

Shining Light on the Shadows of Thought

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29 February 2024

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Like a creature in flight, H. L. Hix's enigmatic poem "The Last Crows Whose Cries Are Audible Here" is a manifestation of thoughts dispersed. It is a sonnet characterized by evasiveness: one that witnesses the flight of crows to navigate notions as grand and transient as "the wind / their one Master" (9-10). Like a creature in flight, the poem is hard to follow. Natural elements appear within complicated syntax to juxtapose large powers with mere humans who struggle to comprehend 14 lines. Throughout the poem, Hix develops the metaphor that crows are people's original thoughts to explore the difficulty of harboring authentic ideas amidst the influence of others.

The first quatrain locates the speaker as a tree and his thoughts as crows to contrast the immobile body against the fleeting ideas of the mind. Hix begins the poem with a sequence of antithetical images, writing:

In this tree the crows condense at dusk
Only to evaporate at daybreak.
They are the questions one knows not to ask,
The answers one does not know how to take. (1-4)

There are direct as well as subliminal metaphors in the first four lines. Indeed, Hix chooses *not* to obscure the comparison of crows to questions and answers. He makes clear that the crows "are" formulations of language—thoughts in one's mind not necessarily verbalized nor digested. This tone of certainty conflicts with how the speaker does "not know" how to approach the answers. The clash between tone and content reflects the paradoxical concept that although the speaker's thoughts are hard to "take," he *knows* that they are hard to take. Noting this correlation, the first word of the poem gives insight to the relationship between thinker and thought—tree and crow.

The birds are not “on” or “around” just any tree: they are “in this” tree. The word “this” establishes proximity between the speaker and the tree, and “in” suggests the speaker knows the plant well, as he notes details an outsider would not be aware of. Additionally, “only” holds an aspect of emotionality, as if the tree is disappointed that the birds leave. This sentiment connects the speaker to the tree because a third party would have no feeling about the crows’ dispersal at daybreak. Additionally, trees physically resemble human bodies with their various limbs, finger-like sticks, and vertical form. Through these two metaphors, Hix cements the speaker’s location while providing his thoughts the freedom to “evaporate,” creating a sense of helplessness in the speaker.

The meter simultaneously emphasizes the struggle to keep original thoughts within one’s mind. Line 1 is in trochaic meter and has only nine syllables. The catalectic ending increases stress on the line’s final word: dusk. This becomes significant because line 2 is also in trochaic meter but has ten words, which causes an unsettling pause between “day” and “break,” which are the ninth and tenth syllables. One must linger on the contrast between dusk and day. The visual motifs of dark vs. light provide various implications, but the understanding that crows represent thoughts correlates to how complex ideas are abundant when someone is alone at night, but they dissipate when the person is among others during the day. Hix furthers this concept in lines 3-4, as he injects the lines with opposing notions such as questions vs. answers, ask vs. take, and “knows not” vs. “not know.” This bilateral diction creates a bouncing motion, where one thing is reflected off another, just as how people’s thoughts are influenced by others. The inverted syntax between “one knows not” and “one does not know” adds to the complexity because it becomes difficult to tell how the two phrases are different. This mirrors the challenge of deciphering

whether one's ideas are actually their own. Hix compounds the confusion through the rhyme scheme. Whereas lines 2 and 4 have a perfect rhyme, lines 1 and 3 have a slant rhyme. Furthermore, there is consonance throughout all four lines with the "k" sound. By having overlapping as well as incongruent features, Hix dilutes the ability to tell which words are most similar and thus reproduces the struggle of pinpointing one's own ideas. The placement of "evaporate" and "condense" adds to the disorientation because one expects water in evaporation to be higher than water in condensation, yet "evaporate" is in a lower line. This mixing up of direction continues into the second quatrain.

Surely enough, a metaphor that involves a different form of water illustrates the impossible task of tracking one's undiluted thoughts during the day. The poem follows the crows: "Their flights / Are lines in verse translations of the snow" (5-6). The enjambment abruptly cuts off the crows' flights. Line 5 ends with a dependent clause that lacks direction. It feels as though birds should fly horizontally along a plane, yet the next word, "into," drops vertically into the line below. These structural choices obfuscate where the crows are. Likewise, the comparison between the birds' flight and snow is perplexing because snow falls vertically yet lands on a horizontal landscape. These various directions make it difficult to track the poem's meaning, just as how it is difficult to track one's thoughts when they do not follow a clear path. It is interesting to note that the flights are in "verse translations" of the snow; while verse translations attempt to maintain a similar rhythm and line length as the original, no translation across languages can be perfect. As such, there is some difference between the crows' flights and snow. Hix reveals this difference in the next line, writing that the flights are in verse translations of the snow "Into a tongue, inscrutable by light, / That no diurnal mind will ever know" (7-8).

Whereas snow can evaporate, the crows' flights are "inscrutable by light." This imagery builds on the contrast between dusk and day and suggests that authentic thoughts exist so deep in the darkness—in the corners of one's mind—that a consciousness awake during the daytime cannot come across or understand them. Moreover, the perfect rhymes of "flights" and "light" as well as the assonance of "snow, know, and no" places auditory emphasis on light and know. The aforementioned negative phrases "knows not" and "not know" compound the "no" meaning of the homophone know/no. As such, Hix emphasizes the *inability* for diurnal beings to ever comprehend the crows—the complex thoughts that people produce alone at night.

The lack of visual imagery increases the concentration on sounds, which permeate the final sestet. Hix finally introduces something the crows *are* subjected to: the wind. He gives power to this force, saying, "Their names are given by the wind, their one / Master, whose calls to them are audible" (9-10). Again, the enjambment isolates certain words such as "master." The fact that line 9 is in iambic pentameter but the first word of line 10 is a trochee further creates an uneven rhythm where the stressed syllables are inverted at "master." This change in rhythm that happens concurrently with the introduction of a larger power suggests a volta. Unlike the speaker, the wind can identify and even name the crows. The intangibility of wind—already a classic symbol of inspiration—supports the notion that creativity **Lies** larger power. XXXt is the wind that allows the crows to take off, not the tree.

The poem concludes with a series of cryptic exclamations that complicate whether Hix plays into or revolts against the speaker's contemplations. Hix elaborates on the calls that are audible:

Among their own: *Wherefore, Nothing, In vain,*
Burning burning burned, Lost, Impalpable,
Map of the abyss, Listen my love listen,

Illegible, Hardly, The unchained fall. (9-14)

“Among their own” is a double entendre. The phrase could refer to the crows as their own species, which implies the calls are audible only to these birds, explaining why the speaker cannot hear the calls or understand the thoughts. However, the subsequent lines offer the more likely interpretation that the wind’s calls are heard even among the crows’ own calls. Hix directly references in line 10 a section of Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality* which reads, “Here is snow; here life has grown silent; the last crows whose cries are audible here are called ‘wherefore!’, ‘in vain!’, ‘*nada!*’” Nietzsche’s philosophy has an evident impact on the poem, yet Hix chooses to delete Nietzsche’s “*nada*” and add his own phrases for three whole lines. By doing so, Hix both follows and breaks the expectations the poem had established: he introduces original ideas but in a language that mirrors and builds off of Nietzsche’s. The asyndeton makes it difficult to tell whether Hix could trace his own thoughts or if they just spilled out into the poem. Furthermore, the second interpretation of “in their own” insinuates that the crows’ calls may exist within lines 11-14. It is impossible to distinguish whether phrases like “*Burning burning burned,*” “*Illegible,*” or “*Listen my love listen,*” are calls of the wind or the crows. The poem maintains that it is hard to distinguish original thoughts from those influenced by others.

“The Last Crows Whose Cries Are Audible Here” is a poem that includes various directions, crossing boundaries between author, speaker, and reader. Its bilateral language infuses the overarching motif of reflection,

in which thoughts and phrases become hard to comprehend in isolation. The enjambment and meter play into this, stressing two particular words—flights and wind—that exacerbate the imbalanced relationship between people's thoughts and the force that drives them. The obscure path of the crows reflects the abstruse ways in which thoughts reside in or flee from people's minds. Ultimately, although the title is an exact reflection of Nietzsche's words, the poem concludes with Hix's personal continuation of the passage, perhaps indicating that authentic ideas do exist but are buried beneath those influenced by others.

- Crosses boundaries in different directions