

An Open Field

Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, ed. Paul Keegan. Faber & Faber,
£40.00

Ted Hughes attributed the failure of his immune system to the years of writing prose that went into *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (1992). The first collapse came with a dose of shingles in 1996 followed in 1997 with the diagnosis of the colonic cancer that killed him. Early in the next year he published *Birthday Letters* and died the following October. Writing about *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, Seamus Heaney, Hughes's friend and co-editor of the anthologies *The Rattle Bag* (1982) and *The School Bag* (1997), wrote, with his usual tact, that Hughes was flying under the critical radar. Shakespeare, the poet, dramatist, monarchist and quasi-mythical figure was Hughes's first great literary love, whose work underpinned much of his own work, references to the plays surfacing at regular intervals throughout his career. At the close of her potboiling biography, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (2001) Elaine Feinstein recalls the memorial service in Westminster Abbey where a recording of Hughes's voice was played reading the song from *Cymbeline*, "Fear no more the heat of the sun,/ Nor the furious winter's rages...". In a backhanded compliment she writes that Hughes's poetic voice was "closely connected to the Yorkshire cadences that now gave shape to Shakespeare's miraculous lyric". The voice that resonates on closing her book is Shakespeare's, not Hughes's.

Herein lies the central problem of Hughes and his reputation, and this is the problem with which Paul Keegan had to wrestle in compiling the *Collected Poems*. The monumental mythologising power of Hughes's persona can overshadow the oeuvre, multifarious and extensive as that is. That Hughes was conscious of his work as forming a single, large whole is evident in the various revisions and re-collecting of many poems, and his revisiting of

certain subjects. It is also his way of reading the work of other poets, including Shakespeare and Coleridge. When I wrote my doctoral thesis on the work of Heaney and Hughes, completed in 1984, I entitled it *A Common Consciousness*, drawing the title and epigraph from Coleridge's account of his collaboration with Wordsworth on *Lyrical Ballads*. For me, Heaney was akin to Wordsworth, and Hughes to Coleridge. Having now perused the *Collected Poems* I find that view confirmed, and I see Hughes as a descendant of the Ancient Mariner compelled to tell the same tale over and over, the dialectic of Death in Life and Life in Death, or as he calls it in "The Offers", an uncollected "birthday letter", "my doubled alive and dead existence".

Outlining his approach to various versions and re-prints of Hughes's poems, Keegan, poetry editor at Faber and Faber, writes that "The reader stands in an open and populous field, rather than on the path of a tidy self-replacement in which earlier versions are progressively disowned". He has cut a swathe through this field by, in most cases, following Hughes's choices in his collections and in *New Selected Poems 1957-1994* (1995). Thus, the stories and play in *Wodwo* (1967) are excluded, as is the narrative of *Gaudete* (1977), and the collections for children (although poems from these which appeared in adult collections are included). Keegan refers twice to a "traffic" in poems between sequences and between adult and children's collections, suggesting an illicit trade. All editors would prefer that poets stuck to one true path and ignored the roads not taken but how interesting would that be? Keegan yields to Hughes's trafficking of poems on occasion by reprinting revised and renamed versions. For example, "Capriccios", the opening poem of *Capriccio* (1990), makes another appearance as "Superstitions" at the end of *Howls and Whispers* (1998). These poems can be said to form a prologue and epilogue to a version of Hughes's triangular love story involving Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill, at the apex of which he is the Minotaur bewildered in his labyrinth. The detail of Keegan's research in Hughes's labyrinth is provided in appendices and notes where he reprints Hughes's introductions to, and explanations of, several works, gives variant readings for the revised poems and maps their location in private, limited, selected and widely published books.

Hughes's identification with the Minotaur is apt. The mythological composite of man and bull epitomises the anthropomor-

phic animals, birds and fish at the heart of Hughes's work. The stigmatised creature remains hidden as Hughes did for so long in his poems. The autobiographical and confessional mode were not for him. Instead he took protective colouring from the natural and sacred worlds, only occasionally breaking into an identifiable first person singular, as in the closing sequence of *Gaudete* and the later uncollected poems about Plath and Wevill. Even in *Birthday Letters* he signposts his and Plath's marriage with talismanic creatures: fox, bat, bear, the Minotaur at once Hughes and Otto Plath, and the serpent that emerges under the "labyrinthine" coils of her hand-made rag rug. In the final section of uncollected poems he exchanges the amorphous shape of the Wodwo found in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for the eponymous knight, who transgresses the chivalric code but is only lightly scarred by the Green Knight's blade. This, coupled with a version of Pushkin's "The Prophet", form a refreshing coda to the *Collected Poems*.

Keegan says that it is impossible to tie Hughes's poems to a rigid chronology, a blessing when one considers the travesty of Anthony Thwaite's chronological *Collected Poems* of Philip Larkin. Keegan places the major collections and the short sequences such as "Recklings", "Orts", "Adam and the Sacred Nine" in chronological order, interspersing them with the uncollected but published poems. This method reveals the care with which Hughes chose and balanced poems for the major collections, for example, we see the accumulation of Crow poems from the early uncollected work of 1967-70 through the five sequences devoted to Crow (1970-71), and his later appearance in "Earth-Numb" (1979). In his appendix Keegan comments that when reading the Crow poems Hughes offered a narrative introduction and spoke of writing this for publication. It could be argued that Reverend Lumb, protagonist of *Gaudete* is an incarnation of Crow but the absence of the Kleistian narrative here conceals this. *Crow* overlaps too with *Cave Birds* (1978), not least because both works are based on drawings by Leonard Baskin, also omitted from the *Collected Poems*. Like the Minotaur, Baskin's birds share human (chiefly genital) and animal features. Here Hughes found his ultimate camouflage for flying under the radar of the feminists and critics baying for his blood after the deaths of Plath and Wevill.

More significantly for the poetry, Crow is the embodiment of a pre-literate sound, the first cry of an infant and a demonic cackle. The sound seeks its home in poems but never quite finds it, as

the Schopenhauerian will seeks its representation in life without ever being satisfied, a vision Hughes expresses in "Life is Trying to be Life" which opens: "Death also is trying to be life./ Death is in the sperm like the ancient mariner/ With his horrible tale". Later, in "Orts 6: *Poets*", he pictures the poets as "singing birds" which cede to "the first word lumped out of flesh". When he devised a language, Orghast, for Peter Brooke's theatre company in Persepolis, he said it derived from a desire to set each word apart like tesserae and in an interview for the BBC with Clive Wilmer in 1992 he referred casually to "Sylvia's poems" as demonstrating this linguistic mosaic. Hughes bore her around his neck like the albatross that nourished his work to the end.

Whether prose was the death of him or whether after the flurry of *Crow*, *Gaudete* and *Cave Birds*, his energy dissipated in the various other projects he took on, and the ease of the middle-aged farmer took over, with *Moortown Diary* (1979), the vigour of the early work vanished. From then on, a rhythmic prose, first deployed in the narrative of *Gaudete*, took over in *River* (1983), *Wolfwatching* (1989), *Capriccio* and *Tales from Ovid* (1997) driving towards the confessional apotheosis of *Birthday Letters*. The cumulative effect of these works is one of exhaustion in the reader and the poet. With the exception of *Tales from Ovid* they do not call out to be re-read. It is easy to ridicule Hughes as Michael Schmidt does in his imitation of Johnson's *Lives of the Poets*, referring to *Gaudete* as the work of "a Baroque imagination with a bone through its nose" but this is too glib a dismissal of a poet whose best work is alert to, and withholds judgement about, life's necessary interplay of brutality and tenderness. His vision derived from a synthesis of the repressive Protestantism of his childhood environment which subdued to silence those who suffered through two World Wars, and the mysticism of eastern spirituality, Tibetan Buddhism, Sufism and the Kabala in particular which advocate the destruction of ego to remake the soul.

Fittingly, as if Hughes had planned it, the last poem in *Collected Poems* is entitled "Dove", an antidote to *Crow*, celebrating love consummated: "They career through tree-mazes—/ Nearly uncontrollable love-weights". The Minotaur has escaped his underground maze for that of the tree-tops as in time the real achievement of Hughes's poetry in his early to middle years will come clear of the overwhelming late poems, and will be remembered with his work for children, all yet to be collected, as are the plays and the prose.