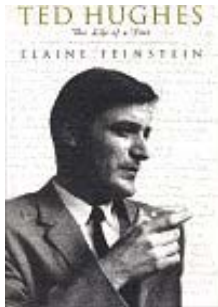


Review: Elaine Feinstein: *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*



Elaine Feinstein:

Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet.

Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2001,

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This is the first biography of Ted Hughes. It is not only a book of literary criticism, but an attempt to understand the man behind the poems and to tell the history of his life as he experienced it.

[Elaine Feinstein, Introduction to *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*, 1].

Published only three years after his death, Elaine Feinstein's *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* has been written with relatively little time for detailed research into the less accessible aspects of his life and work. The book is nicely and cleverly packaged, with a semi-transparent dustcover through which shine manuscript lines from, apparently, Feinstein's draft chapter on Cambridge. And it comes with a small selection of photographs, many of which will be new to most readers.

The table of contents gives us chapter titles such as »A Family Man«, »The Single Life«, »Responsibility« or »The Last Flowering«, many of which are either vague or exaggerated in order to provoke an emotional response. The acknowledgements section which follows bears witness to the amount of research that went into the preparation of the book: Elaine Feinstein consulted archives at Emory University and elsewhere, interviewed friends and acquaintances of Hughes', wrote letters. Yet, there is a striking absence of acknowledgements to Hughes' family.

Feinstein's first chapter, »Childhood«, is 16 pages long and collects information on Ted Hughes' life until the age of 20. Very early into the book she makes use of some of the material she collected or sighted to support her argument. So, already on page two of »Childhood« the reader is treated to an enlightening account by Hughes' childhood friend, Donald Crossley, who recounts the housewives' pride in their whitened, scoured doorsteps at the time (the 1930s). It is a description which reads as wonderfully authentic, and through its inclusion Feinstein offers a useful piece of background information on Hughes' poem »View of a Pig« (which references this long-forgotten habit of the scoured doorsteps).

But as Feinstein introduces her readers to Ted Hughes' parents, she fails to bridge the gap between the authenticity of an account like Crossley's and her own interpretation of Hughes' biography. Instead, her fulsome descriptions and forced conclusions sound almost ridiculous: »William [Hughes' father] had golden hair which, as a child, Ted liked to comb, learning as he did so the fragility of the human skull beneath«, she writes, and: »[his mother] Edith [...] had olive

skin, the hair of a Red Indian and strong features.[7] János Pilinszky falls prey to a similarly overdone characterisation later in the book, where he is described as having »almost translucent« skin »as if his spirit illuminated it from the inside.[202] Sadly, such combinations of inflated paraphrase and extraordinary conclusion mark Feinstein's style throughout the book. This would not be so disturbing if it were limited to the physical description of people. But Feinstein also manages to paraphrase Hughes' own accounts of events in a similarly exaggerated, which more often than not results in falsification.

A first example may be found on page eight, where she tries to refine her previous description of Hughes' mother by referring to the mother figure in the story »The Deadfall«. In Feinstein's summary, the story tells of a woman »dreaming of the cries of dying men on the night of the Normandy landings. [8] »The Deadfall«, however, does not mention »screams of dying men«. It presents us with a character who, on the night in question, becomes increasingly agitated, gets out of bed and looks out of the window to see that »above the church, the whole sky was throbbing with flashing crosses. [cf. »The Deadfall«, 1] As in the example above, the reader will get the sense — but Feinstein's is not an accurate account and one cannot help the impression that Hughes' own words were not sensational enough for the author.

Another example, from the next page of »Childhood«, illustrates how misleading Feinstein's stylistic preference for luxuriant paraphrase and unverified conclusion really is. On page 9 she writes about Hughes' fascination with animals:

Ted's passion for animals was known to the family from his earliest childhood and for his fourth birthday he was given a thick, green-backed book of photographs of them, along with descriptions of their natural history that were rather too adult for so young a child. He liked to try and copy these pictures, and was excited by his childish attempts to draw them. He was more successful in making plasticine models of them. On Saturdays, when the family went shopping in Halifax, Ted was allowed to choose lead animals from Woolworths, until he had so many pieces that they stretched round the fender. [9]

To my knowledge, there is no hint in Hughes' own writing on *his* considering the descriptions of the animals in this book as »too adult«. Neither does Feinstein tell us why she considers them as such. She also fails to give us the title of the »green-backed book« so that we could draw our own conclusions. And a note, referenced at the end of the first sentence quoted, proves to be another dead end. Instead of being given further details, readers will find themselves referred to Hughes' *Poetry in the Making* — and at closer inspection even the endnote proves inaccurate (It claims that this collection of broadcasts was re-issued in *Winter Pollen*, whereas only three extracts of it were). What one might have taken as a sign of Feinstein's knowledge about Hughes (her mentioning of the colour of the book's spine) turns out to disguise only her lack of knowledge. And it proves to be nothing more than a colourful detail lifted straight from Hughes but deprived of its context. (In Hughes' text, the mention of the book's colour marks his account as a memory.) The source text for Feinstein's paraphrase reads:

[...] my interest in animals began when I began. My memory goes back pretty clearly to my third year, and by then I had so many of the toy lead animals you could buy in shops that they went right round our flat-topped

fender, nose to tail, with some over.

I enjoyed modelling and drawing, so when I discovered plasticine my zoo became infinite, and when an aunt bought me a thick green-backed animal book for my fourth birthday I began to draw the glossy photographs. The animals looked good in the photographs, but they looked even better in my drawings and were mine. I can remember very vividly the excitement with which I used to sit staring at my drawings, and it is a similar thing I feel nowadays with poems. [*Poetry in the Making*, 10-1]

Feinstein continues her re-telling of Hughes' own published childhood memories with an investigation of Hughes' relationship with his brother Gerald. However, while her account is interspersed with interesting details from unpublished correspondence between Ted and Gerald Hughes, important information is again withheld or was unavailable to Feinstein without her acknowledging it. The most puzzling instance of this occurs on pages 10/11, where we read that: »Ted remembered one particular expedition to camp with his brother and their Uncle Walt in Hollins Valley as the most important single experience of his life up to the age of twenty-five. [10-1] Which is to say that Hughes remembered this expedition as the most important experience until his meeting with Sylvia Plath — but we are never told what happened. And while Feinstein's retracing of the bond between the brothers is one of the most interesting aspects of this book, she fails to take it to a convincing conclusion. Instead, she infers drama from mentioning largely unrelated events: »The discovery that he could never look forward again to more than occasional visits from his brother knocked Ted out, as he put it, even though he received the Gold Medal for poetry in 1974.« [186]

Undoubtedly, in »Childhood« we are given a broad overview. We learn something about Hughes' writing at school, about his teachers encouraging him, information which, to my knowledge, has never been published before in such detail. But the inaccuracies and holes in Feinstein's account seem unforgivable for the declared scope of her undertaking.

In comparison to the twenty years covered in the 16 pages of »Childhood«, the three years from 1951-54 are given a generous 15 pages (»Pembroke College«). Here, Feinstein gives a detailed description of Cambridge in the nineteen-fifties, establishing a portrait of the academic context which Hughes and his fellow students entered. In the next chapter, »St. Botolph's« (14 pages), she brings events to February 1956, when Hughes met Sylvia Plath at a party to launch the newly established literary magazine »The St. Botolph's Review«.

This, in turn, is followed by »Plath« (12 pages), where Feinstein attempts an outline of Sylvia Plath's life from childhood up to and including her time at Cambridge. The chapter title sits oddly among the other titles. In contrast, the chapter on Assia Wevill is called »Assia«, not »Wevill«. And once again, like many authors before her, but worse for an author who attempts a portrait of Hughes' life as he himself experienced it, Feinstein fails to bring to life the Sylvia Plath who so much fascinated him, the woman he loved. Instead, from this point onwards Feinstein increasingly dwells on sex and affairs as if to prove a point.

Thus, we are given irrelevant details concerning Sylvia Plath's first experience of sexual

intercourse [55], while it remains unclear what Feinstein is trying to communicate with the inclusion of such detail. Her own conclusion comes across as either naïve or insincere. That is, Feinstein displays a near total lack of sense and sensitivity towards the sexuality of her young subject while continuing with her moral undertones, when she claims: »It says something for Sylvia's health and resilience that her eager interest in sex should continue unabated after that frightening experience [of her first intercourse].[ibid.]

After this, it is hardly surprising that Feinstein — though a published poet herself — fails to do justice to Plath's poetry. Throughout this book, poetry is repeatedly dunked into Feinstein's shallow interpretation of biography, and she very effectively deprives it of any other life and forecloses other possible readings. So we are told that »the focus of ›Daddy‹ is crucially on Sylvia's masochism, a common enough element in female sexuality, which feminism is unlikely to eradicate« [132] or that »Sylvia's image of Hughes as a vampire substitute for her dead father with a ›Meinkampf look‹ and ›a love of the rack and the screw‹ would live in the minds of readers for nearly half a century [...]. [132-3] It never seems to occur to Feinstein that just such ›criticism‹ gave rise to this image. Plath's poem never mentions Hughes, and it was only several years after its publication that the highly questionable interpretation of the male figure in the poem as Ted Hughes became fashionable. Feinstein, however, carelessly repeats the verdict. It is when we look at this passage as a whole that we see the extent of Feinstein's failure in coming to terms with and communicating even the basics of Hughes' biography. Feinstein creates legend — from a mixture of ignorance and inaccuracy. And so she is able to conclude the passage quoted above with the claim that »it says a great deal about the honour that Hughes felt for her [Plath's] genius that he sent the poem out into the world«[133]. In contrast, Hughes' own writing about Sylvia Plath's final poems (cf. e.g. *Winter Pollen*) suggests that he was oblivious to the damage which the biographic interpretation of them would do to his reputation.

With the end of the section »Plath« the reader arrives at that part of Hughes' life for which Feinstein choose the broadest distribution of chapters: his relationship with and marriage to Sylvia Plath, his relationship with Assia Wevill, and general events and, of course, affairs in his life until the late seventies. This makes for an odd imbalance in this biography. Compare the 16 pages of the first chapter, »Childhood«, spanning twenty years, with some 151 pages (10 chapters) spanning eighteen years (1951-69), with the meagre 66 pages (7 chapters) dedicated to the 29 years until Hughes' death in 1998. Effectively, about two-thirds of this book deals with aspects of Hughes' life which have, for years, been widely publicized, as in Sylvia Plath's diaries and letters, the many Plath biographies and memoirs, and reaching a new climax with material published in the wake of *Birthday Letters* (on Hughes, Plath and Wevill) and following Hughes' death.

Worse than Feinstein's pre-occupation with the more sensational and colourful facets of this *Life of a Poet* is her ignorance of those aspects of Hughes' life and work which transcend any short-lived need for fresh gossip, and which may ultimately be of more importance to his readers in the

long term.

In this *Life of a Poet*, Feinstein gets away without giving any explanation of many of the topics which so fascinated Hughes — topics which considerably influenced his writing and outlook. There is nothing substantial on Hughes' ideas of art as »healing« [cf. e.g. »Myth and Education« or the »Paris Review« interview] or on his interest in mythology and folklore, not to mention his work in environmentalism or education. Nor does Feinstein seem interested in addressing his interest in topics such as Shamanism, Astrology and Alchemy. She obscures and mystifies rather than enlightens the reader. Not that it would be particularly difficult to find reasons and explanations for this fascination of Hughes. He wrote at length about it in essays which Feinstein chooses neither to mention nor, it seems, to investigate. Instead, she presents a selection of quotes of contemporaries who were equally puzzled or uneasy about it. As a result, Hughes comes across as freakishly »obsessed« with aspects of »the occult«.

Having spent itself in its description of Hughes' life until the late seventies, the book turns increasingly limp. A meagre 6 pages under the heading »The Laureate« are followed by a weak 12 pages, »The Goddess«, which in turn are followed by the pathetically titled »The Last Flowering« (5 pages). These just can't do justice to fifteen very active and productive years. We learn next to nothing of Hughes' output during the time, which consists of several collections of poetry for adults, children's books, collaborations, plays and essays. Which brings us to the literary critical aspect of this book.

Unsurprisingly, but failing to do justice to Hughes' output, the largest proportion of Feinstein's literary criticism is dedicated to *Birthday Letters*. Several other major works receive barely a mention. There are three references to *Cave Birds*, for example (179, 205, 235), yet none of these proffers any content. *Wodwo* is mentioned only briefly, and so is *Remains of Elmet*, although the latter is granted one short paragraph outlining its general context. There is little on *Season Songs*, and *Moortown* is referred to only in the context of *Moortown Diary*. Of over a dozen *major* children's books Feinstein mentions *How the Whale Became* and includes brief notes on *What is the Truth?* and *The Iron Man*, which barely scratch the surface [cf. 175 on *The Iron Man*]. There is nothing substantial in this »Life of a Poet« on such fascinating and influential projects as »Orghast« nor on his other collaborations with Peter Brook (though, again, he gets a brief mention). Feinstein also ignores major essays, which would inevitably have thrown light on Hughes' general outlook. In short, there is nothing substantial on his poetics nor on the central poetic themes which had preoccupied him since the beginning of his literary career.

Where Feinstein *does* offer literary criticism, she often presents herself as clueless. So she describes *Gaudete* as »a puzzling book« [203] and does not even seem interested in attempting to overcome that first impression. Instead we are given a highly superficial and biased summary of other people's responses to *Gaudete* — in the typical Feinsteinesque jumble of irrelevant remarks (used to colour her argument) and unrelated (and unverifiable) assertions, as in the first sentence of the following quote:

Whatever reason Hughes had for choosing this story inside his failing marriage to Sylvia Plath in 1962, it was Faas's knowledge of the two suicides in Hughes' life that lead him to read the poem as ›personak . Both Keith Sagar and Ann Skea offer interpretations of the poem, which see spiritual resurrection rather than misogyny as the source. Michael Schmidt — the poet, critic and publisher — described the book as ›appalling«. Yet a Yorkshire poet of another generation, Simon Armitage, wrote an admiring letter of praise to Hughes about *Gaudete*, as if he intuited something of what Hughes had in mind. [204]

Such ›criticism« gets the reader nowhere. But we should also remember that this is a book of which the author claims that it »attempt[ed] to understand the man behind the poems and to tell the history of his life as he experienced it. [1]

Even in the case of *Crow*, Feinstein misses the point by completely ignoring (and preempting) readings (and textual indications) of *Crow* as hopeful and resilient. The vision of *Crow*, she concludes, »is comparable only to Beckett's in its bleakness« [161]. Hughes thought otherwise: in his own view, as expressed in the essay »Crow on the Beach«, *Crow* was hopeful.

There are ›minor« slips of accuracy, as in the case of Feinstein's summary of *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosencreutz* (1616), which seems to assume that »Rosenkreutz« (its protagonist) was the author of this anonymously published pamphlet [225]. But worse than that is her failure to properly communicate or grasp the importance of this publication with regard to Hughes' own writing. As it happens, an investigation of the *Chemical Wedding* would have given Feinstein the context for a reading both of *Gaudete* and all the other publications related to Hughes' »Difficulties of a Bridegroom« phase [cf. »Foreword« in *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*].

Feinstein even ignores the well-known record of Hughes' publications if it fits her need for support of her strange legend. As if there were no Laureate publications to write about, Feinstein falsely chooses republished poems from the 1970s to characterize Hughes' poetic voice in the 80s. Not only are the poems in *Moortown Diary* (1989) republications from *Moortown Elegies* (ltd. ed. 1978) / *Moortown* (1979): most of them, like »Ravens« (15 April 1974), even have dates! But Feinstein's choice of these poems appears even more extraordinary when one considers the fact that she had already (correctly) mentioned *Moortown Diary* in the 70's context [cf. 194-5]:

It was in the context of the upheaval around *Bitter Fame* that some of Hughes' finest writing in his post as Laureate was published. It is as if he has now totally recovered his early lyricism. His vision of Nature, however terrible the accidents described, always contained a passion for the elemental final beauty of the created world. ›Ravens« from *Moortown Diary* (1989), which describes the death of a lamb, is quintessentially Hughes in its visionary account of the lamb's brief experience of this world as fortunate, since the day was ›blue and warm« [224]

In the end one doesn't even expect this biographer to come to terms with a book like *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. And sure enough, she fails to enlighten the reader on how the ideas in this book might connect with the rest of Hughes' life and work.

Taken as a whole, *The Life of a Poet* is a poor excuse for a biography. The ignorance which Feinstein displays towards the work of Ted Hughes and towards major aspects of his life is incredible for a book which claims to take a view close to Hughes' own. And although it contains

many interesting facts and details, the overall factual account is patchy and inaccurate, while the literary criticism offered is often weak or questionable. Such a legend as this *Life of a Poet* creates cannot do justice to Ted Hughes or his work.

Claas Kazzer
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