

Keith Sagar
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Ted Hughes: Collected Poems
Edited by Paul Keegan
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With the strange exception of *Gaudete*, this handsome volume contains virtually all Hughes' published poems for adults – over a thousand. For those who have read little of his work, it offers one of the poetic experiences of a lifetime. For those familiar with the major trade editions, it contains hundreds of equally fine poems which appeared only in limited editions, anthologies and periodicals.

From the moment he was given Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* by his English teacher, it became evident that Hughes was deeply stirred by the ancient role of the poet as servant of what he later called the Goddess of Complete Being, as prophet and healer. Studying anthropology at Cambridge allowed him to familiarize himself with much of the world's mythology and folklore, with the function of the shaman, and with those bodies of traditional wisdom (often esoteric) preserved in all cultures. Myth, folklore and literature which had lasted for centuries seemed to him to have done so because it answered the deepest permanent needs of the race.

In 1979 Hughes wrote in a letter to me:

Do you remember that article about Yeats in the *Kenyon Review*, where Auden dismissed the whole of Eastern mystical and religious philosophy, the whole tradition of Hermetic Magic (which is a good part of Jewish Mystical philosophy, not to speak of the mystical philosophy of the Renaissance), the whole historical exploration into spirit life at every level of consciousness, the whole deposit of earlier and other religion, myth, vision, traditional wisdom and story and folk belief, on which Yeats based all his work, everything he did or attempted to bring about, as 'embarrassing nonsense'?

Hughes connected his own imagination to this colossal inheritance. *Wodwo* draws heavily on Arthurian and Oriental (especially Buddhist) sources; the Crow project drew particularly on North American Indian and Inuit folklore; *Prometheus on his Crag* is, of course, Greek myth; *Cave Birds* is overtly alchemical; the *Gaudete* epilogue poems were

inspired by Tamil vacanas; in *Adam and the Sacred Nine* the primary source is Talmudic ... Running beneath all Hughes works were such controlling texts as *The Bacchae*, Wolfram's *Parzival*, the Sufi masterpiece *The Conference of the Birds*, 'The Ancient Mariner', Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, and Lorca's *Theory and Function of the Duende*. What gave coherence to such a multi-cultural body of material was, in addition to the tendency of all such sources to converge and overlap, a broadly Jungian psychology and the kind of holistic/biocentric consciousness in Hughes that we have come to call deep ecology. Far from dipping into the myth-kitty for easy resonance, Hughes recycled such material through his own experience both as a unique individual and as a representative modern Western man. The imagination calls the ego to judgement for its manifold crimes against both outer nature and our own deepest inner natures.

Hughes inherited from Blake and Lawrence a conviction that modern Western man has built up over two thousand years layer upon layer of insulation, both physical and psychic, against nature, including all nature's sustaining and creative energies, imagination and spirit. The poet is needed as never before in the role of what Russell Hoban calls a 'connection man', attempting to heal in himself the fatal split between body and spirit, man and nature, self and not-self, male and female. When most of the other poets of his post-war generation were retreating from engagement with anything beyond the ordinary, Hughes wanted to 'open negotiations with whatever happened to be out there'.

His first task was to remove not only the insulation but also the rose-coloured spectacles of our Wordsworthian inheritance, the preoccupation with beauty, the sentimental idea that nature 'never did betray the heart that loved her'. Hughes' nature had to include suffering, predation, decay and death.

At first he tried to resolve the warring energies by imposing poetic controls, as in music. But he soon realized that this too was an ego-preserving activity which would have to be abandoned. Having stripped away all the accretions, he imagined himself as a woad, a little larval being emerging into a baffling world a step and a step, trying to define a place for himself. This emergence was thwarted by the tragedy of the death of his wife, Sylvia Plath. His vision for a while was of a world made of blood, of nature as monstrous. After some years of silence, he began again to try to reconstitute himself in the folklore figure of Crow. The original idea was that Crow re-enacts not only all Hughes' errors, but all the errors of the race (or the male half of it), begins to learn at last from his mistakes,

seeks correction, embarks on a quest for the female, formerly his victim, now his intended bride. But just as his story began its upward turn, and Crow began to become a man, Hughes was thrown back into numbness by a second personal tragedy.

It was not poetry so much as fishing and farming, both modes of connecting himself with the source, which saved him from a world-rejecting nihilism or absurdism. His controlling image of blood transmutes to mud in the farming poems, to water in the river poems, and to light in the Elmet poems. Writing to 'stay within hearing' of younger readers also helped him to see beyond the obvious deaths and failures to the essential miracle of life's persistence. The affirmations, when they come, have the authenticity of something fully paid for, not just by a full look at the worst, but by living through it. The style of the poems is now purged of all rhetoric, all display of ego. Their flow of energy seems to be that of unmediated life itself, replete with spirit.

After *River* Hughes turned mainly to prose, a decision he later regretted. Hitherto he had had no interest in 'confessional' poetry, and had kept a resolute silence about his relationship with Sylvia Plath. Personal experience, including his relationship with Plath, had informed all his poetry, but had there been transmuted imaginatively into universally relevant forms. He came to feel that he had damaged himself by refusing to deal more directly with that relationship. But he was not interested in exploiting it merely as a quarry for impassioned poems. The only point in writing about it would be if he could see a way to come to an understanding of what had happened and why, which would have a healing function, not only for himself but for his readers. To do that he had to find an objective framework. The first such framework which had occurred to him was the myth of Orpheus, but he felt that such an application would be seen as facile, and waited decades until he came to see how perfectly the story fitted within the complex framework of Cabbala. Ann Skea has demonstrated conclusively in her unfinished book *Poetry and Magic*, that the 88 poems of *Birthday Letters* correspond exactly to the 22 paths in the 4 worlds of Cabbala. Hughes did not, of course, expect his readers to know this. The system was mainly for his own benefit. But it was not simply scaffolding which could be removed once the house was built. Cabbala, like all other attempts to find some way of ordering and comprehending the art of living and dying, is assumed to interconnect with what the reader does know, and reverberate, through its imagery, below the level of full consciousness.

Most of Hughes' poems were written in carefully ordered sequences, where the whole is much more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, his poems are so much part of his life, forming the stages of a finally accomplished quest, that no selection, however generous, can do justice to his achievement. This volume gives us the opportunity to read an entire oeuvre as a sequence, a supreme accomplishment in art and life.

Hughes' poems have an amazing capacity to fertilize the imaginations of others, not only other writers, but those who have not yet begun to write, and artists, and musicians. In the last words of Hughes' last poem, 'The Prophet', God speaks to Pushkin:

Be my witness. Go
Through all seas and lands. With the Word
Burn the hearts of the people.

Hughes' words burn our hearts with love of Creation, but also with purifying guilt at what we have done to it and to ourselves.

*Keith Sagar, formerly Reader in English Literature at Manchester University, is the author of **The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes** published by Liverpool University Press. His latest book, **Literature and the Crime Against Nature** will be published next year by the Chaucer Press.*