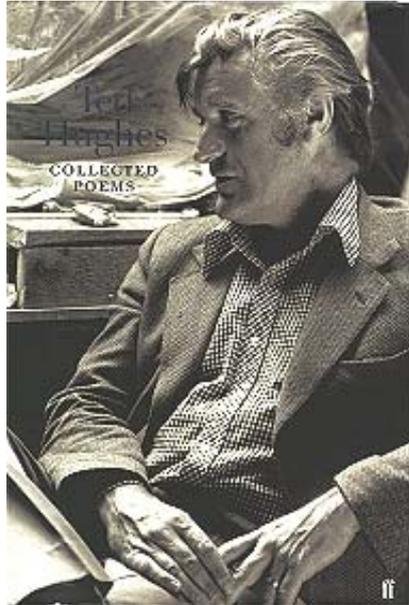


Review

Ted Hughes: Collected Poems

Edited and with a preface by Paul Keegan, Faber & Faber, 2003



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Ted Hughes' *Collected Poems* gathers over 1030 poems in a single volume. The book aims at bringing together for the first time the work for adults published in trade and limited editions, magazines, newspapers and elsewhere. And with over 1300 pages it is a book of almost daunting weight and scope.

Hughes tended his work like a gardener, cultivating, cutting, rearranging. Presenting it, he frequently defied the conventional – and often unreasonable – separation of poetry and prose, and of writing for children and adults. Moreover, he was notorious for revising already published poems, even whole collections. This present collection illustrates vividly how it is almost impossible to establish a ›definitive‹ version of many of the poems and collections. Hughes' work has a life of its own, which powerfully resists our desire for ordered and definitive ›final‹ editions – presenting this vitality is one of the beauties of this collection.

A *Collected Poems* of Hughes' work confronts editors with many a dilemma. Should a volume of poetry include prose narratives, which frame the work and make it more easily understood? Should the poems be published in their original sequence or according to the first or last publication? Which version should be presented as the ›final‹ version? These are only some of the questions that editors must face, yet they are likely to get the blame whatever choices they make. The volume in question is no exception.

The challenge was taken up by Paul Keegan, poetry editor at Faber and Faber. Keegan is aware of the difficulties and potential pitfalls of his project. As an editor he remains unobtrusive throughout, while providing valuable guidance to his potential readers. A short, down-to-earth preface explains his major objectives and outlines some of the problems encountered in compiling this volume. An extensive appendix gives variant titles, records alternative lists of contents and reprints notes and prefaces to some of the collections included here. In the main body of the appendix, Keegan offers details of original publications and lists known variants to single poems, including additional stanzas and early or alternative versions.

With regard to structure, Keegan gives preference to the order of poems established by particular Faber trade editions – a sensible decision, though (as we would expect) not without problems. Keegan is aware of the fact that Hughes' publication history does not necessarily mirror the actual temporal place of a poem in the work nor its association with a particular sequence. He therefore ensures that most of the poems belonging to a particular group are printed in close proximity so that the outlines and content of major projects become quickly apparent. On the other hand, it means that many of the poems from collections like *A Primer of Birds* are printed apart, though the appendix will greatly help readers to establish their contents.

So what is actually in this treasure-trove of a book?

I have counted over 100 uncollected poems, and well over 100 from limited editions, many of which have never appeared in trade editions, e.g. the poems from *Howls and Whispers* (original ed. 110 copies) or *Capriccio* (50 copies), both closely related to *Birthday Letters*. This alone will make this volume worthwhile for many readers.

The book opens with a small number of early poems from Hughes' time at Mexborough and Cambridge. (The recently ›discovered‹ »Zeet Saga« (extract in *The Times*, June 5th 2003) is not included). This is followed by *Hawk in the Rain*, *Lupercal*, and *Recklings* and a number of uncollected pieces. *Wodwo* (minus the radio play and short stories) is included in its 1972 revision, which was never reprinted – an excellent choice. After a few more uncollected poems, Keegan takes us straight to the *Crow* phase, beginning with such gems as the original »Three Legends«, »?« and »Crowquill« and also including most of the limited edition and uncollected pieces. (»Crow Compromises« and »Crow Fails«, published in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, are missing.) With *Crow*, the problems of ordering this volume according to publication history become more obvious, the additional poems not appearing in the sequence laid out by the background story to *Crow*. Unfortunately, the enlightening narrative which Hughes presented in different versions at readings is not included either, even though Hughes chose to incorporate it in the last *Crow* revision published before his death, which was recorded on the magnificent Faber/Penguin audio tape. But the bulk of published poems is here, and with extensive notes.

Prometheus on his Crag is included in its *Moortown* version. All published variants and three alternative poems are reprinted in the appendix. *Season Songs* is the only full collection included which could count as a book for children. Considering the close connection between Hughes' work for children and adults, the exclusion of the children's work presents one of the more difficult editorial choices of this volume. Moreover, the reason given for the inclusion of *Season Songs* feels unnecessarily flimsy, out of place and apologetic. Keegan writes that »*Season Songs* began as children's poems but they grew up« or »the U.S. edition [...]

carries no reference to *Season Songs* as a children's book« [1260]. Such an approach is likely to exacerbate the artificial rift between children's and adult work that has long afflicted Hughes' public reception and criticism alike. But, like separating poetry and prose, it is a publishing convention which, though not appropriate to Hughes' work, has become all too familiar. And while it is unfortunate that Paul Keegan has not decided to be a little more daring in this respect, it might cater to constraints of scope and publishability for this *Collected Poems*. Clearly, the exile of the children's poems from this book is a potential loss to the adult audience, who might have seen the children's poetry in its rightful place in relation to the rest of the poetic output. It also means that adult readers miss out on many excellent pieces from such volumes as *What is the Truth?*, which clearly are »within hearing of adults« – after all, the book collected such ›adult‹ works as »A Solstice« (which Keegan lists as ›uncollected‹; some poems from *What is the Truth* which also appeared elsewhere are included).

Gaudete is next, a book that offers an excellent example of how closely interrelated Hughes' poetry and prose can be. The original publications contained a narrative introduction (both versions included here), a sequence of fascinating narrative poems (not included!) and, after another short narrative, an epilogue of lyrical vignettes. Though the reader is presented many more poems from the context of the ›Epilogue poems‹, Keegan chose to exclude the central body of this work – in my opinion the only sore failure of the book. Keegan notes that Hughes had excluded them from his *New Selected*, but the scope of a selection is obviously very different from that of a *Collected*. That the poems might have been rejected for their strong ›narrative‹ leaning is ruled out by the inclusion of the narrative *Tales from Ovid* – in full.

In contrast, Keegan's notes on *Cave Birds* are as thorough as they are enlightening, and will doubtless prove very useful to readers. They set out the original titles and detail the poems' references to Leonard Baskin's original drawings and the background narrative to the sequence. (Four poems are missing: »The Advocate«, »Two Dreams in the Cell«, »Your Mother's Bones Wanted to Speak«, and »She is the Rock«, all published in *The Achievement of*

Ted Hughes.) Similarly, he gives a very clear overview of the changes to *Remains of Elmet*, while many uncollected pieces provide a valuable context for *Moortown Diary*, *River*, or *Wolfwatching*.

The volume concludes with Hughes' autobiographical output from the 1990s, which is adequately presented by *Capriccio*, *Birthday Letters*, *Howls and Whispers*, and a large number of uncollected pieces including »Black Hair«, »Platform One« and »Comics«. The only poem I expected but found missing is »Football«, published in a limited edition in 1995 (Prospero Poets, Clarion), in which, as in »Comics«, Hughes revisits his childhood.

All things considered, *Ted Hughes: Collected Poems* proves a treasure trove of potential discoveries for most of his adult readers. As an »interim« [vii] reference collection, it offers a glimpse of Hughes' works which whets the appetite for what is to come in future collections. It presents the root and stem of a work that is alive and well, a work that keeps growing. As such, the *Collected Poems* are a celebration of Ted Hughes' life and achievement.

Claas Kazzer

Notes:

The Achievement of Ted Hughes, a book of critical essays, (ed. Keith Sagar, 1983, Manchester UP) collects six poems not included in the *Collected Poems*, possibly for reasons of copyright. These are: »Crow Compromises«, »Crow Fails«, »The Advocate«, »Two Dreams in the Cell«, »Your Mother's Bones Wanted to Speak«, and »She is the Rock«.

»Football« was published in a limited edition with illustrations by Christopher Battye in 1995 (Prospero Poets, Clarion Publishing).

Keith Sagar noted another poem missing from the *Collected*: "Selling Cows at Bridgetown Farm, Iddesleigh". It was published in *This is Our Land. Aspects of Agriculture in English Art*. Ed. Demelza Spargo, Mall Galleries, London SW1, 1989

All three publications should still be available through second-hand and specialised booksellers.