Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life
Jonathan Bate

Review by David Troupes
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Toward the end of this book's somewhat scatterbrained prologue, Jonathan Bate offers the high-minded principle that 'The life is invoked in order to illuminate the work; the biographical impulse must be at one with the literary-critical.' One wishes Bate had referred to this rule a little more often when writing his book.

Instead – and in spite of a dutiful account of Hughes's childhood and student career – *Ted Hughes: The Unauthorised Life* is unbalanced by its preoccupation with its subject's sexual adventures. Bate accepts the notion that women for Hughes were muse figures, à la Robert Grave's *The White Goddess*, and in accepting this he too often denudes his depiction of Hughes's relationships of any real emotional substance, replacing human feeling with a kind of mytho-carnal pattern fulfilment. That's putting it one way; to put it another, Bate has an eye for tawdry detail, even when there's no actual sex involved. Thus, when we meet Joanna Mackle, 'a senior figure at Faber and Faber to whom he became very close', she is foremost described as 'blonde and glamorous'. Hughes may well be guilty of viewing women as the physical and metaphysical furnishings of a phallocentric world, but it is the job of the would-be critic-biographer to interrogate this view, not to participate in its tired rehearsal. Yet here we have a high ranking staffer at an important literary press reduced to a centrefold pin-up cliché. There is no suggestion of any sort of physical relationship between Hughes and Mackle – unless that 'very close' is meant to be delivered with a creepy wink – so why the physical description? Bate doesn't even tell us what Mackle *does* at Faber and Faber. But he tells us her hair colour.

This sort of slip-up (and in calling it a slip-up I'm giving Bate the benefit of a serious doubt) is symptomatic of the book's preoccupation with sex. We are treated to a lengthy description, drawn from Plath's journals, of the daughter of their Devon neighbour, a 'literary-minded and very pretty auburn-haired sixteen-year-old' who turns up to talk poetry wearing 'black stockings and a dark dress'. Four paragraphs of non-story later, Bate admits that Plath has 'no more than a glimmer of fear' about an affair – so why go on about the girl's looks, except to let us imagine the scenario's unfulfilled possibilities? Bate's disinterest in patently non-sexual relationships is unmistakable. Leonard Baskin, the American artist whom Hughes and Plath met during their year in Northampton, Massachusetts, pops up here and there as a mere afterthought or correspondent. Yet the two men maintained a lifelong friendship, collaborating on all sorts of projects. Baskin was a rare kindred spirit for the poet, and the Baskins actually relocated to Devon from New England for several years to be close to Hughes. A late photograph (published in *Poet and Critic*) shows the two men in a tight arms-around-shoulders pose, a strikingly warm image of the usually camera shy Hughes. Yet any deeper exploration of their relationship – an exploration which surely would have 'illuminated the work' – is passed by in favour of juicier copy. We don't even learn the colour of Baskin's hair, much less the colour of his socks.

Am I being naïve? Of course sexual relationships are important, and it is after all not Bate's fault that Hughes slept around. Perhaps – *perhaps* – Hughes's sexual relationships do form a pattern, a pattern Bate tries to formulate with the troubled pronouncement, 'His infidelity to others was a form of fidelity to her' (that is, to Plath). But – huh? Sexual fidelity to the dead is impossible, except maybe through celibacy. Perhaps Bate means that Hughes would have considered it a betrayal of his commitment to Plath to be equally committed to

another woman. But then, he was having affairs with two other women when Plath killed herself, so that can't be it, either.

And by what authority does he make this pronouncement, anyway? It is not footnoted with an archival reference, and there's no mention of a journal where Hughes recorded this thought. Again and again the author presumes to speak for his subject – not quote, not paraphrase, but actually speak for, like a self-appointed press agent. It becomes the book's most maddening habit. Hughes's widow Carol has already publicly referred to Bate's 'breathtaking presumption' in writing, regarding the poet's son's 2009 suicide, 'It is a mercy that he did not have to endure this. It is the one thing that would have destroyed him.' Bate may even be correct – who knows? – but the manner of such a statement, the way it renders speculation as fact and presumes access to Hughes's innermost self, is grossly inappropriate to the biographer's remit. It also does the book no favours in the way of readability. After quoting some fragments of poetic draft penned by Hughes about an early morning walk following a night with Plath, Bate subjects the reader to this short paragraph: 'Like every young romantic after such an encounter, he is walking on air, every one of his senses refined, every detail of the moment etched in his memory for ever.' To follow Hughes's evocative, authentic lines with such a puddle of banalities is more than unnecessary; it takes the reader right out of the conjured moment.

The weakness of such writing makes it all the more apparent that Bate comes into his strength as both biographer and critic when sorting through the archive to reconstruct the slow evolution of poetic material. His account of the 30-year gestation of *Birthday Letters* is lucid, revelatory and, above all, textually grounded. Despite being severely limited in direct quotation, he offers fascinating accounts of related unpublished autobiographical works, developing an argument that from the moment of Plath's death Hughes was always in some sense working on *Birthday Letters*. We come to see Hughes's gradual mustering of the courage to write and publish such unguarded material as a convincing story-within-a-story. Equally, Bate's enthusiasm for theatre comes across in his nuanced account of Hughes's engagement with Shakespeare, and of his late translations of *Phèdre*, *The Oresteia* and other plays. We also get a fascinatingly detailed account of *Orghast*, Hughes's experimental collaboration with theatre director Peter Brook.

Overall, however, the single-mindedness with which Bate pursues his sex-heavy, Plath-centric thesis means that other aspects of Hughes's life – his educational work, for instance, and his environmental advocacy – occupy only the biographical nooks and crannies. Despite its impressive length and the obvious doggedness of Bate's research, *The Unauthorised Life* is far from the thoroughgoing treatment we might have hoped for. The overabundant detail of Hughes's dalliances produces a mere cursoriness in other respects, and Bate's own voice spends far too much time masquerading as Hughes's.