



Ted Hughes: The Importance of Fostering Creative Writing as Environmental Education

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Abstract

Ted Hughes is one of the most important poets in English literature of the last century and his huge volume of work (including his poetry, prose, plays, translations, letters and critical essays) has received a great deal of critical attention. Hughes was, of course, much more than just a writer. Throughout his life he was deeply engaged with environmental and ecological issues, and his own sense of environmental responsibility can be seen through his local call to action. That Hughes's work touches on political and ethical concerns related to environmental issues has been well documented by critics such as Scigaj (1991), Gifford (1995), Sagar (2005), and more recently Reddick (2017). However, the link between these concerns and the importance that Hughes attached, throughout his working life, to engaging with children's environmental imaginations, and the depth of his educational achievements for children, have received little attention to date. This article explores Hughes' educational achievements and his ongoing involvement in a number of projects related to helping young children to write poetry, together with his work as a children's poetry judge, which began in the 1960s, and his role in establishing the Arvon Foundation. It also looks at his commitment to educational projects such as Farms for City Children and his founding of the Sacred Earth Drama Trust, in the 1990s. These projects exemplify the relationship between his life-long commitment to local

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activism, and the impact his ideas had on such organisations underlying his concern to instil what Rachel Carson (1965) called a sense of wonder, by advocating environmental consciousness together with hope in younger generations.

Keywords Ted Hughes · Farms for City Children · Arvon Foundation · Sacred Earth Drama Trust · Creative writing · Imagination · Environmental education

Introduction

“Every new child is nature’s chance to correct culture’s error” (from “Myth and Education”, 1970) still stands as one of the most evocative and enduring lines from Ted Hughes’s critical writing. Maybe it is because the line stands as such a pure moment of proverbial wisdom, recognizing both human failure and hope for a better future, and one that can be found at the heart of his writing and work for children. By advocating environmental consciousness together with respect for nature throughout his children’s writing and work, the poet hoped to educate future generations. Indeed, as a closer look at his writing and work for children reveals, Hughes has, both physically and spiritually, brought us closer to healing the gap between our inner and outer nature—or what he called “Mother Earth”—than any other poet.

Despite the fact that over the last thirty years there has been a rise in critical attention to Hughes’s work (see Paul, 1986, 2018; Kazzer, 1999, 2004; Gower, 2011; Whitley, 2011, 2013; Kerslake, 2018) it is only recently that his contribution to children’s literature has been given the full critical appreciation it deserves. One of the most interesting areas of development for future studies lies in exploring the depth of Hughes’s educational achievements, in line with his life-long involvement to education and the impact he had on different organisations.

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Hughes’s attitude to writing is the importance he ascribes to imagination and creativity as the main engines of social and cultural transformation in the sphere of education. Throughout his working life Hughes engaged with children in order to develop their creativity and imagination, thanks to his particular insight into their sensibility. He became actively involved in a number of projects related to supporting and encouraging children to write poetry, and others which aimed to foster creativity and environmental education. These include Hughes’s work as a children’s poetry judge, which began in the 1960s, together with his support for the founding of the Arvon foundation. Another facet of his activism was his concern to instil what Rachel Carson called ‘a sense of wonder’ (1965)¹ by advocating environmental awareness and concern in younger generations. This can be seen in his involvement with educational projects such as Farms for City Children and his founding of the Sacred Earth Drama Trust, which aimed to make children spokespeople for the environment, in the 1990s.

¹ Carson’s term comes from her article, “Help Your Child to Wonder”, published in *Woman’s Home Companion* in July 1956 and later published posthumously by Harper & Row as *The Sense of Wonder*, in 1965.

Creative Writing: from Children's Poet to Judge

That poetry was essential to Hughes throughout his life is obvious. However, I am not referring here to the fact that poetry was essential as a part of his existence, but rather to the idea that he considered, both as a teacher and educator, that it should be an essential and fundamental part of the young reader's life too. Hughes firmly believed that the key to successful education lay in engaging with the student's imagination.

This was also Hughes's first concern in *Poetry in the Making* (1967), considered as "one of the most influential texts on creative writing of the last fifty years" (Dunkerley, 2018, p. 316): to foster imagination by engaging the reader actively in the creative process. During the early period of Hughes's writing for children and throughout his career, his own convictions, together with his ecological concerns, not only underlined the thinking behind his poetic voice but also led to his life-long commitment to and support for a number of educational projects related to encouraging children to write poetry in order to develop their creativity and imagination.

One of these contributions was the Arvon Foundation, established in 1968 by John Moat and John Fairfax in Devon, as a reaction against the dogmatic approach to teaching poetry and creative writing in schools. The Foundation went on to become part of a creative writing movement "helping thousands of individuals to begin a creative journey of self-discovery and imagination through writing" (Cline and Angier, 2010, p. 259). As Hugh Dunkerley has recently claimed, the organisation did "more to promote creative writing in this country than any other outside formal education" (Dunkerley, 2018, p. 320). The foundation ran week-long creative writing workshops (and continues to do so today), during which students lived together with two tutors. It was initially set up with the intention of providing intensive courses for schools, although later these were opened to anyone with a desire to write. The only "instruction" would be "what rose directly out of their involvement—the apprentice working, and the master guiding him as he worked, showing him how to work, helping him to work" (Skea, 2016).

Hughes was sceptical at first, but soon became convinced that the residential course format worked, not because everybody who attended these courses would go on to become a writer, but because of what the experience could give them and what they could take away from the course. Hughes himself describes the impulse behind the organisation and the importance of nurturing the seeds of creative talent in young writers:

The hope was to do something to salvage the actual art, the living skill, of writing, amidst a combination of forces in formal education that seemed bent on destroying it [The idea was that] professional, experienced writers [...] would teach directly, by example and shared creative production, as masters and apprentices. (Hughes, 1995)

In 1975, when Hughes learned that Arvon was looking for a northern base as a centre, he offered them the use of his home at Lumb Bank, an 18th-century

mill owner's house set in the Pennines, in West Yorkshire, and helped financially with the renovation, partly from the sale of his manuscripts. This cost him, in the words of Jonathan Bate, "two years' literary earnings and a great deal of stress with builders" (2015, p. 325). Notwithstanding, the poet would frequently return there to give readings and support the organisation. However, not only did he offer the foundation financial support, but in 1982 he came up with an idea for raising funds and persuaded three of the most distinguished poets of Britain to join him in the venture. In a letter to Philip Larkin, dated 20 March 1979, Hughes tentatively enquired "Will you be a judge—along with Seamus Heaney & Charles Causley? Fee £350. I know you don't do this sort of thing much—but I wanted to ask you before trying elsewhere" (Hughes, 2007, p. 404). Larkin of course agreed, and together with Seamus Heaney and Charles Causley worked with Hughes as judge for the *Observer*/Arvon International Poetry Competition, to help raise money and save the foundation from collapsing financially. The competition was open to all ages and welcomed entries from around the world. What nobody expected was the public's reaction. Over 30,000 people paid to enter the competition, providing the foundation with the necessary income. Hughes claimed that the whole process of organising the event and then working as judge, was so consuming (the judges had to read every poem) that he wrote nothing for the next six months (Moat, 2005, p. 26). Hughes later wrote to Keith Sagar about his arduous work in judging the competition, stating that "That is the last judging I shall ever do, Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever. Ever" (Sagar, 2012, p. 100).

Despite some disagreement between the judges, the first prize of £5,000 was given to a young Andrew Motion,² who would later succeed Hughes as Poet Laureate from 1999 to 2009.

John Moat recalls Hughes's commitment to Arvon:

there were few Arvon matters he'd not be involved with: little committees, ad hoc brainstorming sessions (he seemed to relish especially each new crisis), high and low level delegations. Endless times he and Carol, his wife, would open their house to meetings, or ask people in any way involved to meals... Ted himself never ran a course, but was the visiting reader on many. Often he would simply drop by, or attend the readings of others. No ostentation, no suggestion he'd gone out of his way. But that energy of his, again it was something else – his presence would have a magical effect, a contagion of imaginative excitement. Relate this to the entire field of his generosity and one can see how his association came to inform the operation. (2005, pp. 26–27)

Later, in 1989, Arvon bought Lumb Bank from Ted and Carol Hughes, with help from the Arts Council. Despite initially beginning as a centre which promoted creative writing mainly for young people and schools, today its residential courses are

² Motion was 30 when he was awarded Arvon Foundation's International Poetry Competition for "The Letter".

open to all-comers. It stands as a national creative writing organization, with headquarters in London and four centres, including Lumb Bank, and continues to run annual courses to this day.³

It was after Sylvia Plath's suicide, in 1963, that Hughes launched his career as a children's writer. This was an intensely creative period, coinciding with works such as *How the Whale Became* (1963), *The Earth-Owl and Other Moon People* (1963) and *Nessie the Mannerless Monster* (1964). From then until the publication of *Crow*, in 1970, he did not publish any adult work whatsoever, but dedicated himself instead to writing for children. As I have previously argued in *The Voice of Nature in Ted Hughes's Writing for Children* (2018), Hughes's attraction to children's literature and his creative surge was not a coincidence, nor was it the outcome of having to raise two young children without a mother, but was rather a therapeutic way for Hughes to deal with his terrible loss (Kerslake, 2018, p. 108). It was also at this time, in 1965, that Hughes began one of his most sustained and less acknowledged associations: his work as a judge in the National Children's Poetry Competition of the *Daily Mirror*, which later became the W.H. Smith National Literary Competition.

Hughes became judge on the Advisory Panel in the mid-'60s, assuming chairmanship in 1978, until the competition was abandoned by W.H. Smith in 1997. The fact that he dedicated over 30 years of his life to such a project suggests the importance that Hughes accorded children's writing competitions and the potential and talent of young writers, together with his particular insight into their sensibility.

As Lissa Paul has noted, "the connections between Hughes's own writing and the writing by children he was reading for the competition are even more intimate than his work as a judge would suggest: he drafted his own work on the blank backs of the competition entries" (2018, p. 49). Witness to this curious fact are the archives at the British Library, filled with double-sided pages with Hughes's illegible handwritten drafts, with neatly typed verses by children on the back. As Paul asserts, "There is something deeply private and tender about the physical closeness between his work and theirs" (p. 49).

That Hughes considered it a serious commitment, can also be confirmed from the fact that he wrote at least two articles, collected in *Winter Pollen* (1994), that talk about the importance of children's writing competitions and the potential and talent of young writers. In "A Word about Writing in Schools" he discusses how the faculty of imagination can be trained, while "Concealed Energies"⁴ considers the importance of fostering creativity and talent both inside and outside schools. Writing of this hidden talent, he explains:

It is as if works of imaginative literature were a set of dials on the front of society, where we can read off the concealed energies. What happens in the imagination of those individuals chosen by the unconscious part of society to

³ For more information about the Foundation, its history and courses see their web site: <https://www.arvon.org/>

⁴ The article was first published as the forward to *Children as Writers 2* (1975). London: Heinemann.

be its writers is closely indicative of what is happening to the hidden energies of the society as a whole. (Hughes, 1994, p. 27)

Both articles offer important insight into Hughes's own ideas on writing for children and his belief in the importance of creating a *lingua franca* for both children and adults. In "Concealed Energies", Hughes explains the "fascinating process" behind the competition and how around 50,000 entries are divided by age into sections:

This mass of entries are worked through by a large panel of selectors, who distil the number down to about 600 finalists. These are passed to a committee of judges who make the final choice. Each of the seven or eight people on this committee receives a copy of the whole 600, and picks out perhaps one hundred items –with degrees of preference. Finally the day comes when this committee meets and thrashes out the list of fifty or sixty winners on which all can pretty well agree. (1994: p. 28)

That a well-established poet of Hughes's reputation should dedicate so much time and effort to the tedious process of reading and judging the entries shows just how much such projects meant to him. One of the main differences between the Arvon/Poetry Society competition and the W.H. Smith Young Writers' Competition was the fact that, in the second case, the entries were filtered by preliminary judges. The number of these entries increased over the years, and, as Mick Gowar recalls, "We still received, by courier, six or seven large boxes of entries which took the best part of a month to read and from which we made a preliminary selection" (Gowar, 2012).⁵ Together with Gowar, the rest of the judging panel—chaired by Hughes—was at that time formed by Michael Morpurgo, Michael Baldwin, Malorie Blackman, and Jan Mark, together with Michael Mackenzie (who was in charge) and Michael's assistant, Lois Beeson. The judges would then meet up, to compare their selections and agree on the prize-winners. During these judging panel sessions, Gowar comments that "one of my clearest memories of Ted, and I think one of the most revealing of an important facet of his personality and concerns for children's writing [was the fact that] while the rest of us more or less agreed on the winners, Ted would always have several which the rest of us had passed over or missed in the bulk of the reading, to put forward" (Gowar, 2011). Hughes's particular empathy and insight to children's sensibility has also been referred to by Lois Beeson:

I was not the only person to be struck by the fact that that he treated this work as he might that of any established writer. I particularly remember an occasion when he lingered over and repeated the two final lines from a poem about a trout by a ten-year old – 'a light of thunder dodging rocks' (Hoque, 1993, p. 148) –shook his head with a wondering respect and said softly, 'I wish I'd written that.' (Beeson, 1999, p. 191).

⁵ The author would like to acknowledge and thank Mick Gowar for permission to quote. Personal correspondence from Mick Gowar to Lorraine Kerslake, 21 February 2012.

Hughes's commitment and his impact on different organisations and educational projects that he became actively involved with was of course a key factor in their success, as in the case of the Arvon Foundation or children's writing competitions.⁶ As Beeson comments:

What is striking about that 33-year old association is that it was a serious commitment for him, something he could not, would not give up, despite the huge demands that it made on his time and the many other calls made on him as Poet Laureate. The contradictions and challenges posed by the extraordinary variety of talent on display in each year's entries; the puzzle of what happened to all the promising young winners, few of whom seemed to emerge as professional writers in adulthood; the noticeable changes wrought in content and perspective by the television and video age; the impact of keyboard composition on the quality and quantity of what was written; the impact of the National Curriculum on the teaching of creative writing in schools – all was grist to his mill. He was endlessly interested, concerned, looking for reasons, solutions, debate. (Beeson, 1999, p. 190)

Arising from the importance that Hughes gave to engaging with children throughout his working life in order to develop their creativity and imagination, Hughes's empathy for the child's imagination is also closely linked to his on-going project to write in a *lingua franca* for a child audience, but one that adults could "overhear".

Hughes firmly believed that "children's writing is not simply adult writing in the larval stage. It is a separate literature of its own [...]. Over and above that, however, children's writing provides one vital thing which adult literature never can" (1994, p. 29). By that 'one vital thing' Hughes was referring to the differences between the adult and child's sensibility and the fact that the child's mind was more open and closer to nature and, in this way, more receptive. As he puts it "Children's sensibility, and children's writing, have much to teach adults. Something in the way of a corrective, a reminder" (p. 29). Hughes believed that as adults we lose that sensibility and with it the ability to embrace imagination and reconnect with the child within.

The underlying idea that children are closer to nature than adults and that they are born innocent and pure is based largely on a cultural belief that goes back to Rousseau. Like Rousseau, Hughes believed that that innate disposition towards nature is one which we are born with. Carson too placed great value on this sensory affinity between children and nature, whilst for adults, she claims, "It is our misfortune that for most of us that clear-eyed vision, that true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring, is dimmed and even lost before we reach adulthood" (1956, p. 42). Carson's ideas would appear to be closely related to the importance Hughes ascribed to instilling an appreciation of the natural world and reconnecting us through his nature poetry.

⁶ Another example of Hughes's involvement was his judging of a writing competition for schools on environmental change for the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in 1986.

Farms for City Children

It was after Hughes reviewed Max Nicholson's *The Environmental Revolution*, in 1970, that, as Sagar has noted, "environmental and ecological concerns came to figure more and more centrally both in his poems and in his life, and led to his working for such organisations as the Atlantic Salmon Trust,⁷ Farms for City Children and the Sacred Earth Drama Trust" (Sagar, 2004, p. 643).

Hughes's support of farms and his own career as a farmer bear witness to the creativity that lies in his animal poems and to his central function as a poet. His farming poems, those from *Season Songs* (1976), *Moortown* (1979), *What is the Truth?* (1984) and *Moortown Diary* (1989) show the farm as a place where culture and nature most intimately meet and "illuminate a healing of the rift between man and nature" (Underhill, 1992, p. 297). Hughes was, in many ways, connected to farming throughout his life. As both an educator and environmentalist he understood, in the words of Jack Thacker, "that farming was a subject worthy of universal attention, but he saw that any environmental awakening also had to be universal" (Thacker, 2018, p. 290). Many of Hughes's farming poems read as examples of his engagement in environmental education and concern to educate young people about environmental issues such as keeping wild animals, or the effects of agriculture on the environment and factory farming.⁸ Poems from *Season Songs* such as 'The Seven Sorrows' or 'The Stag' raise questions about the violence of fox and pheasant hunting, whilst in 'Sheep' the poet informs the reader of how a mother sheep mourns her newborn lamb, concluding that 'Death was more interesting to him. / Life could not get his attention' (1976: 29). In 'Bess My Badger' who 'grew up/ In a petshop in Leicester. Moony mask/ Behind mesh' (1984: 13), from *What is the Truth?*, Hughes makes an interesting case against keeping wild animals in captivity. In 'Cow (II)' he tells us that 'The Cow is but a bagpipe' and openly criticises modern factory farming:

The milk-herd is a factory,
Milk, meat, butter, cheese.
You think these come in rivers? O
The slurry comes in seas
Seas
The slurry comes in seas. (1984: 22)

These ideas are very much in line with the role he undertook as president of the charity Farms for City Children.⁹ The project Farms for City Children, a residential

⁷ Hughes was a friend and supporter of the AST, to which he dedicated the poem, "The Best Worker in Europe", in 1985.

⁸ For an in-depth analysis on Hughes's connection with farming and its impact on works such as *What is the Truth?* see Whitley (2013).

⁹ For more information see their web site: <https://farmsforcitychildren.org/>

farm for children from inner cities, was set up by Clare and Michael Morpurgo in 1976, in order to offer young children a hands-on experience and enrich their lives. The couple were able to establish the charity thanks to the inheritance that Clare Morpurgo received on the death of her father, Sir Allen Lane, the founder of Penguin books. Hughes was to become their first president and was actively involved in helping with fundraising and reading to the children. Like Hughes, Morpurgo had also worked as a teacher before becoming a writer and, in a similar way, had also felt disillusioned and frustrated with the education system. As Morpurgo himself explains:

Clare and I had felt that many children we were teaching suffered from a profound poverty of experience, that school could so often be narrow and restricting for them, that their horizons needed expanding, that their lives needed to be enriched [...] time spent in the countryside, away from school and family, could only be beneficial for them (2010, p. 6).

As chance would have it, Hughes was a close neighbour and would often go fishing on the River Torridge, which bordered the nearby farm. After Farms for City Children was established, the poet became a cherished friend and mentor to Morpurgo. The author of *War Horse* (1982) later recalled how Hughes would come and read to the children, who would sit mesmerised by his voice:

I remember he came to read one evening to some children from Inner City, Birmingham, who had come to stay at Nethercott Farm in Devon, one of the Farms for City Children, a charity which he supported wholeheartedly as its president. I shan't forget his stillness as the children sat listening to him around the log fire, agog not at his reputation – they cared nothing for that and he liked that – but at the power and the fun in his words, and the music in his voice (Morpurgo, 2008).

Hughes become an important figure in Morpurgo's life, not only because of the genuine sympathy Hughes showed towards the project, but also as an important source of inspiration to Morpurgo as a writer who would eventually become Children's Laureate from 2003 to 2005, a post that Hughes helped establish as Poet Laureate in 1999. Morpurgo was later awarded an OBE in 2007 and a knighthood in the New Year's Honours in 2018, for services to literature and charity.

In 1986, Farms for City Children acquired Lower Treginnis in Pembrokeshire, Wales, from the National Trust. The property underwent refurbishing and was opened in May 1989. In 1993, Wick Court, a historic Tudor mansion, set on the River Severn in Gloucestershire, was converted and re-structured as a third working farm, opening in 1998. Today three farms are running. At present, about 85,000 children have taken part in the scheme since it was set up, and the charity's three farms in Wales, Devon and Gloucestershire host around 3200 children and 400 teachers a year. The original programme involved groups of twenty to thirty children aged between 7 to 11 spending a week living on Nethercott Farm, in Iddesleigh, Devon, interacting with the animals and experiencing what it was like to be part of a real farm. Activities included the practicalities of farm life

such as helping with lambing and calving, feeding and grooming the ponies and donkeys, mucking out, collecting eggs and making cider or cheese.

Spending just a week on the farm could provide these children with a new life experience, reconnecting them to the countryside and helping nurture a sense of wonder towards nature. It also helped them learn about the importance of conservation and sustainability. The way young children connect to animals and nature can shape them in their future as adults, as Gail Melson explains: “Children learn about themselves and their place in the world through engagement with the animal kingdom” (Melson, 2001, p. 199). Drawing on Edward Wilson’s concept of *Biophilia* (1984)—our intrinsic connectedness with animals and nature—Melson reminds us of the importance of educating children to respect the natural world through a positive connection to nature, whilst cautioning that “a denatured environment, stripped of a rich diversity of animal inhabitants, will be a toxic one for our children” (p. 199). Indeed, one of the effects of our increasingly dysfunctional relationship with the natural environment is that today’s stay-in generation of high-tech children are becoming alienated from nature (Barkham, 2020). As Patrick Barkham warns us:

We live in a time of unprecedented gloom about enveloping environmental crises. We must adapt to unimaginably rapid climatic changes [...]. But these crises may prove unsolvable unless we fix another problem: our children are growing up without green space and wild things. Our contact with species other than our own is lessening. Our time in nature is curtailed. (2020, p. 4)

In *Last Child in the Woods* (2005), Richard Louv coined the term “nature-deficit disorder” to refer to today’s generation of children being deprived of nature, and warned about the consequences this would have on the future stewardship of our environment. In 2012, a National Trust report called “Natural Childhood” revealed the growing gap between children and nature. The following year the RSPB published a study which concluded that four out of five children in the UK were not adequately “connected to nature”. As David Whitley correctly states, “Children’s loss of the ability to recognize and name—let alone understand and relate to—the real animals that share their local environment has become one of the most profound indices of our current crisis with nature” (Whitley, 2013, p. 106). These words echo those of Quentin Blake, vice-president of Farms for City Children:

This is a generation which will hear repeatedly of ecological disaster, will be told that the earth itself is threatened. For some of them the earth will not be a globe in the classroom or a map on the wall, but a Devon farm where they scuffled beech leaves along the drive and broke the ice on the puddles in the lane. When they are told of polluted rivers, it will be one river, which has had its share of pollution, where they first saw a trout jumping and a wading heron, and plastic bags caught in the branches to mark the level of the last great flood. (Blake, 2020)

Hughes would undoubtedly have agreed with these ideas, and the importance of nurturing imagination and creativity. For it is in those early years that the

child's environmental awareness is shaped, especially through positive encounters and hands-on experiences like those provided by Farms for City Children, which encourage children to develop their biophilia, their love for nature and knowledge and appreciation of the natural world, leading towards the development of an environmental ethic.

A Model for Ecodrama? The Sacred Earth Drama Trust

Hughes wrote over eighteen plays for both children and adults, and worked on a variety of drama projects throughout his life, including his collaboration with Peter Brook on a stage adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus* for the National Theatre Company in 1969. Hughes was also actively involved in promoting the arts as a creative means to foster environmental awareness, especially after becoming Poet Laureate in 1984.

Throughout his life, Hughes was involved in diverse educational and environmental projects and worked to alert governments and authorities to environmental problems. One of his most outstanding environmental essays is the one that appeared in the form of a review-article entitled "Your World" (1992), written to accompany the winning photographs of a competition organised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the Earth Summit, and subsequently published in *The Observer* on 29th November 1992. The competition, held in partnership with Canon Inc., was based on the theme "Focus on Your World". More than 30,000 photographs were submitted, from more than 140 countries, resulting in the largest international photographic competition ever to be staged at that time. The book contained photos on a range of environmental themes, all focusing on the vision participants had of the world, either in celebration or condemnation of its present condition. Just as he used his role as Poet Laureate to challenge the establishment, Hughes used the article as a platform to voice his alarm at environmental issues. In it he recalls a remark made by Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, about how "all our urgent talk about environmental problems seems to get us nowhere" (Hughes, 1992, p. 36) and denounces the way that "resonant promises from politicians and the glossy environmental policy brochures of industry seem to miss the mark" (p. 39). This leads Hughes to propose "a new kind of language that goes straight to the heart and soul, and changes things there" (p. 39).

It was in response to this idea that Hughes founded the Sacred Earth Drama Trust, sponsored by the World-Wide Fund for Nature and Arts for Nature.¹⁰ The idea, in the form of a play-writing competition, with the winning entries published in a collection and used in schools, was to encourage young people to become more actively involved in environmental issues. According to the registers available at the Charity Commission for the UK, its objects included "advancing the education of the public by the promotion and performance of drama productions related to the protection and preservation of the national environment". In a letter of 7 February, 1990

¹⁰ See <http://www.charitycommission.gov.uk/index.aspx>. According to the Charity Commission, *The Sacred Earth Drama Trust* was a regulated charity, first registered 20 August 1990 and removed 27 August 2009. *Arts for Nature* still exists and is actively supported by Prince Philip.

to Matthew Evans, Chairman and Managing Director of Faber and Faber, Hughes describes the genesis of the project:

The idea cropped up at an ideas dinner, in the Palace, where the Duke of E. goaded a number of his guests to think up ways of getting environmental awareness – awareness of the issues – urgency of the issues – past the barrier that everybody now puts up against the incessant flood of chat about it. [...] So it was a natural extension to put together (a) competition of plays about that length, written by anybody, for children, based on religious stories, myths, folktales [...] (b) plays that would revolve around themes of environmental concern; (c) the huge lack of plays suitable for performance in schools by schoolchildren, imaginative, cross-cultural plays, and the huge hunger of teachers for plays of any sort to bring all their pupils into action on real issues; (e) [*sic*] the susceptibility of children to concern for the natural world. (Hughes, 2007, pp. 576–577)

In 1993 Faber published the first collection of the winning entries from the competition, held in 1990. The entries were judged in two age categories: under fifteen and fifteen and above. The children were invited to submit entries “that updated, reshaped and retold an existing religious or mythological story with particular relevance to the natural world today, and how we should live in it” (Hughes, 1993a, p. ix). The response was overwhelming. Plays written by children, from different cultures and backgrounds, flooded in from all over the globe. However, all of them shared a universal trait: “What they all had in common was a desperate cry from the heart to save what is left of our planet. [...] each demonstrated a need to listen to the voices of our ancestors and heed their ancient warnings” (Hughes, 1993a, p. ix). They were to become, in Hughes’s words, “sacred texts of a new children’s religion” (2007, p. 578). The idea was to use the collection in schools nationwide to foster imagination and raise awareness of environmental issues. As Terry Gifford states, Hughes “founded the Sacred Earth Drama Trust in order to nurture an environmental awareness through creativity in the next generation.” (Gifford, 2009, p. 26). This idea that “If we act together we can save the world” (Hughes, 1993a, p. xii) is also the underlying force behind Hughes’s children’s novel, *The Iron Woman* (1993), published that same year. Written as a sequel to *The Iron Man* (1968), the story puts forward Hughes’s own environmental concerns and reads as a redemptive tale of hope where children act as agents of change.

In 1993, Faber & Faber published the first collection, which included plays from people from all over the world: from Britain to places as disparate as Thailand, Vanuatu, Africa or New Zealand. As he explains in the foreword:

By ‘Sacred Earth Drama’ we meant plays for people of all ages, based on environmental themes, to be used in schools and other places of learning, where they would provide an opportunity for young people to become fully involved in the issues – all the better if they could be performed by the young people themselves. From experience, we knew that young people’s drama can be imaginative, inventive, yet at the same time simple and moving, to a degree that adult drama rarely can. Also from experience, we knew that adults, par-

ents and teachers watch children's drama through the eyes of the child within themselves. It reaches them in ways they never can be reached if addressed simply as adults. (Hughes, 1993a, pp. vii–viii)

Hughes's remark on the adult watching drama through the eyes of a child echoes the Romantic poets William Blake's and Wordsworth's ideas on childhood innocence and the child's closeness to nature. Drawing on this Romantic vision, Hughes believed that children have easy access to the inner worlds of feeling and imagination and, like Carson, that observing nature could lead to wonder, a sensory experience, that many adults have long forgotten. In the same way, Hughes emphasises the importance of letting down the barriers between the adult and child readers, given the "strange fact that adults are more affected and moved by children's drama, which they watch through the eyes of their children, than they are by adult drama, which they watch through their visors" (Hughes, 2007, p. 577). Of course, what Hughes is referring to here, is writing in "a style of communication for which children are the specific audience, but which adults can overhear" (p. 482). Drawing on the importance of environmental education and awareness, Hughes's enthusiasm led him to deem that:

We shall go on producing these collections, drawing them from wherever we can in the world, till we have a big repertoire. Then translate them into other languages. Our idea was to involve not only the children (and their schools) but the parents who watch the children perform. The person facing the threat of extinction and the same person seeing their child face the threat of extinction are two completely different people. It's the second one we want to wake up. (Hughes, 1993b)

Hughes genuinely believed that adults had a lot to learn from children. In his essay "Concealed Energies" he refers again to the "visors" that adults wear, observing that: "Children's sensibility, and children's writing, have much to teach adults. Something in the way of a corrective, a reminder [...]. Preconceptions are already pressing, but they have not yet closed down, like a space helmet, over the entire head and face" (Hughes, 1994, p. 29).

Hughes held that these prejudices, together with the "space helmet" of science and technology, were, like a visor, responsible for making adults lose the ability to embrace new ideas and connect with nature and their inner selves. So, the Sacred Earth Drama Trust was, in this sense, not just directed at fostering environmental awareness in future generations but also conceived as a way of making adults more receptive and open to their inner self, letting down the barriers and reconnecting their imaginative and creative energies, in order to embrace both the natural world and the lost child within.

Throughout his career, Hughes remained committed to using the arts to foster environmental education and awareness and aspired to teach children to respect the natural world. In speaking to our imagination, and by engaging this faculty at the deepest levels of experience, Hughes connects what he calls our inner and outer worlds. For the poet, the "outer" world is a world of objective reality, and in order to achieve wholeness we must learn to connect it with our "inner" world. He did this

through his own active call to action and the importance he placed on nurturing the child's imagination and instilling wonder as a moral virtue towards nature.

The importance of his work for and with children, together with his life-long commitment to environmental and educational projects such as those discussed warrant that Hughes was much more than just a major poet. Amongst his many accomplishments he was a poet and writer for both children and adults, an educator, a farmer, an environmentalist and an activist. He was all of these things, and so much more.

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