

Anthony Wilson is a primary teacher, poet, and freelance writer in schools. He has published two volumes of poetry: *How Far from Here is Home?* (Stride, 1996) and *The Difference* (Aldeburgh Poetry Trust, 1999) and was featured as the *Times Educational Supplement* Guest Poet. In 1998 he coedited *The Poetry Book for Primary Schools* for the Poetry Society and remains their Poet in Residence for Primary Education. He is at present teaching at the University of Exeter and researching for a doctorate on children's reading and writing of poetry.

## Anthony Wilson

### Ted Hughes's Poetry for Children

---

*This article considers the poetry written for children by the late Ted Hughes, the British Poet Laureate. Looking at work that spans the length of his career, this article examines Hughes's individual collections for children, both in their own terms as poetry and in terms of their intended audience. I suggest that Ted Hughes's poetry for children was an attempt, with varying degrees of success, to create a body of work that remained true to his gift of 'caging' the minute within real and imaginary worlds, and that he expended considerable energy in staying faithful, not only to the world as he saw it, but also to the way his work appeared in, and took its place within, that world.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** Ted Hughes; poetry; child audience; creative energy; critical reading.

*The late Ted Hughes, the British Poet Laureate, was a good friend to this journal. His seminal paper, 'Myth and Education,' delivered at the conference in Exeter from which the journal first derived, appeared in Issue No. 1 in 1970. He gave his time freely to encouraging the writing of poetry by children, as well as to publishing his own work for young readers, both prose (most famously, 'The Iron Man,' Faber and Faber, 1968, published in the United States as 'The Iron Giant') and several collections of poetry. He died in 1998, and the UK Editors invited the poet Anthony Wilson to consider the poems Hughes published for children over some forty years. We are grateful to Faber and Faber Ltd. for permission to quote from Ted Hughes's work.*

Ted Hughes had a very clear idea of what he wanted to achieve with his children's work: 'a *lingua franca*—a style of communication for which children are the specific audience but which adults can overhear . . . they suspend defences and listen—in a way secretly—as children. So long as the affection is there' (in Pirrie, 1999, quoting a letter to Lissa Paul). The key phrases here seem to me to be 'suspend defences' and 'affection,' because it appears from the work itself that

Hughes might have been *writing* with his own critical defences 'suspended' towards, and with 'affection' for, his audience—combined with a hoped-for suspension of defences, and affection, in his adult readers of the same work.

By 'affection' I infer that Hughes meant a desire to communicate directly to children, but on a level that is both demanding and unpatronising. There are two chief ways in which this affection manifested itself: first, in the way his work challenges our sense of what constitutes 'poetry for children'; and second, in the way he wrote, as in all his best work, with a mesmerising energy which wanted to inform everything it touched upon. Before looking at the work in detail, I want to suggest one of the ways, intentional or not, that Hughes scrambles our defences or ideas about children's poetry in his constant reordering and reshaping of his work—not so much on a line-by-line basis (very little indeed is redrafted once published), but on a book-by-book basis: a process that can dismantle existing books, only for them to reappear several years later repackaged and often with new poems.

A comment Tom Paulin (1992) makes about Hughes is insightful here because I think it illuminates the way he worked on his books as books, for both adults and children. Paulin says: '[The] poems are meant to happen in the moment; they are one-off oral events, speech acts which distrust the fixity of print. . . . It's as if Hughes has been endlessly redrafting the same poem, so that each version is a temporary and provisional utterance only. It has a casual throwaway quality that refuses the idea of canonical permanence' (p. 298). Very much the same could be said for many of his collections, several of which went through different stages of evolution before seeming to arrive at perfected, final draft versions.

This was true of both his adult and children's verse. Witness the way *Moortown* (1979) took ten years to reach the intense focus of *Moortown Diary* (1989), shedding a number of sequences, among them 'Prometheus On His Crag,' 'Earth-numb,' 'Seven Dungeon Songs,' and 'Adam and the Sacred Nine,' on the way. Doubtless there is more than a hint of Faber and Faber being quick to remarket one of their prize possessions in these episodes.

Sometimes the repackaging happened for a mixture of what we might call artistic reasons and economic realities. Nowhere did Hughes modify and change the content of his books more than in his work for children; sometimes, as with *Season Songs*, allowing a book to appear in the 'Work for Children' list on his flyleaves five years after it was first published. Among the very finest of his collections, *Season*

*Songs*, was first published in 1976. It contained a handful of poems that had appeared in a limited edition pamphlet (1968) through the Devon publisher Richard Gilbertson under the title *Five Autumn Songs for Children's Voices*. By the time it reappeared in 1985, it had lost 'The Stag,' a truly memorable account of a stag hunt (inexplicably missing from the *Collected Animal Poems*), and 'Two Horses: Parts 1-5'. But, it had gained seven 'new' poems, two of which ('Pets' and 'He Gets Up in Dark Dawn') had already appeared in the prizewinning (and by now out of print) *Moon-Bells* (1978) and were not new at all. Two poems ('Sheep 1 and 2' and 'March Morning Unlike Others') reappear in *Moortown* (1979), an adult collection.

Hughes's treatment of *Moon-Bells* (1978) is particularly illuminating. Not only did it win a *Signal* award, but the *first Signal* award, and as such, could be seen to set a kind of gold standard for all future *Signal* winners. The book raises two issues of particular interest: its inconsistency and its virtually wholesale 'selling off' once it had been published. Four of its poems ('Fox-Hunt,' 'Roe-Deer,' 'Coming Down Through Somerset,' and 'Birth of Rainbow') were all used in *Moortown* only a year later. Of the other poems, two ('I See a Bear'—later 'The Grizzly Bear' and finally 'Grizzly'—and 'Amulet') were used in *Under the North Star* (1981), seven reappear in *Moon-Whales* (1988), four reappear in various *Collected Animal Poems* volumes, one ('Bullfinches') turns up in *What is the Truth?* (1984), and only three make no further appearances anywhere.

Hughes's efforts at searching for a consistent tone were admirable, but something about his post-publication reshuffle of *Moon-Bells* (I shall come to other examples later) reveals, perhaps, that he knew the attempt had failed. Here are some extracts from *Moon-Bells* that illustrate the different kinds of poet he was attempting to be. We have the jolly rhymester of 'Nessie' (p. 8):

Mislaid by the ages, I gloom here in the dark,  
When I should be ruling Scotland from a throne in Regent's Park!  
  
Once I was nobility—Diplodocus ruled the Isles!  
Polyptychod came courting with his stunning ten-foot smiles.

the clear-eyed journal writer of 'Fox-hunt' (p. 10):

The fox  
Is flying, taking his first lesson  
From the idiot pack-noise, the puppyish whine-yelps  
Curling up like hounds' tails, and the gruff military barkers:  
A machine with only two products:  
Dog-shit and dead foxes.

the spell-maker of 'Amulet' (p. 18):

Inside the wolf's fang, the mountain of heather.  
 Inside the mountain of heather, the wolf's fur.  
 Inside the wolf's fur, the ragged forest.  
 Inside the ragged forest, the wolf's foot.

and the animal-anatomist of 'I see a Bear' (p. 11):

I see a bear  
 Growing out of a bulb in wet soil licks its black tip  
 With a pink tongue its little eyes  
 Open and see a present an enormous bulging mystery package  
 Over which it walks sniffing at seams.

With the exception of 'Fox-hunt,' which seems aimed at mid-to-late teen readers and beyond, all of the above are children's poems, but not all are the 'real respectful' ones wished for by Peter Hunt (1999). 'Nessie' feels like an exercise in end-of-line-rhyme; compared with the no-less rhythmic 'Amulet' it appears as apprentice-work, both in content and in tone. To borrow Medbh McGuckian's phrase (in Wilson and Hughes, 1998) one is 'all meaning and no reserve' (p. 53), while the other holds those perfectly in balance, because of, not in spite of, its form. 'I See a Bear' is Hughes at his best in free-form extempore mode. The 'it,' the 'enormous bulging mystery,' is hinted at but never fully revealed in unpunctuated metaphorical language that, far from gifting readers everything on a plate, leaves them wanting more.

Sadly, the same cannot be said for the bulk of the seven *Moon-Bells* (1978) poems Hughes combined with twenty poems from *The Earth-Owl and Other Moon People* (1963), plus twenty-one new poems, to make *Moon-Whales* (1988). The best of the *Moon-Bells* poems are 'Moon-Bells,' 'Moon-Whales,' and 'Earth-Moon.' The first is a surreal conversation full of rollicking word-play between Earth and Moon in *abab* rhymed quatrains that recall Lewis Carroll:

So they swing the bells they have slung  
 In each volcano's womb,  
 And earth begins to declare with clung  
 And clang and mumbling boom  
  
 Out of one bell: 'Towers fall  
 And dunghills rise.' And from another:  
 'He who thinks he knows it all  
 Marries his own mother.' (p.27)

'Moon-Whales' is quieter, almost lyrical, but still retains the same note of strangeness:

Sometimes they plunge deep  
 Under the moon's plains  
 Making their magnetic way

Through the moon's interior metals  
Sending the astronaut's instruments scatty. (p. 16).

'Scatty' has the kind of subversive ring that delights children, whilst 'interior metals' appeals to deeper elements in the auditory imagination, suggestive of the ultimately unknowable forces Hughes delights in attempting to harness.

In 'Earth-Moon' we find another poetic voice altogether, one more in tune with some of Hughes's favourite Eastern European poets, Vasko Popa, say, or Miroslav Holub:

Once upon a time there was a person  
He was walking along  
He met the full burning moon  
Rolling slowly towards him  
Crushing the stones and houses by the wayside. (p. 90)

The question with such a wide range of poetry is not that it is difficult, but lies in how one might choose to present its virtuoso variety of forms, tones, and voices to children in an accessible, stimulating way. Of course, one could argue that it is hardly the poet's role to worry about such things. In the light of his comments about writing with 'affection' and hoped-for 'suspended defences,' however, one begins to think that Hughes relished writing for a younger audience so much that he found it hard to assess just which kind of children's poet he wanted to be.

While *Moon-Bells* is a consistently (and at times infuriatingly) awkward collection, *Moon-Whales* is one of Hughes's most consistently dull and predictable books. Including the three poems mentioned above, there is a handful of poems (at most) for which one would want to claim any merit. Reading *Moon-Whales* is a bit like being hit over the head repeatedly with a few blunt instruments, namely: inane rhyme ('The Silent Eye'), self-parodic violence ('Moon-Weapons'), and unintentionally hilarious doggerel ('The Burrow Wolf').

When one does encounter lines that allow a moment's reflection, as in 'Moon-Shadow Beggars' ('. . . you will be nothing but a skinful of shadows / whispering shadow-talk,' p. 28), the end is often bathetic: 'It is a horrible state and nothing can heal it' (ibid.) 'Moon-Art,' 'Moon-Witches,' 'Moon-Thorns,' 'Moon-Mirror,' and 'Visiting the Moon' are the noble exceptions, the last two of which are especially suggestive and, like 'Earth-Moon,' seem to come from an entirely different poetic tradition:

And there the moon, molten silver in a great cauldron,  
Was being poured  
Through the eye of a needle

Spun on to bobbins and sold to poets  
 For sewing their eyelids together  
 So they can sing better. ('Visiting the Moon,' pp. 26-27)

While part of the disappointment of *Moon-Whales* is in its over-reliance on a few techniques, some of it could also be said to be the remoteness of its subject matter. D.H. Lawrence (in Crosby, 1961), in a remark that influenced Hughes, referred to writers connecting the 'outer world' of things/animals (their immediate surroundings) to their 'inner world' (the primitive forces keeping them alive). In this instance 'the outer world' Hughes writes about remains just that, very rarely connecting with anything we could call 'the known world.' This is a failing *Under the North Star* (1981), however, takes to new extremes.

According to its blurb, *Under the North Star* 'originated as an entertainment for a lively and precocious little girl.' Unlike the books discussed so far, it was conceived of as a joint project with a long-term collaborator, the artist Leonard Baskin, whose watercolours sit next to the poems. Unlike the other books, it has not reappeared in any other format (except where poems have been used for *The Collected Animal Poems*). It is a large book, (7 inches by 11), with large, imposing type. As Peter Hunt said in *Signal* 38 (1982), it 'presents itself as a work of art: text and paintings seem to be somewhat clinically isolated, things to be observed and admired rather than encountered' (p. 64).

*Under the North Star* sets out to 'evoke,' in the words of its blurb, 'the landscape within the Arctic Circle and in particular the animals and birds who live there.' Remoteness, right from the outset, is all. Reading it is to become aware of an insistent background screeching, like tinnitus, bullying one into uncaring submission. The book reverberates not to the actions these animals make but mostly to their noises—variously cackling, crying, gasping, shrieking, yelling, weeping and sighing, in a kind of vast deep-frozen echo chamber made up of moons, stars, planets, heavens, mountains, and forests:

His spread fingers measure a heaven, then a heaven.  
 His ancestors worship only him,  
 And his children's children cry to him alone. ('Eagle,' p. 46)

For all the violence contained in it, the book is also strangely inanimate; its most commonly used verb and noun/adjective are 'sleep' and 'iron' respectively. Both are classic Hughes words, finding their first outing in the early 'Wind' (1957) and from *Lupercal* (1960) onwards where we find them in 'Witches' and 'Pike' respectively. All of these early poems, however, manage what *Under the North Star* fails to do:

to animate extreme landscapes whilst making every sort of negotiation with the reader towards comprehensibility. It is hard to see where there is any sense of 'affection' in the following, from 'Eagle':

And already the White Hare crouches at the sacrifice,  
 Already the Fawn stumbles to offer itself up  
 And the Wolf-Cub weeps to be chosen. ('Eagle', p. 46)

As in the other books, there are more than enough moments (but very few whole poems) to make one think 'if only . . .'. Here is the opening of 'The Snow-Shoe Hare,' brilliantly and beautifully realised:

The Snow-Shoe Hare  
 Is his own sudden blizzard.  
  
 Or he comes, limping after the snowstorm,  
 A big, lost, left-behind snowflake  
 Crippled with bandages. (p. 24)

A few lines later, however, we have the overreaching imprecision of:

In his popping eyes  
 The whole crowded heaven struggles softly.  
  
 Glassy mountains, breathless, brittle forests  
 Are frosty aerials  
 Balanced in his ears. (p. 24)

Having opened with a description of almost casual elegance most poets can only dream of achieving, it is as if Hughes's imagination grows bored with the constraint of continuing to 'make it new.' One can see the appeal to children of a 'big, lost, left-behind snowflake' and 'sudden blizzard'; while 'glassy mountains, breathless, brittle forests' and 'the whole crowded heaven' remain emphatically remote and abstract. When we read 'The Snowy Owl' (p. 16), which is variously described as an 'Ice Age,' a low-flying 'Moon,' a 'rusty-throated' 'North Pole,' a 'white mountain,' and a 'big-eyed blizzard,' one's patience wears so thin the only things left to ask are: how, why, and so what? The great failing of *Under the North Star* is that the reader is barely given time to glimpse what these animals are actually like before the overruling metaphor of the sheer inaccessibility and inhospitality of the world they live in takes over. This may well be Hughes's point, but it does not make for reading that children would find engaging.

Far more rewarding is to turn to Hughes's most complete poetry books for children: *Season Songs* (1976 and 1985) and *What is the Truth?* (1984 and 1995). Both are about the most immediately recognisable Hughesian landscape of all, that of Mid-Devon, its farms, villages, and animals. *Season Songs* is the closest Hughes came to writ-

ing an out-and-out song cycle (as opposed to sequence, his preferred method of working in both his adult and children's work); whilst *What is the Truth?* (subtitled *A Farmyard Fable for the Young*) ostensibly uses the conceit of a story (of how God's Son persuades God to take him to earth to find out the 'Truth') as a framework for some of the very finest animal poetry he wrote. Any editor taking on the task of making a Hughes *Collected Poems for Children* could reasonably feature more work from these volumes than the others put together.

*Season Songs* divides into four sections, one for each season, marking the progress from spring to winter. One of the chief delights of the book is that for the first time we find poems in both strict and open forms, which consistently offer pleasure to the child reader whilst stretching and renewing both the tone and language of what one expects from a children's poem. Again, Hughes is drawn to life *in extremis*, be it birth, death, or the weather; but there is here no struggle in the tone to remain affectionate whilst retaining the by now familiar, full-tilt trademark bursts of energy, as in 'Swifts':

They crowd their evening dirt-track meetings,  
Racing their discords, screaming as if speed-burned,  
Head-height, clipping the doorway  
With their leaden velocity and their butterfly lightness,  
Their too much power, their arrow-thwack into the eaves. ('Swifts',  
p. 34)

None of the energy gets lost when he adopts more traditional forms:

Now what shall I do with the trees?  
The day said, the day said.  
Strip them bare, strip them bare.  
Let's see what is really there. ('There Came a Day' p. 67)

This is work that is neither what Peter Hunt (1982) calls 'self-consciously accessible' (p. 64), nor one that has to be read '*against* the form' (ibid.); nor does it, most emphatically of all, rejoice in the blood-lust autopilot laziness of so much of *Under the North Star*. This is Hughes being truly affectionate—to his own gift, to his subject matter, and his sense of audience. In extracts like the following, from 'A Crane-fly in September' and 'The Warm and the Cold,' one finally begins to witness the reconciliation of Lawrence's inner and outer worlds:

Her jointed bamboo fuselage,  
Her lobster shoulders, and her face  
Like a pinhead dragon, with its tender moustache,  
And the simple colourless church windows of her wings  
Will come to an end, in mid-search, quite soon. ('A Crane-fly in  
September,' p. 65)

This is the kind of writing, tender and intensely concentrated, foreshadowed in the beginning of 'The Snow-Shoe Hare,' but which, in that poem, quickly dissipates into self-parodic abstraction. Here the minute workings, the inner world of the crane-fly's 'face,' 'shoulders,' 'moustache,' and 'colourless church window' wings are presented with what one can only call love, but in the full knowledge of the workings of the outer world; that is, the crane-fly's limited lifespan and inevitable, imminent death. Our privileged access to this inner world enriches and expands our understanding of the larger world, described for us through the effects of seasonal change and natural farm-yard decay: 'the frayed apple leaves, the grunting raven, the defunct tractor/Sunk in nettles . . . / Like other galaxies' (p. 66). Here the 'galaxies' do not grate; they have earned their place.

*Season Songs* is unique for containing a quality field of that too-rare Hughes phenomenon, the rhyming and rhythmically strong children's poem that refuses to sacrifice meaning on the altar of effect. ('Leaves,' 'The Warrior of Winter,' and 'There Came a Day' all qualify in this respect.)

'The Warm and the Cold,' which closes *Season Songs*, is an exemplar. It opens compellingly:

Freezing dusk is closing  
 Like a slow trap of steel  
 On trees and roads and hills and all  
 That can no longer feel.  
 But the carp is in its depth  
 Like a planet in its heaven.  
 And the badger in its bedding  
 Like a loaf in the oven.  
 And the butterfly in its mummy  
 Like a viol in its case.  
 And the owl in its feathers  
 Like a doll in its lace. ('The Warm and the Cold', p. 87)

This is the real thing: as seductive to the ear as it is riddling to the imagination, the poem is expressionist but highly structured, beginning each stanza with images of ice and steel, and bracketing the following two sets of quatrains, which consider mammals and insects/invertebrates, with images of fish and birds.

This is a landscape where the inner world of curled up hibernation attempts to survive and is entwined with the outer 'shaggy world / Like a mammoth of ice' (p. 88), the 'steel vice' (ibid.) of the depths of winter. The achievement of such writing within the context of the cheery-cosy world of much children's poetry is that it offers the reader no fail-safe sentimentality. It is a poem where the realities of

life on the 'bare-blown hill' (ibid.) are presented to us memorably and with a dry-eyed clarity so lacking in his other collections: 'The sweating farmers / Turn in their sleep/Like oxen on spits' (ibid.).

For many readers, among them Morag Styles (1998), Jill Pirrie (1993 and 1999), and Neil Philip (1985), *What is the Truth?* is Hughes's finest collection of poems for young readers. God visits earth one night, 'about two o'clock in the morning,' (p. 1) with his inquisitive Son, to enquire of people's 'souls' (p. 2), their version of the 'Truth' about the animals they know and care for. It is possible to detect a quasi-Freudian subtext when God says: 'In their sleep, they will say what they truly know. That is another odd thing about mankind. When they are awake, they are deepest asleep. When they are asleep, they are widest awake. Strange creatures!' (ibid).

Beginning with a farmer, God and his Son encounter what reads like a cast list from an Agatha Christie novel: the farmer's wife, his son and daughter, the vicar, the poacher, and the schoolteacher. Indeed, it is hard to believe that God and his Son have visited any part of earth other than England, specifically the Mid-Devon where Hughes lived: 'All around him he saw valleys in mist, and the sleeping farms, under the full moon. And away below he could see the spire and roofs of a village, in a hollow, in the moonlit mist' (p. 2). The poems that fill out the narrative (and are the book's main subject) are the answers spoken by the different characters. Though it provides Hughes with a structure to write about farm animals (several of the animals are spoken about more than once, as if seen from different angles), the story itself is the least satisfying aspect of the book, culminating as it does on a rather flat and not entirely convincing hymn to pantheism: God says, 'I am each of these things. The Rat. The Fly. And each of these things is Me. It is. It is. That is the Truth' (p. 113). (A handful of the poems appeared, shorn of their narrative, in Hughes's last *New Selected Poems* [1995] and lost none of their power.)

What makes *What is the Truth?* exciting is that the range of forms and voices are extended from *Season Songs* without losing that book's unsentimental tenderness:

Suddenly he's here—a warm heap  
Of ashes and embers, fondled by small draughts.  
  
A star dived from outer space—flares  
And burned out in the straw.  
Now something is stirring in the smoulder.  
We call it a foal. ('New Foal,' p. 11)

One finds what Peter Hunt (1982) calls 'verbally beautiful moments' on page after page of *What is the Truth?*. A rookery is 'like a big sea

heaving through wreckage' (p. 27); swallows are 'Blue splinters of queer metal . . . / Magnetized along weird lines of magnetic force' (p. 43); a hare is like 'an escapee / From a looney-bin, lurching and loping along in his flapping pyjamas . . . /Or . . . a woman mad with religion' (p. 95); a fly is a 'Sanitary Inspector' (p. 61) 'with his team of gentle undertakers, / In their pneumatic protective clothing, afraid of nothing, / Little white Michelin men' (p. 62).

The forms Hughes uses include doggerel ('The Hedgehog,' 'Roger the Dog'—a pun perhaps?), jingles ('Cow II'), A riddle ('A riddle'), lyrics ('The Vixen,' 'Catching Carp'), and a full-blooded psychodrama ('Somebody'). The most common, and most successful, approach, is the kind of verse found in 'A Cranefly in September,' free verse improvisations that aim to capture the naturalness and freshness of speech. Here are three extracts that reconcile the animals they describe to other worlds through Hughes's affectionate and powerfully metaphorical language:

. . . there's a ruined holy city  
In a herd of lying down, cud-chewing cows—  
Noses raised, eyes nearly closed  
They are fragments of temples—even their outlines  
Still at an angle unearthly. ('Cow III', p. 18)

The Sheep is a mobile heaven, it nibbles the hill,  
A manageable cloud,  
A cloud for a lawn, or a field-corner.  
A small, patient cloud  
In whose shade the Shepherd's dog can rest.  
A cloud going nowhere,  
Growing on the hillside, fading from it—  
A cloud who teaches quiet. ('Sheep II', p. 34)

And, finally, a descendant in poetic terms of 'I See a Bear,' the 'sort of root / A ball of roots a potato or a bulb maybe' (p. 53) of the badger:

His sniffing around is a bit like a maggot  
Then he's off following his sniff  
With his burglar's mask on and his crowbar  
Under his moonlight cloak  
. . .  
Crashing about, humming to himself ('Main Thing About Badgers,'  
p. 54)

Once encountered in Hughes's company, none of these creatures can be the same again.

Certainly in terms of the different sizes and types of animals collected in it, *What is the Truth?* is Hughes's most varied poetry book for children. In its subject matter, too, from its cosmic opening to its

various descriptions of scatology, mating, hunting, and killing, Hughes took it on as a project, for all its occasional faults, at pretty much full throttle.

Since 1970, when he published *Crow*, Hughes's books appear as a long sequence of sequences, sometimes as collaborations with other artists as in *River* (1983) and *Elmet* (1994), sometimes as uncompromising 'one-off oral events' (Paulin, 1992) (which only he could have made), as in *Gaudete* (1977) and *Moortown Diary* (1989). He used this method right up to his final and most famous sequence of all, *Birthday Letters* (1998), his account of his relationship with his first wife. In his work for both adults and children it is as though his imagination needed to work within such self-imposed restraints to get itself out of bed in the morning. For all the wild variations in quality control (sometimes in the space of a single poem) that method produced, it did ensure, at least, that Hughes was able to stay, as he said of Coleridge, 'infinitely sensitive to what his gift [was]' (1994, p. 1).

How sensitive Hughes was to the value of his own work can be seen in two comments he made on the work of others. In his introduction to Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981), he made a comment that could equally be applied to his own work. Saying her attitude was 'artisan-like,' he claimed, 'The end product for her was not so much a successful poem as something that had temporarily exhausted her ingenuity' (p. 13). Reading Ted Hughes's poems for children, where he also worked predominantly in sequences, alongside (and at the same time as) his adult work, one continually has the feeling that a perfect 'end product' was not his chief concern, rather that he should remain true to whatever means he had at his disposal at any given time.

In his foreword to Jill Pirrie's anthology of children's poetry (1987), Hughes again casts light incidentally on his own work while praising younger writers when he says of them '[it is] as if the whole aim of the exercise were not to shape a small work of art, but simply to practise . . . effort towards precision and honesty' (intro., x). He goes on, 'even though the piece of writing turns out to be a beautiful little poem or paragraph . . . it always has the air of being a by-product of a more serious purpose' (ibid.). In Hughes's case the 'precision and honesty' could be said to have been higher priorities than evenness of tone or style.

Hughes also said of Plath: 'if she couldn't get a table out of the material, she was quite happy to get a chair, or even a toy' (1981). Some of the poems we have looked at ('Nessie' and 'Moon-Bells')

make their way in the world as nothing more than toys, throwaway entertainments that appear very different when seen next to their more serious grown-up cousins ('New Foal' 'The Warm and the Cold'). They have different functions and occasions, not least of which seems to have been to use up some of that boundless 'ingenuity.' That not all of them are great he must surely have realised.

His most successful children's poems are his most down-to-earth, where he literally renews the ground we stand on, plus the language we use to define 'poetry for children' and children's books in general. Perhaps it is this readiness to make what he could make, rather than set his sights on creating a classic oeuvre, which makes his children's verse the varied, tantalising and, at times, magnificent, lingua franca that it is.

### References

#### *A Selected Ted Hughes Bibliography in Order of Publication*

- The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Lupercal* (1960). London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Earth-Owl and Other Moon-People* (1963). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Five Autumn Songs for Children's Voices* (1968). Crediton: Richard Gilbertson.  
*Crow* (1970). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Season Songs* (1976 and 1985). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Gaudete* (1977). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Moon-Bells and Other Poems* (1978). London: Chatto and Windus.  
*Moortown* (1979). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Under the North Star* (1979). London: Faber and Faber.  
*River* (1983). London: Faber and Faber.  
*What is the Truth? A Farmyard Fable for the Young* (1984). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Moon-Whales* (1988). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Moortown Diary* (1989). London: Faber and Faber.  
 'Introduction' to Hughes, T. (ed.), *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (1981). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Elmet* (1994). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (ed. Scammell, W.) (1994). London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Collected Animal Poems: Volume 1: The Iron Wolf* (1995). London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Collected Animal Poems: Volume 2: What is the Truth?* (1995). London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Collected Animal Poems: Volume 3: A March Calf* (1995). London: Faber and Faber.  
*The Collected Animal Poems: Volume 4: The Thought-Fox* (1995). London: Faber and Faber.  
*New Selected Poems: 1957-1994* (1995). London: Faber and Faber.  
*Birthday Letters* (1998). London: Faber and Faber.

Quotations from *Moon-Bells* are from the original (1978) edition; from *Season Songs*, the 1985 edition; from *What is the Truth?*, the 1995 edition; from *Moon-Whales* (including poems from *The Earth-Owl and Other People*), from the 1991 edition (with drawings by Chris Riddell); and from *Winter Pollen* from the 1995 paperback edition.

Crosby, H., *Chariot of the Sun*. London: Heinemann, 1961.

Hunt, P., 'The *Signal* poetry award,' *Signal*, 1982, 38, 63-72.

Paulin, T., *Minotaur: Poetry and the Nation State*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.

Philip, N., 'The *Signal* poetry award,' *Signal*, 1985, 38, 71-85.

Pirrie, J., *On Common Ground: A Programme for Teaching Poetry*. Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton Educational, 1987.

Pirrie, J., 'Introduction' to: Pirrie, J. (ed.), *Apple Fire: The Halseworth Middle School Anthology*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993.

Pirrie, J., 'A measure of grace: The teacher's story,' in N. Gammage, ed. *The Epic Poise: A Celebration of Ted Hughes*, London: Faber and Faber.

Styles, M. *From the Garden to the Street: Three Hundred Years of Poetry for Children*. London: Cassell, 1998.

Wilson, A. with Hughes, S. (eds.). *The Poetry Book for Primary Schools*. London: The Poetry Society, 1998.