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**An Exhumation:**

**Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes:  
Disinterred Ancient Texts**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for

Master of Arts by Research

By Lenore Smith BA (Hons)

Discipline of English  
School of Humanities  
James Cook University

**2005**

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Lenore Smith  
March 31, 2005

## **Declaration**

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any other form for another degree or diploma at any other university or institution of tertiary education. Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and a list of references given.

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Lenore Smith  
March 31, 2005

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Lenore Smith  
March 31, 2005

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An Exhumation:  
Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes: Disinterred Ancient Texts.

**Thesis Abstract**

Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes are major English language poets who, like others, disinter the bones of ancient texts and reclothe them in living flesh. This thesis argues that the poems discussed, which were published in the last decade of the twentieth century, expose and explore themes and ideas that have determined human action from ancient to modern times. Heaney, who is Irish and has an English publisher, is installed at the centre of the Anglo-American literary canon. Conversely, apart from *Birthday Letters* which offer segments of his relationship with Sylvia Plath, Hughes is largely ignored by American critics. In dealing with Hughes' last long poems, this thesis fills a gap in the critical literature. Examination reveals Hughes' work to be as powerful, disturbing, appealing and pertinent for modern readers as Heaney's.

The focus of the study is a detailed analysis of the poetry's power in a 1990s context of war, oppression and intermittent peace. Basic to the analysis is Heaney's repeated assertion: "the way an artist engages with the modern world is through the techniques of his art among other things, it doesn't have to be modern subject matter at all, I think" (qtd. in John Haffenden 66). The thesis establishes Heaney's ideal of modern relevance by exposing through close analysis continuous patterns of themes and ideas from ancient to modern times. Concurrently, the argument demonstrates similarities and differences in Heaney's and Hughes' poetic techniques.

## An Exhumation:

### Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes: Disinterred Ancient Texts

#### Primary Poetry Texts

- Heaney, Seamus. *Beowulf*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- . *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991.
- . "Death of Orpheus." *After Ovid*. Eds. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- . "Mycenae Lookout." *Opened Ground*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- . "Orpheus and Eurydice." *After Ovid*. Eds. Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.
- Hughes, Ted. *Aeschylus, The Oresteia*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- . *Euripides, Alceste*. London: Faber and Faber, 1999.
- . *Tales from Ovid*. London: Faber and Faber, 1997.

#### Primary Prose Texts

- Heaney, Seamus "The Art of Poetry LXXV: Seamus Heaney." Henri Cole. Paris Review 39 (1997): 88-138.
- . "Crediting Poetry." *Opened Ground*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- . "The drag of the golden chain." Times Literary Supplement 12 Nov. 1999, 14-5.
- . "Eulogy: Memorial Service for Ted Hughes." Guardian 16 May 16 1999. Online Guardian Archive. 28/05/1999.
- . *Finders Keepers. Selected Prose 1971-2001*. London: Faber and Faber, 2002.
- . *The Government of the Tongue*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988.
- . Interview. *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation with John Haffenden*. John Haffenden. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.
- . *Preoccupations. Selected Prose 1968-1978*. London: Faber and Faber, 1980.

———. *The Redress of Poetry*. London: Faber and Faber, 1995.

Hughes, Ted. “The Art of Poetry LXXI. (interview with poet Ted Hughes).” Drue Heinz. *Paris Review* 35 (1995): 55-95.

———. “Two Interviews conducted by the Author: Ted Hughes and *Crow* (1970), Ted Hughes and *Gaudete* (1977).” Ekbert Faas. *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe*. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow P, 1980.

———. *Winter Pollen*. Ed. William Scammell. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.



### Abbreviations

B	Heaney, Seamus. <i>Beowulf</i>
CP	Heaney, Seamus. “Crediting Poetry”
CT	Heaney, Seamus. <i>The Cure at Troy</i>
DGC	Heaney, Seamus. “The drag of the golden chain”
DO	Heaney, Seamus. “The Death of Orpheus”
Eu	Heaney, Seamus. “Eulogy: Ted Hughes Memorial Service”
FK	Heaney, Seamus. <i>Finders Keepers</i>
GT	Heaney, Seamus. <i>Government of the Tongue</i>
HA	Heaney, Seamus. “Interview – John Haffenden”
ML	Heaney, Seamus. “Mycenae Lookout”
P	Heaney, Seamus. <i>Preoccupations</i>
PA	Heaney, Seamus. “Interview – Henri Cole”
OE	Heaney, Seamus. “Orpheus and Eurydice”
RP	Heaney, Seamus. <i>The Redress of Poetry</i>
A	Hughes, Ted. <i>Alcestis</i>
FA	Hughes, Ted. “Interview – Ekbert Faas”
DH	Hughes, Ted. “Interview – Drue Heinz”
TO	Hughes, Ted. <i>The Oresteia</i>
Ov	Hughes, Ted. <i>Tales from Ovid</i>
WP	Hughes, Ted. <i>Winter Pollen</i>

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