

Symposium

Ted Hughes's Expressionism: Visionary Subjectivity

British Library, 96 Euston Rd, London NW1 2DB
Friday, 15th September, 2023

Organisers: Steve Ely, Director of the Ted Hughes Network, University of Huddersfield and Helen Melody, Lead Curator for Contemporary Literary and Creative Archives, the British Library, funded and supported by the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

Call for Papers

Ted Hughes (1930-1998) is one of the most important English language poets of the twentieth century, the author of dozens of acclaimed works, including *Lupercal* (1960), *Crow* (1970) and *Birthday Letters* (1998). Hughes was a prolific poet, publishing 46 UK trade publications of his work (poetry, short stories, plays, translations, anthologies, criticism and works for children) and at least 88 limited or small press editions. The scale of Hughes's literary production is mirrored by the number of different genres he writes in, the different modes and registers he adopts, and the variety of content he draws upon. The encyclopaedic heterogeneity of Hughes's oeuvre presents a significant challenge for researchers seeking to present comprehensive, inclusive and discriminating accounts of his art.

This symposium is designed to explore and investigate the claim that Hughes's most characteristic, distinctive, and innovative work—wherein lies the weight of his claim to be regarded as a major poet and an internationally significant artist—is essentially *Expressionist*, characterised by a rejection of objectivity in representation in favour of a *Visionary Subjectivity* that draws on inner life and imagination to transform and distort content, deploying abstraction, typologies and symbols to shape presentations in an essentially didactic manner. Hughes's Expressionist mode manifests throughout his oeuvre and includes many of his most celebrated poems and books, including 'Wind', 'Mayday on Holderness', 'Thrushes', 'Pike', *Wodwo*, *Crow*, *Cave Birds*, *Gaudete*, *Remains of Elmet* and *Capriccio*. Many of his plays and short stories—'Difficulties of a Bridegroom', 'The Wound', 'The Head'—are similarly Expressionist, having particular affinities with German Expressionism. Of course, not all Hughes's work is Expressionist by any means, and across his career he produced celebrated poetry that seems to represent a more objective—Naturalist, Realist—response to experience, in works including *Season Songs*, *Moortown Diaries*, *River* and *Birthday Letters*, for example.

Focusing on Hughes's art, method and technique in this way invites approaches to his work that go beyond the Anglophone literary-historical tradition and discuss his work in the context of European and international artists and movements in the arts—visual, dramatic and musical as well as literary—looking at affinity, influence and collaboration: one thinks immediately of Hughes's work with, and advocacy of, innovative, experimental and avant-garde artists in the Expressionist tradition, including the Eastern European poets Herbert, Holub, Pilinsky and Popa; the American artist Leonard Baskin; the dramatist, director and impresario Peter Brook and the photographer Fay Godwin.

This conference will be held at the British Library, which is a major centre for Hughes study with substantial collections relating to the poet that include archival, printed and audio-visual material. Researchers can learn more about all aspects of Hughes' work by exploring his large personal archive (Add MS 88918), which was acquired in 2008 and a number of smaller related collections including Hughes' correspondence with Olwyn Hughes, Leonard Baskin and Keith Sagar. Please see the [British Library website](#) for more information about its Hughes holdings.

Subjects for papers might include, but are by no means limited to, the following. Proposals should make the link to the themes of the symposium clear.

- Works by Hughes: specific poems, sequences or collections; radio plays; short stories; critical prose or pedagogical works
- Hughes's poetics: artifice, method, style, technique
- Hughes and 'visionary precursors' (including, but not limited to, Christopher Smart, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, D.H. Lawrence, W.B. Yeats)
- Hughes, T.S. Eliot and Modernism
- Hughes, Dylan Thomas & the poets of the New Apocalypse
- Hughes's relationship with modern and contemporary experimental and avant-garde English language poetry
- Hughes, European and International poetry & poets
- Hughes and visual artists (including, but not limited to, relevant collaborations, for example, with Leonard Baskin and Fay Godwin)
- Hughes and Drama
- Hughes's work with Peter Brook
- Hughes and German Expressionism
- Hughes and Music

Send proposals of up to 250 words for 20-minute papers, plus a short biographical note, to Steve Ely at s.ely@hud.ac.uk by Friday, 12th May, 2023. There will be no charge for registration. For more information about the Ted Hughes Network, see: <https://research.hud.ac.uk/institutes-centres/tedhughes/>.