shorthand for a fox collar or wrap worn by a woman, and defined (via *vixen*) as an ill-tempered woman. Bandit, seductress, victim, victor: given its broad use as a symbol, and its amalgamation of real and projected traits, particularly that of a

less powerful creature capable of victory through the use of its wits—its quickness of mind, its imagination—we can see why the image of the fox would continue to appeal to poets. Common and familiar as the fox image is, I find it nevertheless intriguing to see a cluster of poets using the same image within a given time period.

During the 1990s, at least six poets—James Baker Hall, W. S. Merwin, Philip Levine, Adrienne Rich, Mary Oliver, and Lucille Clifton—wrote and/or published poems using fox imagery.¹ These individuals are members of the well-known generation of poets who came of age in the post-World War II era, a generation that, influenced by Pound, Jungian archetypes, eastern philosophy, and surrealism, produced several related poetics—Beats, Black Mountain School, Deep Image, Feminist, to name a few. In varying ways these movements sought unity of self and of society in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, and in the face of a conservative, alienating, corporatized American society. This generation also developed a mistrust of language itself. Their position as summarized by Alan Williamson is “that language is one of the most powerful agents of our socialization, leading us to internalize our parents’, our world’s definitions, and to ignore the portions of our authentic experience—the experience of the body and of the unconscious—that do not express themselves directly in verbal terms” (3). Non-human creatures who communicate with nonverbal vocabularies become valuable subjects and figures for the poet who mistrusts language. Animal life figures prominently, repeatedly, in the work of this generation as a way of comprehending collective and individual human failure, and as a source for alternative approaches to modernity. For this reason, their work should be of interest to the growing field of animal representation studies in which the hierarchy of human over animal is challenged in favor of a species-neutral outlook, applied at times to political advocacy regarding animals and humans. Among other concerns, many scholars in this multi-disciplinary field favor a literal representation of animal life over anthropomorphizing metaphor. This outlook, which Marianne Dekoven calls a “posthumanist view of animals” and Rosi Braidotti refers to as “bioegalitarianism, a recognition that we humans and animals are in this together,” predates these twentieth-century poets in some ways, though the field itself has been shaped by the animal rights movement of the 1970s.²

With these concepts in mind, I will focus the following discussion on a smaller cluster of poets from the post-World War II generation whose fox imagery appears in poems published from 1996 to 1999: Merwin (born in 1927), Rich (born in 1929), and Hall (1935-2009).³ Both Merwin and Rich also use the fox image to title their poetry volumes. Merwin’s *The Vixen*, in part an extended elegy concerning his periodic residence in southwest France since the 1950s, was published in 1996 and includes “Fox Sleep” and “Vixen,” as well as other poems that use the fox image.⁴ Rich’s *Fox*, published in 2001 with its title poem written in 1998, offers a broad critique of late twentieth-century humanity. Hall’s use of the fox image during this period occurs in three poems from his 1999 volume, *The Mother on the Other Side of the World*, appearing in the book in the following order: “*Ars Poetica*” (written in 1998), “The Fox” (written in 1981), and “It Felt So Good but Many Times I Cried” (written in the late 1980s).⁵ This volume, dedicated to his mother who committed suicide when Hall was eight years old, explores not only the meaning and effect of his mother’s death; it observes and interrogates the nature of the search for meaning itself. To some extent, all three of these poets use the image of the fox to represent inspiration.

Following a brief consideration of the poems by Merwin and Rich, I will offer an extended close reading of Hall’s fox poems, with occasional brief forays into related poems and prose by Hall, to demonstrate: 1) his place in this generation of poets, 2)

his technical mastery as a poet, and 3) a recurring motif in his work: the poet's need for rational and non-rational forms of intelligence in art and life as seen in his use of animal imagery. By non-rational intelligence I mean that which is achieved by one's sensory perceptions of the world, and by attention to the subconscious processing of those perceptions. Those who approach animal representation studies by way of post-structuralist analysis of Enlightenment rationalism might object to the human/rational, animal/non-rational terminology I will apply here, but in using this dichotomy I do not intend a hierarchy of human over animal, only a difference between the two, one that Hall's poetry recognizes and honors.

Merwin's *The Vixen* concerns itself with the passing of time and its relationship to remnants and disappearances. The volume opens with "Fox Sleep," a five-part poem that presents three related images of the fox that broadly represent an awakening from false and simplistic assumptions about reality. He alludes to this theme in part two, where he asserts what a lesser poet would have used as the poem's conclusion — "What I thought I had left I kept finding again / but when I went looking for what I thought I remembered / as anyone could have foretold it was not there" (2.1-3)—thus allowing us to engage with his three foxes on their own literal and metaphorical terms. The first fox appears in the image of an old mill's grinding ring that had been carved in the shape of a fox sleeping head to tail, and worn from use. The ring, which sits among other mill items being sold off piecemeal, offers an image of decay, and is visible only "if you looked closely" (1.26). The second image, also suggesting a sleeping fox, moves the poem from the pragmatic to a parable of shape-shifting. A man speaking before a crowd is turned into a fox after answering "yes" when asked: "When someone has wakened to what is really there / is that person free of the chain of consequences" (3.9-10). The man is later freed from the body of the fox, and thus awakened, only after he hears the correct answer to the question he was asked: "That person sees it as it is" (3.17). He then asks the crowd to bury the body of the fox he was—a literal fox body found on the other side of the mountain—as "one of your own" (3.21). In doing so, they, too, are awakened, one individual by asking the question, "what if he had given the right answer every time" (3.28), and the others by hearing it and thus, presumably, having to deal with it. The third image is also a literal fox, a dead vixen the poet finds in a field the night before he is to leave the area for good. He carries it home and buries it in his garden, in a show of respect, as one of his own. Without denigrating animals or humans, Merwin has used a combination of literal and metaphorical fox imagery to register not only loss, but a movement toward clarity of perception, essential to the poet's trade as well as to the life well lived.

This subtle connection between the fox and poetic inspiration is more directly asserted in "Vixen," the next-to-last poem in the volume. This poem addresses the fox, and from the first line grants it elevated and paradoxical status. The vixen is the "comet of stillness princess of what is over," and ultimately the symbol of the lost or missing material the poet seeks, the "keeper of kept secrets / of the destroyed stories the escaped dreams the sentences / never caught in words" (l. 3-5). The poem later links the vixen to perception and clarity: "When I have seen you I have waked and slipped from the calendars / from the creeds of difference and the contradictions / that were my life . . ." (l. 16-18), echoing themes in "Fox Sleep." By the end of the poem, the fox has become the embodiment of loss as a driving force of the imagination. Merwin writes, ". . . when you are no longer anything / let me catch sight of you again going over the wall / . . . let my words find their own / places in the silence after the animals" (l. 20-21, 23-24). The tension between its presence and absence leads Merwin to write what is essentially an elegy for inspiration.

Rich's critique of humanity in her volume *Fox* responds to its shortcomings with a quasi-elegaic longing. In the title poem, Rich embodies what she seems to lack in the image of a female fox, using both "fox" and "vixen" to represent the female. Taking advantage of the indeterminate gender identity that the term "fox" permits, Rich draws on both the cleverness associated with fox behavior in literal and metaphorical terms, as well as its link to female sexuality in popular culture, and the vixen's secondary definition in the OED as an ill-tempered, quarrelsome woman. The fox Rich craves would have every right to be ill-tempered; she has survived the "briars of legend" and the "truth of briars," and thus with "lacerated skin calling legend to account" could offer an example of "a vixen's courage in vixen terms" (lines 6, 9, 13, 14). For Rich, this desire itself provides further evidence of human failure: "For a human animal to call for help / on another animal is the most riven the most revolted cry on earth" (l. 15-17). The human in Rich's poem is both animal and somewhat different from animal, searching for some kind of ability or knowledge that humans lack and should not have to seek from a non-rational being, implying a hierarchy of sorts. The extreme nature of the call is emphasized by the alliteration of "riven" (split, torn apart) and "revolted" (rebellion and disgust). By the end of the poem it serves as an analogy for "the birth-yell of the yet-to-be human child" (l. 22), suggesting the extent to which humanity has yet to evolve. Though bearing scars, Rich's vixen is similar to Merwin's: both represent an elusive and feminine muse or source of needed knowledge.

James Baker Hall is the youngest and lesser known poet of this trio. A native of Lexington, Kentucky, his first book was a novel, *Yates Paul, His Grand Flights, His Tootings*, published in 1962 following his Wallace Stegner fellowship to Stanford. The novel's poetic allusions—the title character "Yates" a homonym for poet William Butler Yeats; and the presence of Wallace Stevens' poem "The Sleight-of-Hand Man" in both the novel's title and its conclusion—seem to forecast Hall's later shift to poetry. Given his debut as a novelist, it is not surprising to see character-driven work in Hall's early poems published in the 1970s. Several of these focus on his observations about friends and fellow writers—Bob Holman, Ed McClanahan, Gurney Norman, Wendell Berry—and other individuals he observed.⁶ These poems, with their long, prosy, verb-driven titles; their use, at times, of informal speech and verb-deprived voices; their cataloging description; and their humorous insights are externally driven; their focus is on an individual as largely separate from the speaker/observer. In later poems, Hall's use of the external world will serve less as stand-alone subject matter, and more as the vehicle of his truth-seeking. What kinds of intelligence can we draw on to comprehend our selves over time, our time in any given place and moment? Hall's poetry becomes a pursuit of that kind of knowledge, drawing on both rational and non-rational forms of intelligence, and acknowledging at times that the mystery remains. Animal imagery abounds in both *The Mother* (1999) and in many of Hall's poems in *Stopping on the Edge to Wave* (1988), and is often present when rational and non-rational processing of experience intersect in a poem.

One of Hall's early poems, "The Family of Man Resides in the House of Philosophy," alludes to this concern. The poem's opening stanza describes a humorous domestic scene in which two young brothers annoy each other with a repetition of two food-related questions, prompting their now annoyed parents to ask them why they keep asking each other the same questions. The second and last stanza brings this ruckus to a close:

and

it is decided finally that nobody

describe inspiration without drawing on the antiquated image of the feminine muse, itself a non-rational construction with an excessive life span? Hall's fox that carries "his tail" defines a masculine muse—unlike the female fox-as-muse in the poems of Merwin and Rich—acknowledged for its literal quickness rather than for anthropomorphic projections of wit. By comparison, the lingering, ephemeral feminine muse seems lethargic, and the phallic overtones of "pen" and "ink" are reminiscent of Seamus Heaney's poem, "Digging." Nevertheless, the concrete image of the fox provides a fitting metaphor for the speed with which thoughts enter and leave the mind, sometimes lodging in the den of memory, and other times not. This postmodern, revisionist muse remains somewhat elusive when it interacts with the rational mind as represented in the poem by images of human invention.

The fox, a non-rational being, is encountered via "your headlights"—not just the metaphorical light of one's perceiving mind, but the light of the automobile, a literal, physical product of the rational mind. The headlight and its vehicle, like the human life, moves on just as the fox does; for the two to encounter each other, and for the encounter to stick involves both chance and effort. The fox's tail is "(like a pen running out of ink)"—another human invention, and one that can fail if its other half, ink, is missing or used up. The fact that this simile is contained within parentheses invites us to read the poem without it, suggesting that the comparison itself is less important than the quickness of the fox, the thought or inspiration it represents, and the poem, which both relies on and potentially rejects the comparison. Simile and metaphor are not just literary devices; they provide a way for the rational mind to comprehend new experience. This mental processing takes longer to complete than the event or moment that set the process in motion. The use of the parenthetical simile and its optional reading allows the poem to demonstrate two experiences: the flash of unexpected inspiration, vision, or thought which can seem to arise from a non-rational source, and the slower, more rational processing of that experience.

Another aspect of the poem's form reinforces its expression of speed and of inspiration's relationship to non-rationality: it is a four-line sentence fragment ending with a dash, replicating a thought snatched at random, its prior and subsequent connections remaining unknown, mysterious. And yet, by title it is presented as that most rational of texts: an *ars poetica*, an explanation, a theory. This is not a how-to *ars poetica*; it is a what-is *ars poetica*; it describes a moment of inspiration rather than explains it; even its undermining of the simile works against the concept of rational explanation that drives the typical *ars poetica*. A sense of loss interwoven with the creative process itself also permeates the poem: inspiration comes in a flash by chance and just as quickly disappears. The imagist and intellectual density in this poem is reminiscent of Pound's "In a Station at the Metro," but I am also reminded of Ruthmarie Mitsch's comment about Dorothy Parker's ability to capture, in her poem "Iseult of Brittany," many elements of a large legend in two quatrains: such a feat, she argues, "is true poetry."⁷

The arrested moment and its relationship to vision, rather than quickness, is the focus of a second and longer fox poem (29 lines), "The Fox." This poem also blurs the distinctions between rational and non-rational mental processing. Although it is a single-stanza, free form poem with no punctuation, it can be organized into three sections based on its presentation of time.⁸ The first 15 lines recount the experience of the speaker and at least one other person (in reality, Hall and his wife Mary Ann Taylor-Hall) who encountered a fox in a pasture. The next seven lines refer to the more distant past, making it clear that this walk and setting are a familiar one: "for

years we've watched this pasture" (l. 16). The last seven lines bring us to the present and allude as well to the future, opening with "when I am restless" (l. 23). Although the sudden appearance of the fox seems to prompt the poem, its importance is both essential and nearly negated by the end of the poem.

Vision is a recurring motif that is attributed not only to the people and fox watching each other, but made relevant to the landscape as well. The poem opens with: "the blind side / of the hill came through / an opening in the trees it opened / out into the pasture . . ." (l. 1-3), blindness setting up a sense of mystery and the unexpected that the poem explores. A phrase from Hall's first "*Ars Poetica*"—"the moment / given form"—is echoed in "The Fox" while the speaker and his companion observe the pasture: "we were waiting / to see what forms would evolve" (l. 5-6), literally referring to the creatures or events that might transpire in the pasture, metaphorically to the poem that might result. Eventually, a fox enters the pasture and though it carefully looks around, the speaker reveals:

. . . it stopped in front of us
as though it saw
we were not there
not even a body
moved where would it go (l. 11-15)

Both fox and observers are caught in an arrested moment where what will happen next is unknown. The line breaks and run-on sentences suggest the inevitability of movement, the poem revealing its knowledge formally rather than linguistically. Eventually the fox and observers will move, will disappear—as will this arrested moment unless it is captured in art—but the mystery of when that will happen and what the movement beyond this moment will bring is unknown. Animal and human relate in other ways. The experience of coming upon an animal suddenly brings out in humans what it brings out in animals: an immediate halt to motion, a quickening of the senses, a tensing of muscle and nerve until it is determined whether or not danger is present. It brings out the "animal nature" in humans. What appears to be the fox's blindness with regard to the presence of the still, observant humans also suggests a leveling of human superiority. Neither posing nor intending threat, the humans become part of, rather than master of, the natural world.

In the poem's second section, the speaker tells us, "for years we've watched this pasture / coming through that opening" (l. 16-17); this in combination with the previous phrase "we were waiting" creates a sense of expectation, planning, and possible routine: the observers have previously experienced events of this kind. But in spite of this repetition, the fox still arrests them, still draws from them the sudden, keen observation that, in the animal world, keeps creatures alive; in the human world makes humans most alive. Expectations are not just met, but defined: the form that evolves this time is a fox, though it is not named in the poem's second section. It reappears in the last section, revived and then rejected as representative of a yearning the speaker has but cannot or refuses name:

when I am restless
I think it must be the fox
trying to come back
but it's a breath
on my face my neck

of old my heart
beating has come for each thing (l. 23-29)

The vagueness of “thing” returns us to the poem’s subject: the mystery of unexpected encounters, their occurrence as well as their possible meaning, echoing “the blind side” that opens the poem. In postmodern fashion, the fox that inspired the poem and the poet’s reflection has nevertheless led the speaker to a point of departure rather than an epiphany. It offers no moral, solution, or answer.

Whereas the foxes in “*Ars Poetica*” and “The Fox” were initially observed as living creatures prior to representing an encounter with inspiration or a search for meaning, the fox in “It Felt So Good but Many Times I Cried” refers to a fox fur wrap or collar— “her piece we called it” (l. 20) —that belonged to Hall’s mother before she committed suicide. The voice of the poem is an adult looking back through the perspective of a young boy who periodically disrobes, climbs into the den-like enclosure of a cedar closet containing his mother’s garments, and begins to caress the fox fur. The poem guides us through a ritual of grief the young boy has created in which the fox fur represents his missing mother. He is conscious of the fox’s “missing body” (lines 27 and 37) and the scent of the mother it carries (lines 16-17). The encounter with the fox fur becomes increasingly sexual, creating a metaphorical journey from innocence to experience. The speaker first “ask[s] permission” (l. 10) of the fox “to touch” it (l. 9), also an early indication of a child’s perspective in the voice of the poem. The action then proceeds with “smell” (l. 16) “rubbed” (l. 26), “kissed” (l. 30), “I may even have stuck my tongue inside its mouth” (l. 31), and “mounted it rode it” (l. 35). The poem’s sexuality with its climax of comfort and tears is designed to bring the reader into the trauma of the loss itself as experienced initially by the boy emotionally and physically, and later by the poet intellectually and creatively. Boundaries between human and animal, rational and non-rational, blur throughout the poem.

Key components of this strategy appear in lines 9-17 where the speaker shifts from the first person “I” pronoun to the second person “you” and “your” pronouns that serve grammatically to draw the reader into the experience with the speaker. The section also presents a set of instructions one must follow in order to participate in the speaker’s ritual:

in order to touch the fox
first you had to go into its face and ask permission
then you had to take its yellow eyes to the door
to the crack only when it knew where it was
were you free to run your hands up and down
the whole length of its fur . . . (l. 9-14)

Rituals themselves are a paradoxical construct, embracing the rational in pursuit of the non-rational, be it religious, spiritual, or mystical. They typically employ a set of rules or procedures that, while invested in symbol and/or mystery, nevertheless suggest a rational, more or less linear process for achieving the desired effect. The presence of this construct in the poem provides another layer of rational/non-rational interaction in the poem’s exploration of a boy’s grieving for his mother.

This section of the poem also personifies the fox fur for the first time, a way for the child to instill life in the empty pelt. But after the section closes with the speaker’s ability to smell the scent of the mother, the fur becomes an “it” (l. 16), a “piece” (l. 18), and the poem returns to its first person pronoun and increasing sexuality. Naked in

the den with the fox, the boy becomes more animal-like in both a sexual and mystical sense. After completing the caressing and kissing that constitute the poem's foreplay, the boy is "ready" (35):

I mounted it rode it
Mother's fur was there right there
its missing body was there
entering mine and many other things
as well as entering me . . . (35-39)

These lines move back and forth, between presence and absence, mirroring the tangible loss the boy feels. The phrase "Mother's fur" as a reference to the fox also alludes to the mother's pubic hair, certainly a sexually charged image but also suggesting origins, birth, life. The "missing body" in the next line, however, brings us back to loss. The mother's absence permeates "many . . . things": the fox pelt and the boy, including the boy's sense of his own missing body, at least for the duration of this encounter. The boy's merging with the fox pelt is simultaneously a merging with the loss of his mother, and with loss itself as a defining element of his life. Readers experience the recurrence of this loss and the trap it creates formally. The poem's title is repeated with slight variation in line 29, and again in the last two lines of the poem, returning the reader to the poem's beginning, placing us in the speaker's cycle—a den of sorts—of desire and loss, comfort and grief.

This image of a den-like enclosure where rational, non-rational, and sexual encounters take place is seen also in Hall's first novel, *Yates Paul, His Grand Flights, His Tootings* (1962, 2002). Yates Paul, the novel's protagonist, is a young adolescent boy who never knew his mother. His father, a portrait and wedding photographer, runs his own studio where Yates spends much of his time and feels "more at home there than in the lonesome house" they share (22). The novel tracks his movement within two den-like, interior spaces from which Yates considers the world of adults: the darkroom of his father's studio where he develops prints, and his own imagination.

A complicated and essential place for Yates, the darkroom represents power and creation as well as mere technique. Hall provides a Whitmanian catalog of the darkroom's contents, a place that was "the most orderly and the most changeless," yet nevertheless offered the power to change one's view of reality (50). It both isolates and empowers Yates:

The darkroom was a kind of world to itself: the temperature was constant, the humidity controlled, it had its own knowable laws, and the man who worked there, if he knew his business, had almost God-like control over everything. No one could enter unless he wanted them to. . . . In negative the world was black and dead, as lifeless as a blue baby, and he was the God-like doctor who could leave it that way or enlarge it with light into life as he saw fit. He didn't have to take any guff—if anybody messed with him, he'd crop their heads off. In the darkroom, Yates was boss, and he loved it. (51-52)

In the darkroom where Yates has the god-like control of a technician, the creation of images requires an eye for composition, thus some imaginative vision is involved. However, their creation is also dependent upon chemicals, temperatures, precise timing, and procedures, a process that is scientific and rational. Images are locked into place on the paper, becoming concrete, archival, and to a large degree literal.

However, like the den-like enclosure of the mother's closet in "It Felt So Good but Many Times I Cried," the darkroom is also a sexualized space. It becomes the

recurring scene of Yates' voyeuristic encounters with sexuality. While his father's married assistant, Bob Barret, conducts secret liaisons with Dunster Bingham near the air conditioner in the darkroom, Yates develops prints at the sink. Only eleven years old and busy with his work, Yates "was never sure exactly what happened over there—it was dark (only not that dark) . . . but he had a general idea," and concluded that "a general idea was enough, at least for the time being" (35). Later, Yates would observe from a vent in the darkroom his father taking photographs of a nude model (202-203). This Blakean rupture of innocence by experience—or more specifically, by the experience of observing—brings the external world into the darkroom. Exposure becomes a process beyond that of chemicals and images on paper that Yates can control.

The "grand flights" and "tootings" of Yates—his imagination—construct the second interior space he occupies. In one he is landing a B-24 while manning the tail gun (17); in another he is a baseball star, "Yates the Splendid Splinter Paul" (70). A more revealing fantasy involves his darkroom and photography tasks. While Yates is proud of being, in his mind, "the best darkroom technician in Lexington," he also recognizes that the darkroom is not world enough; one of his grand flights is to be "an artist of landscapes. The pictures he dreamed of taking didn't have people in them" (54). His choice of subject matter, however, provides not only the familiar image of the lone artist, but that of a young boy's loneliness and Oedipal tensions with the wifeless father. The work his father did was "commercial bunk, none of these dumb people and their dumb weddings for Yates Paul" (55). Boredom with the routine nature of this work is not the only issue alluded to here; the "dumb weddings" represent that union of two people, the complete family unit, missing from Yates' life. An eventual escape from the darkroom will mean an escape from the constant reminder of his mother loss, but it will also put him in the imperfect world where that loss occurred. For Yates, the mother's absence permeates the darkroom and the world beyond it, just as the mother's missing body as represented by the fox pelt in "It Felt So Good" entered the speaker and "many other things"—a deliberately generic phrase that expresses the ubiquitous nature of the loss experienced by the boy.

In his poetry and fiction, Hall explores loss as both a defining element of his personal life, and as a broader aspect of creature existence. The foxes in "*Ars Poetica*" and "The Fox" are literal animals that, in the life of the poem, conduct their own, natural lives. They enter and exit the speaker's vision in their own time. Experienced in this way, the foxes allow the human observer to come into contact with his own anima—his spirit—and with the instinctual, non-rational aspects of his intelligence. Another word for this, of course, is inspiration; like Merwin and Rich, Hall seeks a non-verbalized knowledge he can translate into poetry. "It Felt So Good" differs from Hall's other two fox poems, in that its fox ceases to exist before the poem begins; its pelt can only serve as a representation of the mother, her death, the child's loss, and the physicality of that loss. Yet all three poems achieve their insight or wisdom when the line between human and animal existence is made permeable.

Although I have drawn on concepts associated with animal representation studies for this analysis, I am not claiming that the poems discussed here were consciously shaped by these concepts. This essay suggests that this field somewhat follows, rather than leads, this group of poets. More importantly, animal representation studies raise thorny questions about lives and texts, ranging from actual relationships between human and non-human animal life, to a poet's use of language, metaphor, and imagination. Can the poet who uses anthropomorphizing animal imagery offer insight and

understanding without being accused of slighting the integrity of animal life? Is there such a thing as compassionate anthropomorphizing? Is this a question of creating responsible metaphor? An answer might be found in the first epigraph to this essay. The humanity embedded in the work of Hall, Merwin, and Rich (and many in their generation) generally extends to the broad spectrum of existence, out of respect for, connection with, and responsibility to that existence. Their poetry derives in large part from close and long-term observation of the natural world. To extend a bit the epigraph by Hall, the poet is “the proud snail,” by virtue of never withdrawing into its shell, thus capable of seeing the world and all its creatures on their own terms, even if by way of metaphor.

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Endnotes

Epigraphs: “11.7.56 SJPR,” *Praeder’s Letters* in James Baker Hall, *The Total Light Process: New and Selected Poems*, Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press, 2004 (211-212). “Motherless Children,” author unknown. Well-known and recent recordings are by Eric Clapton, Lucinda Williams, and Roseanne Cash.

1. For those poems not discussed in this paper, see Lucille Clifton, “Telling Our Stories,” “Fox,” “The Coming of Fox,” “Dear Fox,” “Leaving Fox,” “One Year Later,” and “A Dream of Foxes” from *The Terrible Stories* (1996) and included in *Blessing the Boats* (2000); Philip Levine, “The Fox” (1982); and Mary Oliver, “Foxes in Winter” in *House of Light* (1990), “Foxes in Winter” in *White Pine* (1994); and “The Fox” (1993) in *Poetry Comes Up Where It Can* (2000).

2. See Braidotti and DeKoven. This issue of *PMLA* devotes a section of “Theories and Methodologies” to animal studies. Some of the poets in the post-World War II generation use anthropomorphizing metaphor in their animal poems; see for example Philip Levine, “The Fox,” and Ted Hughes, “The Thought-Fox.” Richard Webster has argued that Hughes’ fox is subject to the violence of the poet’s imagination; it “lives triumphantly as an idea—as part of the poet’s own identity—but dies as a fox” (5). Merwin, a friend of Hughes, may have known this poem.

3. Merwin and Hall were friends and admirers of each other’s work, as were Merwin and Rich.

4. See for example “In the Doorway” (30) and “Completion” (54). For an earlier fox poem, see “Plea for a Captive” (from *The Drunk in the Furnace* (1960)) in W. S. Merwin, *Selected Poems*, New York: Atheneum, 1988 (59).

5. Dates provided by Mary Ann Taylor-Hall, electronic correspondence, February 15, 2010.

6. “The Poet Finds an Ephemeral Home in a “Truck Stop on the New Jersey Turnpike, C.A. 1970 (3-5); “Captain Kentucky” (for Ed McClanahan, 6-7); “Gurney Norman, Kentucky Coal Field Orphan, Is Gurney Stronger Than History, or What?” (8-9); “The Mad Farmer Stands Up in Kentucky for What He Thinks Is Right” (about Wendell Berry, 10) in *The Total Light Process*.

7. “Parker’s ‘Iseult of Brittany,’” *Explicator* 4:22 (Winter 1986), 37-40.

8. Hall probably did not intend for the poem to be read in “parts” given its single-stanza form, and its use of enjambment and run-ons.