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Reshaping the Past: The Personal Poetry of Ted Hughes

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DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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May, 1998

Abstract

This thesis examines the significance of personal and confessional poetry in Ted Hughes' writing. Its title emphasises the importance of his origins and his use of autobiographical materials both from earlier and later stages of his life.

Major subject divisions consider the importance of Hughes' Yorkshire origins, the indirect impact of the First World War through his father and his uncle, and the influences of his mother and his partners (particularly Sylvia Plath). Comparisons between Hughes' and Plath's work and discriminations between their poetic use of autobiographical materials are made during the course of the argument.

Examination of an array of bibliographical techniques by which Hughes seeks to put into print without "publishing" poems on private matters gives the historical context of his personal poetry. This helps to form an understanding of why Hughes is widely known as either a shamanic poet, or a regenerative nature poet, or an alchemical poet, or a bardic poet, rather than as an autobiographical poet writing personal and confessional poetry.

In his re-ordering of autobiographical and familial experiences, Hughes employs strategies akin to those that enable him to write his animal, elemental and mythopoeic poems. Like Plath, he makes free use of named classical myths, particularly in his recent personal poetry. Using a variety of poetic techniques, Hughes re-inscribes autobiographical details in order that his poems, universalised, might speak to all.

The original version of this thesis was submitted before the publication of Birthday Letters (1998). In fact, Birthday Letters appeared at a point when the revised thesis was being checked for what otherwise would have been the last time. While it has not been possible in the time allotted to give comprehensive treatment to the new collection, substantial discussions of it will be found in chapters 5 and 7, and brief mentions of it occur here and there in other chapters.

The Appendices include genealogical research, newspaper transcriptions, and a transcription, undertaken by Mary Carlson on my instruction, of Plath letters held in the Lilly Library showing differences from the versions published in Letters Home. There is an index of the poems referred to in the thesis.

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Note on Abbreviations

The following is a full listing of abbreviations used for texts that are commonly referred to throughout this work:

<u>BL</u>	<u>Birthday Letters</u>	<u>NSP</u>	<u>New Selected Poems, 1957 – 1994</u>
<u>C</u>	<u>Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow</u>	<u>O</u>	<u>Orts</u>
<u>CB</u>	<u>Cave Birds: An Alchemical Cave Drama</u>	<u>PM</u>	<u>Poetry in the Making</u>
<u>CP</u>	<u>Sylvia Plath, Collected Poems</u>	<u>R</u>	<u>River</u>
<u>DB</u>	<u>Difficulties of a Bridegroom</u>	<u>Re</u>	<u>Recklings</u>
<u>E</u>	<u>Elmet</u>	<u>RE</u>	<u>Remains of Elmet</u>
<u>Fi</u>	<u>Flowers and Insects</u>	<u>SP</u>	<u>Selected Poems, 1957 – 1981</u>
<u>G</u>	<u>Gaudete</u>	<u>SS</u>	<u>Season Songs</u>
<u>JP</u>	<u>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams</u>	<u>THR</u>	<u>The Hawk in the Rain</u>
<u>JSP</u>	<u>The Journals of Sylvia Plath</u>	<u>Wg</u>	<u>Wolfwatching</u>
<u>L</u>	<u>Lupercal</u>	<u>Wo</u>	<u>Wodwo</u>
<u>LH</u>	<u>Letters Home</u>	<u>WP</u>	<u>Winter Pollen</u>
<u>M</u>	<u>Moortown</u>		