

Poetry In The Making: fifty years old

Mick Gowar ~ **Journal of The Ted Hughes Society, Issue 2, Winter 2011.**

If one dates Hughes's *Poetry In The Making* from the original broadcasts rather than the publication of the talks in book form, then the *Poetry In The Making* 'project', if one might call it that, is 50 years old this year. But over that period, the education system of the UK has been transformed from one where '*teachers decided both the content of the school curriculum and how it would be taught,*' to the present system in which, '*a host of external influences dictates the nature of the educational experience....So that those claiming to reform education now focus on measurable outcomes and the answerability of schools to parental and government pressure.*'¹ Or, as Roy Lowe has asserted in the subtitle to the book from which those two short quotations were taken: '*teachers lost control of the classroom.*'

Beginning in the mid-1960s, British politicians, educational administrators, employers and parents organizations have made repeated attempts to make the educational system more 'accountable' – ie. more responsive to their particular interests. Politicians and employers especially have increasingly demanded an education system capable of both responding to and facilitating the transformation of a declining industrial mixed economy outside the European Common Market (as it was in the early 1960s) into what has been described as a 'post-industrial'² services-based 'knowledge' economy, within the European Union but competing in a system of globalized 'free' trade. Schools, even primary schools, have been expected to play a major role in training the highly skilled workforce we are told that the 'knowledge economy' and 'creative industries' of the future will require. Unfortunately, the result of all the debates, focus groups, green and white papers, edicts and Acts of Parliament is the present stifling regime of testing and inspection, reports and league tables, naming and shaming. And despite the stated aims of reforms such as the introduction of a National Curriculum ('*the first major educational reform in Britain that had not been created by the education professionals*'³) and national SATs testing to raise and maintain standards, many parents - desperate to assure their children's futures in what they perceive to be an increasingly competitive job market with ever decreasing opportunities - are now paying not only for their children to be educated in independent secondary schools, but also paying for them to be coached exhaustively for the 11-plus entrance exams for which a state primary education does not adequately prepare them.

¹ Roy Lowe *The Death of Progressive Education: how teachers lost control of the classroom*, Routledge, 2007.

² See Daniel Bell *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, Harper Collophon, 1974.

³ *The Death of Progressive Education*.

*"It is absolutely manic," says one London mother, whose daughter hopes to go to an independent school. "Entry is so oversubscribed that children are being tutored for three years before the 11-plus. I know girls who are having three sessions a week at £50 a time. The after-school maths club is practically compulsory. Some of the children are really suffering under the pressure. It all seems so unfair."*⁴

When the radio talks which eventually formed the basis of Ted Hughes's *Poetry In The Making* were first broadcast in the early 1960s, the UK had a secondary education system which is now looked back on by many in the present government as a golden age of high standards and high quality education. In reality it was an age of lead. Despite being barely twenty years old, by the early 1960s the British secondary education system had already fallen into disrepair and disrepute. Under the 1944 Education Act, secondary education for all children in the UK had at last been guaranteed. A tripartite system of grammar, secondary technical and secondary modern schools had been proposed, with pupils selected for the most appropriate school according to their abilities and aptitudes as measured by a series of IQ tests at the end of primary schools: the original 11-plus examination.

In practice a three-school system did exist, but it wasn't the one that had been visualized by the 1944 Act. The fee-paying public (ie private) schools had survived the period of post-war austerity and now educated the most affluent 5% of the UK's children, many of whom would go on to either Oxford or Cambridge and from there into a well-paid career in one of the highly paid professions such as medicine, the law or banking (or a less well-paid but nonetheless prestigious post in the church, academia or the civil service). The remaining 95% competed through the 11-plus exam for a limited number of places at the academically-oriented grammar schools, of which around 180 were the elite direct grant schools (virtually independent, but playing their part in the state system by creaming off the highest scoring pupils at 11-plus) and around 1500 more humble 'County' grammar schools which were fully maintained and controlled by the local authorities. Together, these grammar schools provided places for only around 25% of pupils. In the 1944 Act, Secondary Technical Schools had been proposed to teach high level practical skills, similar to the German Realschule, but these never came into being. The remaining 75% of British children were dumped – there really is no other word for it – into the secondary modern schools which were: *'frankly second-rate and often in buildings which reflected their lower status.... Some of these schools were truly dreadful, sparsely staffed, crowded into ancient and unsuitable*

⁴ *Daily Telegraph*, January 8, 2005.

*buildings and sitting almost no pupils for outside exams before most were released to start work at fifteen. At 'A' level in 1964, the secondary moderns with around 72 per cent of Britain's children had 318 candidates. The public schools, with 5 per cent had 9,838.'*⁵

Tales of the enormous pressure put on children to pass the 11-plus are many:

*My parents were frightfully middle-class so it would have been a disaster not to pass the eleven-plus. I was terrified of failing.*⁶

*For years it had been impressed upon us at school how important the whole thing was. I felt that if I didn't get through this exam and do well, then I would never do anything with my life.*⁷

Apart from the almost intolerable pressures put on so many children in their final year of Primary school, there were other reasons why the selective system based on the 11-plus exam attracted such widespread opprobrium. For one thing a child's likelihood of passing the eleven plus and gaining a place depended to a great extent on whether in the country they lived: it was what would now be called a 'post code lottery'. In the under-populated South West of England, for example, 35% of all children 'won' a grammar school place; in the City of Nottingham, where there were far more children and far less grammar school places, only 10% of children passed their eleven plus.

For another, there was an in-built bias in favour of boys. Thanks to the continuation of single sex secondary education, and the fact that there were fewer girls' grammar schools than boys', most girls had to score considerably higher marks than their brothers to gain a place at grammar school.

However even these modest reforms were too radical for some. T. S. Eliot, for example, strenuously objected to the 1944 Act as an egalitarian abandonment of 'standards', even though it placed a traditional grammar school education at both the heart and apex of the system:

... whether education can foster and improve culture or not, it can surely adulterate and degrade it. For there is no doubt that in our headlong rush to educate everybody, we are lowering our standards, and more and more abandoning the study of those subjects by which the essentials of our culture—of that part of it which is transmissible by education—are transmitted; destroying our ancient edifices to make ready the ground upon which the barbarian nomads of the future will

⁵ Andrew Marr *A History of Modern Britain*, Macmillan, 2007, p247.

⁶ Akhtar and Humphries *The Fifties and Sixties* quoted by Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles*, Abacus, 2006 p 421.

⁷ Landau (ed) *Growing up in the sixties* quoted by Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to The Beatles*, Abacus, 2006 p 421.

*encamp in their mechanized caravans.*⁸

But such views were largely ignored – certainly by the majority of teachers, who were conscientiously struggling to give the best possible education to the greatest number of children.

Ted Hughes was just a year or so too old to have been personally affected by the 1944 Education Act as a pupil – although he did, as he recounts briefly in *Poetry in The Making*, teach in a secondary modern school in Cambridge⁹. Nevertheless, as a boy from a working-class background in rural Yorkshire¹⁰, he did benefit from the wider access to a grammar school education, through a system of local authority funded scholarships, which had preceded the Act. Two English teachers in particular, Pauline Mayne and John Fisher, encouraged his creative writing, and fittingly Hughes dedicated *Poetry In The Making* to them. They also encouraged his reading of modern poetry and his interest in the occult and ancient mysteries: Mayne introduced him to Hopkins and Eliot; Fisher gave him a copy of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. Hughes had started writing humorous poetry to amuse his classmates at the age of 11¹¹ but by the time he left school, he was utterly convinced that he would be a poet.

From Mexborough Grammar School, Hughes won an Open Exhibition¹² to Pembroke College, Cambridge to study English Literature, which he took up in 1951, having completed two years National Service in the RAF, which he spent, as he told his friend Keith Sagar, reading and re-reading the complete works of Shakespeare until he knew many of the plays by heart and 'watching the grass grow'.¹³

English must have seemed the obvious choice for Hughes to study, however the drudgery of producing a weekly essay for his tutors about writers for whom he often felt no enthusiasm not

⁸ T S Eliot *Notes Towards A Definition of Culture*, 1948.

⁹ In 1956-7 Hughes taught English and Drama at Coleridge Secondary Modern School, Cambridge, before departing for the USA with Sylvia Plath.

¹⁰ Hughes was born in the village of Mytholmroyd in the Calder Valley of West Yorkshire. When he was 8, the family moved to the town of Mexborough in South Yourkshire when his father, who had been a carpenter, bought a tobacconist and newsagent's shop. Hughes comments on this move in *Poetry In The Making* 'Our cat went upstairs and moped for a week, it hated the place so much, and my brother for the same reason left home and became a gamekeeper. In an interview for the BBC, Hughes commented on his life in Mytholmroyd: 'My first seven years seems almost half my life. I've remembered almost everything, because it was sealed off in that particular way and became a sort of crain – another subsidiary brain' (*Vlose Up*; 'Ted Hughes; force of nature', May 16. 2009.

¹¹ See *Paris Review*, No. 134, 1995.

¹² A form of scholarship.

¹³ Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes*

only reduced to almost nothing his enthusiasm for studying English, it also stifled his creativity to the point where he had ceased to write any poems at all by his second year. One night he had been struggling once again with his weekly essay, and had fallen into bed, frustrated and exhausted, sometime between 1.00 and 2.00am, with his essay still unfinished on a table within sight of his bed. He dreamt that a fox entered his room – a fox walking on its hind-legs, as tall as a small man but definitely a fox – and it was burned as though it had been in a furnace: its skin was blackened, scabbed and cracked and blood oozed from its many wounds. The fox placed its paw on the essay and when it lifted it a blood-stained print was left behind. It stared across the room at Hughes, and then said: ‘Stop this. You are destroying us.’ Then it walked from the room. Hughes woke almost immediately and hurried to his desk, expecting to see a blood-print on his papers, but there was none. Nevertheless, the following day he went to his Director of Studies and changed his course from English to Archaeology and Anthropology, and within days had begun writing poetry again. A week or so later, Hughes dreamt that the fox returned, but this time his skin was healed and his red fur glowed with health. He stooped over Hughes’s table, where some drafts of poems lay, looked up and smiled, then left the bedroom without another word.¹⁴

This experience was truly life-changing for Hughes. Firstly, the resulting change of university course allowed him to devote much of his time to the study of the magical beliefs and rituals which were to become the bedrock of his personal belief system. Secondly, it confirmed for him the essentially shamanistic nature of his poetic mission, and that he was therefore compelled to undertake the duties, responsibilities and risks it involved¹⁵ - to restore the balance between the spirit world and the human world and, in taking on the traditional shamanistic function of ‘medicine man’, to bring healing to the tribe in the form of songs or poems containing wisdom from the spirit world. The shaman also customarily receives the gift of shape-shifting into the form of an animal for his dream journeys into the world of spirits, and is able to speak the languages of animals.

The central figure in the transforming drama of Hughes’s shamanic summoning dream was the animal that had already become his personal totem: the fox. Hughes had experienced a number of strange encounters with foxes while still a boy in Mexborough. One morning, walking beside

¹⁴ This story, of the ‘Burnt Fox’ or ‘Scorched Fox’ has been retold in slightly different versions by Hughes and others, including an account by Hughes himself of the first part of the story in *Winter Pollen*, and a similar version in a BBC broadcast in the *Close Up* series entitled ‘Ted Hughes: Force of Nature’ (May 16, 2009).

¹⁵ As Hughes himself noted, in a review of Mircea Elaide’s book on shamanism (reprinted in *Winter Pollen*) ‘you’ve been chosen by the spirits, and dreamed the dreams, there is no other life for you, you must shamanise or die.’

the River Don on his way to school, as he clambered up one side of a hollow in the river bank: 'quite unknown to him a fox was climbing the other. They arrived at the ridge simultaneously, and looked into each other's eyes from a distance of a few inches. For a split second, which seemed timeless, Hughes felt that the fox had leapt into his head, supplanting his own provisional human nature with its own definitive foxhood. This was the kind of experience he most wanted from the natural world, encounters with another, deeper reality, with something so totally other as to be sacred, yet also able to speak as nothing else could to his own depths, depths beyond all conditioning and education.'¹⁶

So it is hardly surprising that the poem which became his 'opus one' – the poem which first indicated the full power of his true poetic voice and the profundity of his gift, and the first poem in both his *Selected Poems* and *Collected Poems* – should be about a spirit creature which is part fox and part the living force of the words by which the creature is captured: *The Thought Fox*.

It is also the first poem by Hughes in *Poetry In The Making*, and was singled out for particular comment by the producer, Moira Doolan, in her sleeve notes for the 1971 BBC LP record of two broadcasts from the *Listening and Writing* series: 'Capturing Animals' and 'Learning To Think'. 'Capturing Animals' is about a fox that is both a fox and a spirit. Then she quotes Hughes: Every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head. And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere in the darkness and coming walking towards them.'¹⁷

The *Thought Fox* indicates clearly both the nature of Hughes's poetic mission and the methods by which he sought to fulfill it: how through the engagement of the imagination at the deepest levels of experience, the dreadful ruptures between modern humans and the natural world, and between modern humans and their own inner life, might be repaired. In *Poetry In The Making* he describes this as a desperate and urgent struggle for each individual: 'truly to possess his own experience, in other words to regain his genuine self, has been man's principal occupation....Men have invented religion to do this for others, but to do it for themselves they have invented art – music, painting, dancing, sculpture, and the activity that includes all these, poetry.'¹⁸

At the time of the first *Listening and Writing* broadcast, Hughes was 30 years old and had

¹⁶ Keith Sagar *The Laughter of Foxes*, Liverpool University Press, 2000. p42. See also the short story 'The Deadfall', in *Difficulties of a Bridegroom*, Faber, 1995 for another story about a fox which the British poet, Simon Armitage, is convinced is based on something that actually happened to Hughes.

¹⁷ See also Ted Hughes *Poetry In The Making*, Faber, 1978 p20.

¹⁸ *Poetry In The Making*, p124.

published two prize-winning collections of poetry, *The Hawk In The Rain* and *Lupercal*, and was about to publish a volume of rather contrived comic verse for children *Meet My Folks*. Since 1956 he had broadcast a number of readings of his own and others poet's poetry and revealed his exceptional talents as a reader and presenter of poetry. He had also written a number of radio plays for the BBC including *The Storm*¹⁹ and *The House of Aries* and several plays for children. As Elaine Feinstein observed in her biography of Hughes: '*Ted spent most of 1960 writing plays for the BBC, which were among his most important radio work.*'²⁰ So it was perhaps unsurprising that, despite his very limited experience of working with children, Hughes was commissioned to write the scripts for a themed group of programmes on writing poetry and prose for the BBC Schools' series *Listening and Writing*.

In the early 1960s, BBC Schools' Radio programmes were an injection of high-minded and high quality content into the rather dull and formal curricula of both Primary and Secondary schools, and were much anticipated by children and teachers alike. These broadcasts included programmes such as *Music and Movement*, a series of creative drama/dance exercises inspired by the Kodaly Method and the *Kindermusik* programme of Carl Orff; drama series in foreign languages featuring native speakers; weekly religious services for primary and secondary schools; extracts from orchestral concerts; and of course programmes of readings of verse and prose, including *Listening and Writing*.

Following the success of Hughes's broadcasts, a book was commissioned by Faber and somewhat misleadingly titled *Poetry In The Making* - it includes two chapters on writing prose, *Writing Novels: beginning* and *Writing novels: carrying on*, and a key chapter *Learning to think* which, although the examples provided to illustrate Hughes's main points are poems, addresses the importance of close observation and developing '*an inner life...the world of memory, emotion, intelligence and natural common sense*' which extends far beyond the narrow considerations of composing poems. Added to the scripts were a number of poems which had not been part of the original broadcasts, teachers' notes and rather sketchy writing exercises. The final chapter of the book, *Words and Experience*, was taken from a talk in the series *Religion In Its Contemporary Context*, a series broadcast on the BBC Home Service (and continued later on Radio 4) for an adult audience. It is surely significant that the BBC should consider Ted Hughes observations on turning personal experience into poetry to be equally appropriate to a religious broadcast for adults as for schools broadcasts for children and their teachers.

¹⁹ An excerpt from *The Odyssey*, November 10 1960

²⁰ Elaine Feinstein *Ted Hughes, The Life of A Poet*, Widenfeld and Nicholson, 2001, p 103.

In its combination of personal anthology and literary autobiography, *Poetry In The Making* is Hughes's most unguardedly confessional and revealing prose work - a personal view of the vocation of the poet, distinguished by Hughes's openness about his own shortcomings and constant failures. It is also unique among the books being considered in this chapter for its being addressed directly to children. And it speaks to them in a tone of respectful seriousness: there is no forced joviality; no false intimacy; no falsifying of how demanding it can, and should be, to write to the very limits of one's ability. But Hughes expects nothing less from his young readers. Hughes's implicit assumption is that his young readers are as potentially talented as he was, but also need help to achieve their potential - the advice of an experienced writer to guide, encourage and re-assure them. Hughes does this through sharing his own experience of reading, writing, but above all thinking, in the unmistakable tone of one writer addressing fellow writers. This was typical of Hughes's attitude towards children. As Sandy Brownjohn, recalling a visit by Hughes to the Primary school poetry group she led, observed:

*'He treated them as equals - he did not talk down to them or modify his presentation, or so it seemed to me. I had seen him read to adult groups, but can honestly say I had never seen him appear so relaxed. [He] knew they [the children] were approaching him as fellow practitioners who wanted to learn from him. He spoke quietly in that alluring and compelling voice, and they listened, drawn in by the power of his use of language and his honesty. The atmosphere was charged and the hour went by like some magical moment. He read mostly from his current poems - they later appeared in his volume Moortown in 1979. The children asked questions which showed how engrossed they were and he answered them straight and fully - no holding back, no patronising, talking to them as one writer to another.'*²¹

Hughes famously begins *Poetry In The Making* with personal recollections of his own early struggles – not to write poetry, but to capture animals: *There are all sorts of ways of capturing animals and birds and fish. I spent most of my time, up to the age of fifteen or so, trying out many of these ways, and when my enthusiasm began to wane, as it did gradually, I started to write poems.*²²

It's a startling opening, referring to stalking, trapping, fishing – images which recur throughout the book. And he goes on to explain the connection that hunting and fishing and writing have for him.

²¹ Sandy Brownjohn *To Rhyme or Not to Rhyme?: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*, Hodder, 1994.

²² *Poetry In The Making*, p 15.

*You might not think these two interest, capturing animals and writing poems have much in common. But the more I think about it the more sure I am that with me the two interests have been one interest....I think of poems as a sort of animal. They have their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have a certain wisdom. They know something special...something perhaps which we are curious to learn. Maybe my concern has been to capture not animals particularly, and not poems, but simply things which has a vivid life of their own, outside mine.*²³

It sounds rather like the whimsical explanations that fiction writers too often give in press interviews: 'my characters took over', or 'the book wrote itself'. However, two pages further on Hughes attempts to clarify the claim, and in particular makes it clear that his assertion of the poem as a living organism with an independent life of its own is not offered as a metaphor but is, for him, the literal true:

*'How can a poem, for instance, about a walk in the rain, be like an animal?... It is better to call it an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living parts are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all work together. It's impossible to say which comes first, parts or spirit. But if any of the parts are dead...if any of the words, or images or rhythms do not jump to life as you read them...then the creature is going to be maimed and the spirit sickly. So, as a poet, you have to make sure that all these parts over which you have control, the words and images and rhythms are alive.'*²⁴

The method he suggests to young readers is a fascinating mixture of meditation and magic: *'imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it. Do not think it up laboriously, as if you were working out mental arithmetic. Just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself into it. When you do this the words look after themselves, like magic. If you do this you do not have to bother commas or full stops or that sort of thing. You do not look at the word either. You keep your eyes, your nose, your taste, your touch, your whole being on the thing that you are turning into words.'*²⁵

This short passage shows once again in Hughes's early writing his passionate commitment to, and desire to share his insights into shamanism and other magical and occult beliefs in which he was becoming expert – what is being recommended to the young writer in this short passage is

²³ Poetry In The Making, p 15

²⁴ Poetry In The Making, p 18.

²⁵ Poetry In The Making, p 18.

nothing less than shape-shifting. It also reveals, in its dismissive reference to mental arithmetic, Hughes's antipathy to analytical, rational, scientific thought, which he summarized in a letter to the educationalist, philosopher and poet Nicholas Haggar:

*'Physics, modern philosophy, even dear old Lit Crit with its contortions, have always appeared to me as the synthetically constituted poisonous water supply that the whole Public is compelled to purchase (for real cash) and drink in one form or another, while the simple, pure sources of real water, in the wells, have been sealed.'*²⁶ It also expresses the necessarily headlong, heedless, instinctive grasping of ideas which if not immediately captured, trapped, ambushed, vanish leaving only a tantalizing shadow or a feint echo behind. It's a type of writing and thinking which Hughes is willing to concede to his young readers that he himself found extremely challenging – especially within a school setting.

*'At school I was plagued by the idea that I really had much better thoughts than I could ever get into words. It was not that I could not find the words, or that the thoughts were too deep or too complicated for words. It was simply that when I tried to speak or write down the thoughts, those thoughts had vanished. All I had was a numb blank feeling, just as if someone had asked me the name of Julius Caesar's eldest son, or said "7,283 times 6,956 – quick. Think, think, think."*²⁷

This is an experience that surely everyone shares, the frustration of words deserting when they are most urgently needed - especially when under pressure from a teacher. However, at the present time, when we are constantly being reminded of the importance of 'Bigging yourself up' 'selling yourself' in both work and personal life, it seems even more extraordinary to read a poet of Hughes's verbal power and eminence confessing to inarticulacy, and the inability to hold onto a fleeting thought. But he is completely frank with his young readers about his problems as a young writer – problems which they will certainly have experienced themselves: *'I was thinking alright, and even having thoughts that were interesting to me, but I could not keep hold of the thoughts, or fish them up when I wanted them.'*²⁸

Hughes offers his young readers a technique to help train the conscious mind to concentrate and to visualise – in effect, to practice a form of meditation (in the teachers' notes he attempts to disarm any teachers' objections to this by asserting that it should be possible to follow the

²⁶ Letter to Nicholas Haggar, March 19, 1994, *Letters of Ted Hughes* (ed. Christopher Reid) Faber, 2007, p 663.

²⁷ *Poetry In The Making* p57

²⁸ *Poetry In The Making*, p57.

methods suggested in the chapter 'without turning English lessons into Yoga sessions.²⁹). He demonstrates this way of seeing and imagining by using his own poem, *View of a Pig*, as an example - but interestingly, he refers throughout to 'the poet', and never identifies himself as the writer. Hughes describes how the poet '*stares at something which is quite still, and collects the thoughts that concern it. He does it quite rapidly, and briefly, never taking his eyes from the pig....he chooses the thoughts that fit together best to make the poem.*'³⁰

But this is not the sort of skill that is taught in school, as Hughes makes abundantly clear by repeating the point twice: '*It is a valuable thing to be able to do – but something you are never taught at school, and not many people do it naturally. I am not very good at it, but I did acquire some skill in it. Not in school, but while I was fishing.*'³¹ He goes on to describe how an angler staring at his float is in a state of complete concentration, so that he is not only extraordinarily sensitive to the slightest movement of the minute tip of the float, but is all the time imagining the weed beneath the water's surface, the fish stirring in the bottom of the stream or pond, rising from the bottom and approaching the bait.

In the teachers' note to the first chapter of the book *Capturing Animals* Hughes had already outlined his preferred method for composition, which would have been as radical then as it is now in that it was the thinking which should be allowed the most time, with the writing being a brief but intensely pleasurable release of tension: '*I have always thought that it would be productive to give out at the beginning of term some of the subjects that are going to be written about during the next weeks. The pupils would then watch the intervening lessons more purposefully, and we cannot prevent ourselves from preparing for a demand that we know is going to be made. Then when the time comes to write, it should be regarded as a hundred-yards dash.*'³²

One can imagine the questions that would spring to the mind of any present day English or Literacy teacher reading that passage: what about considering the audience – isn't that one of the most important things to think about before starting a piece of writing? When do the children get the opportunity to re-draft their writing? Shouldn't the children be given a list of adjectives, adverbs and connectives first to ensure that the writing can be scored at the highest possible level?

²⁹ *Poetry In The Making*, p63.

³⁰ 'Learning to think' *Poetry In The Making* p59

³¹ 'Learning to think' *Poetry In The Making* p60

³² *Poetry In The Making*, p 23.

But unlike the current requirements for children's writing, Hughes is not trying to encourage formulaic writing to persuade or convince an entirely imaginary reader, nor writing whose main purpose is to demonstrate a grade or level to a teacher or examiner. Hughes's aim is help his young readers create a poem or story that is a genuine expression of each child's inner life which, as Hughes asserts, *'is the world of final reality, the world of memory, emotion, imagination, intelligence, and natural common sense, and which goes on all the time, consciously or unconsciously, like the heart beat.'*³³ And to help them to discover the means to explore their personal interior world through *'the thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it. That process of raid, or persuasion, or ambush, or dogged hunting, or surrender.'*³⁴ For if we don't learn this, Hughes warns, *'then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.'*³⁵

In Hughes's opinion most adults were beyond saving, but he passionately believed that *'every new child is a chance to correct culture's error'*³⁶. Unlike their parents, Hughes argues, children *'want to escape the ugliness of the despiritualized world in which they see their parents imprisoned. And they are aware that this inner world we have rejected is not merely an inferno of depraved impulses and crazy explosions of embittered energy. Our real selves lie down there. Down there, mixed up among all the madness, is everything that once made life worth living. All the lost awareness and powers and allegiances of our biological and spiritual being.'*³⁷

Despite the rigor of the recommended exercises, and the intellectual demands which many of the poems would seem to make of younger readers, *Poetry In The Making* has never been out of print since it was first published in 1967. It might be assumed that this was due to Hughes's subsequent eminence, however this has not prevented others of his books for young readers going out of print.³⁸ The reason for its longevity is simply that the book has succeeded in enthusing many pupils, and many teachers too, and inspired them to write in ways that they have found profoundly and personally satisfying. The children's author and former Children's Laureate, Michael Morpurgo, in a valedictory piece published shortly after Hughes's death, recalled how, as a primary school teacher he discovered *Poetry In The Making* and used it to encourage his pupils to write. *'I doubt if there has ever been written a more lucid, more enabling invitation to write. I*

³³ *Poetry In The Making*, p 57.

³⁴ *Poetry In The Making*, p 57-58.

³⁵ *Poetry In The Making*, p 58.

³⁶ Winter Pollen, p149.

³⁷ Winter Pollen, p.149.

³⁸ For example: *The Mermaid's Purse; The Cat and The Cuckoo; Moon-Bells and other poems.*

was enthralled. So was my class. 'You see,' I told them, 'you can do it too. I can do it too. He says so, he's shown us how.

*I did it right. I didn't sit them down and just get them writing. We went to our local nature reserve. No clipboards, just eyes and ears and our own thoughts. I gave them time. They wrote, and I wrote with them....The children...wrote the most keenly observed work they had ever done. What Ted Hughes had done for us, for all of us, was to enable us to believe we could do it, that we were not dolts, we were writers, all of us.*³⁹

But the final word must go to Hughes himself, who provided the best summary of *Poetry In The Making* in a letter to the Canadian academic Lissa Paul: 'my basic notion, the root of the roots, in *Poetry In The Making*, was – that – poetry is simply the name we give to a certain kind of writing. The closer that kind of writing gets to a total (instantaneous) release – something that satisfies & rejoices & appeases the whole organism – the more intense, as poetry, it seems to be. Verbal competence has to be taken for granted, I suppose, but my aim was to direct readers (listeners) towards certain faculties – inner concentration, inner listening and dependence on the spontaneous mind rather than on the calculating and remembering mind etc. A deliberate sort of self-exposure to an event – an inner event, where the part normally active (our manipulation of the world) becomes passive, and the part normally passive (whatever it is that registers the consequences of our manipulations – or failures of manipulation) becomes active, i.e. speaks, & renders the account.'⁴⁰

³⁹ Nick Gammage (ed) *The Epic Poise*, Faber, 1999 p. 225-226.

⁴⁰ *Letters of Ted Hughes*, p.483.