

## William Bedford

### *Letters of Ted Hughes: Selected and Edited by Christopher Reid*

(Faber, 2007)

This superbly edited selection of Hughes's letters will do much to secure his reputation. And the editing is an important part of the success. As Christopher Reid points out, 'an edition in three or four volumes, each just as big, could have been assembled, with the guarantee that no page would have been without its literary or documentary value' (p.ix). No doubt when researchers into the Emory Archive have done their work, a full and scholarly edition will be published. Reid's *Letters of Ted Hughes* is not that scholarly edition, but it does something possibly more important at this stage of Hughes's growing reputation. As Reid says in his 'Introduction', this is not 'a biography in disguise' but the story 'of Hughes the writer' (p.xi).

It is a welcome emphasis. Any life seen through the distortions of its most dramatic moments is bound to be a travesty, and Hughes has suffered more than his fair share of such distortion. Frieda Hughes made this point herself in her 'Foreword' to *The Restored Edition of Ariel*: 'But the point of anguish at which my mother killed herself was taken over by strangers, possessed and reshaped by them . . . Life at home was generally quiet, and my parents' relationship was hardworking and companionable' (1).

In Reid's tactful editing, no attempt is made to avoid the anguish of the traumatic personal experiences, but they now occur contextualised in the natural rhythms of a whole lifetime, the sheer ordinariness of much of the poet's life, and indeed the life he shared for seven years with Sylvia Plath. What emerges from this editing is a man with an astonishing range of interests and commitments, a sensitive, loving and often hilarious relationship with his children, a trusting openness (p.x) which I found deeply moving, and a tremendous creative and intellectual curiosity.

The series of letters Hughes wrote to Plath when they were apart in 1956 'may surprise believers in a certain die-hard literary myth – or "Fantasia", as Hughes himself tended to call it in later letters to friends' (p.x). 'I have met a first-rate American poetess' (p.39) Hughes wrote to his sister Olwyn, and he never changed his opinion that Plath was the finest female poet since Dickinson. 'You keep watch on our marriage Sylvia as well as I shall and there is no reason we shouldn't be as happy as we have said we shall be. Don't let any stupid thing interfere' (p.51). The letters are passionate and playful. 'What have I done today? A mouse could not find it if a second of honest labour were a pound of toasted cheese' *ibid*). 'Read write reflect' (p.53) he advises his

wife, and the practical criticism in these letters is as much of a guide to creative writing as *Poetry in the Making*, which almost certainly grew out of the experience of writing such letters. ‘I like the poem about statuary very much, the first verse without exception, and the second. In the third “Let break an elegiac tear” reminds me of “Now break a giant tear for the little known fall” and somewhere else he “Put a tear for joy in the unearthly flood.” Also there is a traffic confusion I think in “Fierce flaming game of Quick child” – do you think “Quick flaring game Of child, leaf or cloud” because the “Fierce flaring” are two consecutive likenesses, and have been too often the double tap of the hammer . . . Well in verse the tendency is to follow an adjective that’s working with an idle timing one, so that adjectives tend to go in pairs. Well in “fierce flaring” an old couple has come up, and the one to go I think should be the fierce for the same reasons that you would give me if I had written “Fierce flaring”’ (pp.67-8).

Such practical criticism would have been perfectly welcome in a Leavis seminar, but in its immensely detailed exploration of choice of words and pairings of adjectives, and the impact of rhythm on meanings, such criticism is impossible to illustrate in a short review without turning the whole thing into a series of quotations of favourite bits. The 1956 letters to Plath are extraordinary in both their generosity and insight into the way poetry works, and need to be read with close attention.

Such practical criticism of course features throughout the whole collection, not least in Hughes’s strenuous efforts to place and explicate Plath’s work. ‘. . . her least successful efforts were unique’ (p.225), he wrote to Donald Hall in late 1963, and his various essays on poems such as ‘Sheep in Fog’ are among the finest criticism there has been of Plath’s poetry. Those are public efforts, and in the letters he can afford to be less restrained. Carlos Williams is great at his best but banal in his pretensions to ‘great mission’ (p.145); Cummings is a genius in a way ‘but prevailingly a fool, and essentially a huckster’ (ibid); Yeats has something ‘inflexible about him that disagrees with me at present’ (ibid); and ‘behind every word of Hart Crane is no human being at all, just an electronic noise’ (p.146). Some of the remarks about his contemporaries, especially the Movement poets that were the target of Alvarez’s *The New Poetry*, are less than fair, but the focus of attention is nearly always the poetry, not the personalities. Even at their most malicious they have a generosity sadly lacking in some of Larkin’s diatribes. In a long public career, Hughes produced an amazing body of published criticism, and the letters add to that published work substantial and illuminating insights into his own development as a poet.

The feminist maelstrom Hughes entered in the seventies is usually taken to be the crucial turning point in the poet’s creative life, but as Neil Roberts showed in his *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (2), Hughes had his own view of some of his problems. ‘From the age of about 16-17 my life has been quite

false' (p.309) he wrote to his brother in 1971, 'and since Ma's death & Assia's this false arrangement has been falling to pieces with great drama' (ibid). Hughes understood the nature of his own difficulties very well indeed, a letter to János Csokits in 1967 (pp.273-75) exploring the shamanistic 'event' that structures *Wodwo*. But understanding did not allow Hughes to escape his own tragedies. 'My writing got moving again this last year' (p.269) he wrote to his old school teacher. 'I proved again the Universal law that the more you concentrate on anything inside your head, obstacles, devils and the general worldly barrage seize the opportunity to attack full strength' (ibid). Sometimes, the 'understandings' which seem so clear to the poet remain obscure to his readers, or at least to me. Of *The Iron Man*, for instance, he says 'Apart from being a story I told to my own children, I intended it as a blueprint imaginative strategy for dealing with a neurosis. That is, ideally anybody familiar with that story will have a plan of action for dealing with neurosis in themselves' (p.284). I don't really know what this means, but such moments throughout the *Letters* constantly stimulate curiosity and determination to read more, read more deeply in the texts which excited Hughes. They are the intellectual fruit, if you like, of the agonies sometimes explored more openly, as in the letter to Assia Wevill's younger sister after Wevill's suicide: 'I feel now my life has gone completely empty. I know if I had only moved – if I had only given her hope in slightly more emphatic words in that last phone conversation, she would have been O.K.' (p.290). Such glimpses into nightmare are difficult to read, and the sense of a Greek tragedy is reinforced, not the least of the tragedies being the collapse of *Crow* into an unfinished state which bewildered and depressed Hughes for the next ten years.

The depression of course fed a search for answers, for healing, and some of the most interesting letters are those to Peter Redgrove, whom Hughes had known at Cambridge when Redgrove was reading Physics. The Redgrove Archive is held at the University of Sheffield, and Neil Roberts is working on an authorised critical biography which will do much to help us understand the work of both poets, who shared so many interests. *The Wise Wound* was of course one of Redgrove's major achievements, along with his partner Penelope Shuttle, and Hughes certainly thought it 'the most important book about The Goddess since Graves' *White Goddess*, & more important in that it roots the whole story in physiology' (p.391). This is certainly not the place to start exploring these ideas, but it is an example of the endlessly fascinating and fruitful nature of these *Letters*, which could lead one on to a lifetime's new reading. But Hughes was not only concerned with such abstract ideas.

There are marvellous letters to his children. In a letter to Frieda (pp.342-44), for instance, in 1973, he tries to give her advice as to how to prepare for an essay on Caesar and Cleopatra. Here one can see why *Poetry in the Making* was such a marvellous book for schools, and indeed adults trying to learn some of the secrets of writing. In 1974, there is another masterpiece to Frieda

(pp.347-48) which includes a series of proverbs, for instance ‘Heat a stone for a thousand years, it will cool in an hour’ and ‘Slowness comes from God, quickness from the devil’ (p.347). We come close to the great myth-making storyteller in these letters, just as we come close to a great clown in another long and hilarious letter to Frieda of 1974 (pp.353-58) in which he describes his antics finding morning dress for his visit to Buckingham palace to receive the Queen’s Medal for Poetry. It is also to Frieda that he offers advice about the importance of reading aloud – ‘Read every sentence as a separate music speech unit’ (p.390) – advice which he subsequently explains he himself received from T.S. Eliot:

‘T.S. Eliot said to me “There’s only one way a poet can develop his actual writing – apart from self-criticism & continual practice. And that is by reading other poetry aloud – and it doesn’t matter whether he understands it or not (i.e. even if it’s in another language.) What matters above all, is educating the ear.” What matters, is to connect *your own voice* with an infinite range of verbal cadences & sequences – and only endless actual experience of your ear can store all that in your nervous system’ (p.393).

*The Letters of Ted Hughes* should really be read through as they were written, with passion and concentration and at a single sitting. The poet we meet in his unguardedness and passionate hunger for life is quite overwhelming. And the word that keeps surfacing as you read is generosity. The letters to Donya Feuer which formed the substance of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* are an amazing example of that generosity. The huge letter to a French MA student at Oxford, Anne-Lorraine Bujan (pp.621-37) in 1991, talking about his entire writing life, must have seemed like a gift from the Gods to the young academic. The anguished letters to the press (pp.552-61) about the ‘Fantasia’ which had taken over and monopolised any understanding of the life of Sylvia Plath are deeply disturbing, whatever we might think about the ‘facts’ of the events. The heated correspondence that surrounded the publication of *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, whether you be with the academics who largely denigrated the book or the free spirits such as Marina Warner who thought it was a masterpiece (pp.603-12) . . . all are astonishing food for reflection and new thought. This was a poet who was fully alive, and it seems a tragedy that he remained lost to us, in significant ways, because of a rackets private life which disguised the best of what was truly interesting, and truly fine.

I think a marvellous letter to the poet’s son Nicholas provides the best conclusion to a review of a book where there is so much one would like to quote. In February 1998, after the publication of *Birthday Letters*, Hughes

wrote to his son talking about several dreams of his own, and a dream of his son's (pp.707-13). His own dreams involved a crashing aeroplane, salmon, sometimes other creatures. His son's, a frog walking up a garden path towards a glass door. The letter interprets the dreams. Hughes is trying to help his son, who had refused to read *Birthday Letters*. Hughes talks simply and painfully about his years with Sylvia Plath, and about his failure to write about those years. It is heartbreaking stuff, not least to glimpse yet again the Plath we have missed, as Hughes and his children have missed her. 'In 1963 you were hit even harder than me. But you will have to deal with it, just as I have had to. And as Frieda has had to. You were given the means – if you use them, everything about you will be changed, by what follows the frog through the door. Slowly. Like a leakage. Bit by bit' (p.713). This is not an entirely 'truthful' version of events, any more than the versions he gave to Aurelia Plath, but then who could have survived such traumas without wanting to put the 'best' interpretation on their own behaviour?

And for us, the outsiders trying to make some sense out of the 'love story' given in the poems and the inevitable evasions and self-justifications exposed in the *Letters*, he reveals the relief the publication of *Birthday Letters* brought. 'I have a freedom of imagination I've not felt since 1962. Well, let's hope it wasn't all just a bit too late' (p.713). As we know, in one sense it was. But we have an amazing body of work to sustain and delight, and these *Letters* will go a very long way to helping in the difficult process of explication and evaluation. It is a beautifully produced book, meticulously edited with helpful annotations. A glorious addition to Faber's growing celebration of this great poet.

(1) 'Foreword', *The Restored Edition of Ariel*, (Faber, 2004) pp.xiv-xv.)

(2) Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). Reviewed in the current *Agenda*.