

I would recommend this anthology to early modern students, as it could offer them both a critical method and informative resources. This is not an imaginative collection of essays; it is a careful one, unlikely to frighten. Since some of the texts discussed in the anthology are “early” and unemphasized at the undergraduate level, some directed period reading may be necessary before students are able to approach the essays.

Nusya James Thomas Campbell

Elaine Feinstein

Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet

Great Britain: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001

(also published in the US by W.W. Norton & Company, 2001)

273 pp. \$29.95.

Ted Hughes has been well served by his major critics and interpreters: his poetry well-glossed, his preoccupations, themes, and governing myths understood. Elaine Feinstein attempts to raise the stakes in this first biography of the poet, which she announces as both a study of the life and a work of literary criticism. She is not always successful. Feinstein is a respected poet, novelist, and biographer who knew Hughes, and has managed to create a relatively sympathetic, although highly fragmented portrait of the man who was devoted to his family, committed to poetry, generous to friends and other writers, and persistent in his efforts to ensure that the writing of his first wife, Sylvia Plath, was published appropriately.

Yet literary biography is tricky business. An extensive understanding of the subject *and* his work, the ability to convey his or her specific vision, guiding themes or conflicts, and a strong narrative sense are called for. There is little question that Feinstein has done her homework, talked to many although certainly not all of Hughes’s network of friends, and had the advantage of access to the large trove of Hughes’s manuscripts and letters at Emory University, which have been opened to scholars within the last couple of years. Feinstein’s cautious tone throughout the biography, possibly out of respect for Hughes’s immediate family who did not cooperate with the study, works against her, however, and opportunities for interpretation are either circumvented or never addressed.

Feinstein's approach is largely chronological, and she covers much of the familiar biographical terrain that critics, even Hughes himself on occasion, have discussed previously – his childhood in west Yorkshire, studies at Cambridge, marriage to Plath, development of poetic career, second marriage, poet laureateship, and later poetry and prose. She has provided some informative material about the letters of Hughes to his brother Gerald, and one wishes this significant relationship had been discussed more fully. Similarly, Feinstein includes some important commentary on Hughes's childhood friendships, schooling, and early life in west Yorkshire. Yet here again, since Hughes himself had frequently spoken of the influence of the area on himself and his writing, Feinstein's discussion appears thin, or at best truncated.

Feinstein does attempt to refute the feminist outcry against Hughes, suggesting Hughes's consistent support of Plath's writing while they were married. To a certain extent, this interpretation is corroborated in the recently published diaries of Plath. She has also provided the first detailed—and comparatively objective—portrait of Assia Wevill, the woman for whom Hughes left Plath. And she is circumspect and non-judgmental about areas of Hughes's life that border on tabloid status. More surprising, perhaps, is that the former lovers are quite forthcoming about the extent and importance of their relationships to Hughes.

The problematic issue is Feinstein's approach to Hughes's poetry. The criticism is mainly biographical, and conveys no sense that Hughes was involved throughout his writing life in an overall, interconnected, and progressive poetic enterprise. Brief snippets of poetry are used to explain or support commentary on the life, and paraphrase replaces detailed analysis. Poems in collections are often mentioned without accompanying titles, with little awareness, in some cases, of the importance of chronology. As far as I know, Feinstein did not have copyright permissions to quote from the poetry, but this in itself should not inhibit thoughtful interpretation of the poetry.

What is missing is a clear sense of the growth, development, even setbacks in the poetry, or how Hughes's various preoccupations such as shamanism, alchemy, or environmentalism are worked out in his writing. Several of Hughes's knowledgeable critics have already paved the way. Feinstein's discussion of *Crow* (1970), a major sequence by any standards, seems sketchy or incomplete. The volume was dedicated to the memory of Assia, and their daughter Shura, and while it is true that Hughes did not develop the sequence further after their deaths, Feinstein seems to miss the point that the full work as envisioned by Hughes was structured on a shamanic framework with a positive transformation of *Crow* as the outcome. Feinstein mentions that Hughes placed some of the *Crow* poems in *Cave Birds* (1978), but since

this volume is not discussed, the import of the statement is lost. In fact, a few of the volumes such as *Remains of Elmet* (1979) and the original *Moortown* (1979) receive cursory attention, while excessive weight is given to *Birthday Letters* (1998). While the latter volume is easily accessible, and the most popular of Hughes's sequences because of the continuing interest in the Plath/Hughes relationship, it really does stand somewhat outside or alongside Hughes's other major writings.

Overall, the biography could have benefited from some close editing. Transitions between paragraphs are often unclear, and events and/or associations in Hughes's life tend to read like a laundry list. Attributions should have been more specific. There are also a number of errors, which, putting the best light on it, may have been the result of the relatively fast production of the work. Feinstein refers to the late 1980s, for example, as a period when Hughes produced some of his "finest writing," and cites the poem "Ravens," from *Moortown Diary* (1989) as evidence. Yet "Ravens" was included in the earlier *Moortown* (1981), and the date of composition has been noted as 1974. Further, Feinstein notes correctly that by 1979, Hughes had written some of the early poems of *Birthday Letters* (1998) including "You Hated Spain" and "The Earthenware Head," but she cites publication in *New Selected Poems* (1995) when both of these poems had been published initially in literary journals in 1980, a not insignificant consideration in the overall discussion of *Birthday Letters*. Moreover, to support her point that some of Hughes's earlier poems suggest the difficulties of living with Plath, Feinstein refers to "You Hated Spain," and comments that Hughes infers in the poem that Plath had "made a mistake in crying wolf when she was only mildly ill" (208). This phrase (or paraphrase) actually refers to "Fever," which was first published in *Birthday Letters*.

Yeats commented that there is "some one Myth for every man, which if we but knew it, would make us understand everything he did and thought." Feinstein is tactful, avoids preconceived judgments of Hughes, and clearly respects his work—yet the Myth of the man remains elusive.

Carol Bere