Ted Hughes and Translation

"It is a pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer."

Richard Bentley quoted in Samuel Johnson's *Life of Pope*.[1]

1

Given that French was the only language in which Ted Hughes was sufficiently fluent to translate directly, and *Phèdre* the only complete French text he translated, the title 'Ted Hughes and Translation' will strike some readers as paradoxical if not provocative. How can you translate from languages you can neither read nor write? Yet Hughes's involvement in the 'project' of translation since the 1960s, both as translator and co-founder of *Modern Poetry in Translation*, has been significant for both his own work and the huge growth in the publishing of translations into English. In a long career and as part of that project, Hughes 'translated' works from Latin, Greek, Spanish, German, Hungarian, Hebrew, Russian and Italian. I choose the word 'project' precisely because it is the most accurate description of what has been a conscious and consistent effort to change the nature of a very old argument.

John Dryden's 'Preface' to his translation of Ovid's *Epistles*, first published in 1680, states the terms of the controversy with admirable clarity: "No man is

[1] Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2009) p.429. Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* (Penguin English Library, 1984) p.459.

capable of translating poetry, who besides a genius to that art, is not a master both of his author's language, and of his own".[2] This would seem to rule Hughes's project out from the start, but fortunately, in the same 'Preface', Dryden does offer some definitions which leave room for discussion of Hughes's concept of what 'translation' might be allowed to involve. All translation, Dryden argues, can be summarised under three headings:

> First, that of metaphrase, or turning an author word by word, and line by line, from one language into another . . . The second way is that of paraphrase, or translation with latitude, where the author is kept in view by the translator, so as never to be lost, but his words are not so strictly followed as his sense, and that too is admitted to be amplified, but not altered . . . The third way is that of imitation, where the translator (if now he has not lost that name) assumes the liberty not only to vary from the words and sense, but to forsake them both as he sees occasion: and taking only some general hints from the original, to run division on the groundwork, as he pleases.[3]

Dryden's "third way" was picked up by Pope in his *First Epistle of the Second Book of Horace Imitated*, first published in 1737, and indeed by Robert Lowell in *Imitations*, his own controversial venture into the argument, published – significantly for any discussion of Hughes – in 1961. Pope of course famously courted trouble with his comparison of George II with Augustus, but the interesting point for us is his claim that "to make the poem entirely English", he "was willing" to show how Horatian reflections and judgements upon Augustus might "contribute to

[2] John Dryden, 'Preface to Ovid's *Epistles*', *The Oxford Authors*, Ed. Keith Walker (Oxford University Press, 1987) p.163.
[3] Ibid p. 160.

the happiness of a *free people*, and are more consistent with the welfare of *our neighbours"*.[4] There is something here of Lowell's ambition "to do what my authors might have done if they were writing their poems now and in America"[5], and indeed Hughes's attempt in his Ovid translations to register "what it feels like to live in the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era".[6] We shall return to the notion of "imitation" when we look at the role of the classics in Hughes's own creative development, but it is Dryden's concept of "metaphrase" which strikes one most immediately when thinking of Hughes's early ambitions.

2

Because of their shared interest and long association, Daniel Weissbort is the ideal guide to our understanding of Hughes's involvement in translation. They became friends as undergraduates at Cambridge in the 1950s, and together founded the magazine *Modern Poetry in Translation*, publishing the first issue in 1964. In 1967, actively promoted and directed by Hughes, the first Poetry International readings were held at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London, with programme notes again by Hughes. A very detailed account of the history of these interventions is given in Weissbort's *Ted Hughes and Translation*[7], with examples of translated work throughout Hughes's lifetime in *Ted Hughes: Selected*

[4] Alexander Pope, *The Major Works,* Ed. Pat Rogers (Oxford World's Classics, 2008) p. 372.
[5] Robert Lowell, *Imitations* (London, Faber, 1961) p. xi.
[6] Ted Hughes, Tales from Ovid (London, Faber, 1997) p. xi.
[7] Daniel Weissbort, *Ted Hughes and Translation* (London, Richard Hollis, 2011).

Translations[8]. The latter is particularly valuable in including background notes to specific translations, showing the thinking behind Hughes's approach.

Hughes's major public contributions to translation began in 1968, with the publication of Yehuda Amichai's *Selected Poems* and the performance of his version of Seneca's *Oedipus*. He had worked on the *Bardo Thödol* at Yaddo in 1959 and a passage from the *Odyssey* was broadcast by the BBC Third Programme in 1960, commissioned by Louis MacNeice and Anthony Thwaite and read by Patrick Garland.[9] There are also manuscript translations of Carneiro, Macedo, Juház, Bonnefoy and Eluard collected in Weissbort's *Selected Translations*. We shall return to the importance of Amichai and Seneca's *Oedipus*, but it is important to note the remarks Hughes made during the early years of his involvement with *Modern Poetry in Translation* and the Poetry International movement. A clear principle is being articulated here. Thus, for instance, in his Editorial for the 1965 *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Hughes tells us that "The type of translation we are seeking can be described as literal, though not literal in a strict or pedantic sense"[10], and again in the Editorial for the 1967 edition, "we feel more strongly than ever that the first ideal is literalness".[11] The Programme Note for the 1967 Poetry International further justifies this literalism – probably in the face of growing scepticism from traditional translators – on the grounds that "However rootedly-national in detail it may be, poetry is less and less prisoner of its own language"[12], and the true "voice of spirit and imagination and all that is potential"[13] in the face of "the materialist cataclysm"[14] facing the world. The 1965

[8] Daniel Weissbort Ed., *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London, Faber, 2006).
[9] Ibid, p.14.
[10] Ibid, p.200.
[11] Ibid, pp.200-201.
[12] Ibid, p.199.
[13] Ibid, p.200.

Editorial to *Modern Poetry In Translation* also makes an interesting point about Lowell's "imitations", arguing that "while undeniably beautiful" they are fundamentally "the record of the effect of one poet's imagination on another's" and "may simply obscure"[15] the original. In 1965, this was clearly part of Hughes's defence of literalism, but we shall have to return to the notion when looking at the poet's own practice.

It is important to note that at this stage Hughes is primarily drawn to the work of East European and Israeli poets who suffered under the regimes of both Hitler and Stalin. What lies behind the principle of literalism is clearly Adorno's claim that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric"[16], though many of the poets Hughes was drawn to were actually victims of Soviet oppression. The choice being posed seems to be between literalism and silence, an issue George Steiner explored in 1966 in his seminal *Language and Silence*. An even earlier model for the principle of literalism may also be found in Hughes's reading for the Archaeology and Anthropology tripos at Cambridge, where he encountered William Bleek's *Specimens of Bushmen Folklore*, a collection made in the 1870s by the German-trained ethnographer and philologist which became a sort of model for Hughes of literal translation. He mentions Bleek in his 1982 Introduction to *Modern Poetry in Translation*[17], where Shelley's "note to his translation of the opening chorus of Goethe's *Faust*" is also offered as exemplary[18].

The year 1968 saw the publication of Yehuda Amichai's *Selected Poems*, and the performance of Hughes's version of Seneca's *Oedipus*. I shall look first at his

[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Theodore Adorno, 'Cultural Criticism and Society' (1949), *Prisms,* tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge MA, MIT Press, 1981) p.34.
[17] Weissbort, ibid, p.205.
[18] Ibid.

involvement with Amichai. Hughes was able to attempt literal translations of Amichai because his then partner Assia Wevill could work directly from the Hebrew texts. But what does this literalism amount to? Neil Roberts has noted the obvious problem. Having "settled for literalness as a first principle . . . what can Hughes contribute?"[19] Weissbort touches upon the answer when he notes the paradox that "while intentionally remaining close to the ad verbum text" Hughes "nevertheless created works" that are "unmistakably 'Hughesian'".[20] The paradox may not be as paradoxical as it seems, given a widespread readiness in the 1960s "to allow translation of foreign texts to alter English itself"[21], but my own view would be that the reality of political nightmare, together with the growing interest in myth, folklore, fairy-tale and legend, pressing upon all writers in the twentieth century, has to be a much more significant explanation for so much of Hughes's literal translation work ending up sounding so Hughesian. It is also clearly the case that Hughes's involvement was deeply related to his own needs as a writer, needs first fuelled by Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, and he has himself made the point that he "needed literal versions to activate his own poetic imagination".[22]

Hughes encountered Amichai's work in 1964 when the first issue of *Modern Poetry in Translation* was being prepared. He began working with Assia Wevill on literal translations of his own shortly afterwards. Born Assia Gutmann in Germany of a Protestant mother and Jewish-Russian father, Assia left Germany for Israel in 1939, growing up with Jewish friends and speaking Hebrew. She translated Amichai on her own behalf as well as providing Hughes with literal transcriptions

[19] Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) p.180.
[20] Weissbort, ibid, p.viii.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.

for him to work on.[23] The 1960s context is important here. Whilst most actively involved with *Modern Poetry in Translation*, Hughes was married to Sylvia Plath and involved in an affair with Assia Wevill. The trauma of the suicide of Plath in 1963, and the suicide of Wevill with their daughter Shura in 1969, surrounded the year of publication of *Ariel* in 1965 and the ensuing controversy caused by Plath's use of Holocaust imagery.

Without Hebrew, I am unable to judge whether the Amichai translations are as literal as Hughes intended. What I can say without hesitation is that Crow's is the first voice I hear when I read 'A Weeping Mouth' with its disturbing "A weeping mouth and a laughing mouth/in terrible battle before a silent crowd".[24] 'My Parents' Migration' contains "My blood goes on shaking at its walls" and "Stumps of talk after midnight[25]; 'Dennis was Very Sick' has "His face retreated/But his eyes advanced from it/With great courage"[26]; "I have invented the dry weeping"[27] comes from 'On My Return' and 'Mayor' ends with the apocalyptic "at night/The stones of the hills round about/Will crawl down/Towards the stone houses,/Like wolves coming/To howl at the dogs/Who have become men's slaves".[28] Mouths and stones have a life of their own in this desolate poetry, the names on the tombstones in 'Luxury' like "the names of long-abandoned railway stations"[29], the poet's "mouth bitter with nightmares" and an almost affectless "I attend to my bad

[23] Yehuda Amichai, *Selected Poems* tr. Assia Gutmann (London, Cape Goliard, 1968). Although only Assia is credited, Keith Sagar and Stephen Tabor in their *Ted Hughes: A Bibliography 1946-1995* (London, Mansell, 1998 p.201) insist that Hughes collaborated with these translations. Yehuda Amichai, *Selected Poems* tr. Assia Gutmann and Harold Schimmel with the collaboration of Ted Hughes (London, Penguin Books, 1971). After Assia Wevill's death, Hughes also collaborated with Amichai directly on *Amen* (Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Time* (NY, Harper & Row, 1979). In the last year of Hughes's life, he collaborated with Weissbort on a new *Selected Poems* (London, Faber, 1998).

[24] Daniel Weissbort Ed., *Ted Hughes: Selected Translations* (London, Faber, 2006) pp.50-58.

[25] Ibid.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

dreams." "Once a great love cut my life in two"[30], the opening line of 'Once a Great Love' tells us, and goes on to remind us explicitly of scenes familiar from Crow's antics in the Garden of Eden: "The first part goes on twisting/at some other place like a snake cut in two." The syntax is more controlled than in *Crow*, and the language has not that "super-simple" or "super-ugly" quality[31] Hughes claimed to see in *Crow.* However, this remains a world in which Crow would be comfortable; a world, in 'National Thoughts', of "Motor car, bomb, God"[32]; a world in 'Ibn Gabirol' where the eyes are "sharp as tin-openers"[33], a markedly Hughesian metaphor whether it is in the original or not. Whether the poems were worked on with Assia Gutmann (to give her the name she chose for publication) or Yehuda Amichai after her death, "Sometimes pus/Sometimes a poem", again from 'Ibn Gabirol' has all the anguish we have come to assume of Hughes's relationship with Wevill, and "Something always bursts out/And always pain"[34] seems to voice the anguish of an entire people. Clearly, the anguish is Amichai's, and Assia Gutmann's too, but it is an anguish shared by us all, voiced partly through Hughes's determination to give himself to another's imagination, thus releasing his own. And the God in this last poem, 'Ibn Gabirol,' one of those he definitely worked on with Assia, has a voice which is certainly Hughes's own, in his poetry and his retelling of myths for children: "But through the wound on my chest/God peers into the world. // I am the

[30] Ibid.
[31] Roberts, ibid, p.184.

[32] Weissbort, ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid. The private tragedies of these years led to some irresponsible speculations, despite Hughes's attempt to give his experience a mythic interpretation. What we can see, without subjecting them to forensic psychological analysis, is the anguish expressed in Hughes's letters, selected and edited by Christopher Reid in *Letters of Ted Hughes* (London, Faber, 2007). I am thinking specifically of the letters to Celia Chaikin and Aurelia Plath in 1969 (pp.290-1), and to Nicholas Hughes in 1998 (pp.707-713).

door/To his apartment",[35] 'Apartment' is Hughes or Crow at their surreal best, no matter who came up with the choice.

If Hughes's own voice is to be heard in these literal translations of Amichai, how much more strongly can we expect to hear it in his version of Seneca's *Oedipus*. There are obviously theatrical and aesthetic decisions going on with the Seneca which don't apply to the Amichai, and the involvement of Peter Brook has to be born in mind, but the text is still significantly a linguistic construct, whatever Brook's influence. In his 'Introduction' to the Faber edition, Hughes notes that Brook's guiding idea "was to make a text that would release whatever inner power this story, in its plainest, bluntest form, still has, and to unearth, if we could, the ritual possibilities within it".[36] (36) For Brook, Sophocles's Greek text was in the classical Greek sense too "fully explored" and too "fully civilized".[37] "The figures in Seneca's *Oedipus*," Hughes argues "are Greek only by convention: by nature they are more primitive than aboriginals. They are a spider people, scuttling among hot stones".[38] The demand for a new version grew naturally out of this shared vision. But the notion need not come as entirely a surprise. In the Editorial to the 1967 *Modern Poetry in Translation* already mentioned, Hughes argued that it was possible to justify something other than a literal translation "where the translator already is an interesting and original poet in his own right, and in his 'versions' we are glad to get more of him" as in the case of Lowell's Heine and Rilke translations in *Imitations*.[39]

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ted Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus* (London, Faber, 1969) pp.7-8.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Weissbort, ibid p.201.

Context is again important, not just the personal and political context discussed above with the Amichai literal translations, but the ghosts at this particular feast: *Crow*, and T. S. Eliot's 1927 essays 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation' and 'Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca'.[40] Where else would Hughes have looked if he was seeking inspiration for a version of Seneca's masterpiece? The clue is there in 'Examination at the Womb-door', first published in 1970 and collected in *Crow* in 1972. The Hughes poem offers a series of questions which clearly echo the responses to other questions in Eliot's 'Marina.' From the Hughes:

> Who owns these scrawny little feet? *Death*.
> Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? *Death.*
> Who owns these still-working lungs? *Death*.[41]

And from the Eliot:

> Those who sharpen the tooth of the dog, meaning
> Death
> Those who glitter with the glory of the hummingbird,
> meaning
> Death
> Those who sit in the sty of contentment, meaning
> Death
> Those who suffer the ecstasy of the animals, meaning

[40] T.S. Eliot, 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation', *Selected Essays* (London, Faber, 1980) pp.65-105.
[41] Ted Hughes, *Crow* (London, Faber, 1972) p.15.

Death[42]

John Talbot has argued forcefully for the links between Eliot's 'Seneca in Elizabethan Translation,' his 'Marina' and dramatic fragment 'Sweeney Agonistes,' Shakespeare's *Pericles* and Hughes's *Oedipus*.[43] The fact that 'Marina' has an epigraph from Seneca's *Hurcules Furens* reinforces the point, and I think it is indisputable that Hughes is far more influenced by Eliot's study of Seneca's sanguinary imagination than the scholarship of Senecan rhetoric and stichomythia. Hughes never claimed to be a Latin scholar anyway, and there seems to be some confusion as to the "Victorian crib"[44] he claimed to have been working from. Roberts takes it for granted this must have been the 1917 Loeb edition, translated by Frank Justus Miller, but the Loeb Classical Library was hardly Victorian, being launched only in 1911.[45] It is certainly important to be wary of Hughes's claim to have consulted the Latin original. John Talbot again has argued that "Hughes's translation corresponds less to any Latin than to English, the English of David Anthony Turner" whose prose translation, commissioned by Kenneth Tynan for the National Theatre, was rejected by Peter Brook.[46]

Whatever the scholarly or theatrical influences that went in to the making of Hughes's *Oedipus*, it seems obvious that the anguish that went in to the writing of the *Crow* poems, and whatever needs Hughes himself had after the traumas in his personal life, contributed to the tone. As Hughes argued, "Crow was in the tradition

[42] T.S. Eliot, *Selected Poems* (London, Faber, 2002) p.93.
[43] John Talbot, 'Eliot's Seneca, Ted Hughes's *Oedipus*' in *Ted Hughes and the Classics*, Ed. Roger Rees (Oxford University Press, 2006) pp.62-80.
[44] Hughes, *Seneca's Oedipus*, p.7.
[45] Roberts, ibid, p.181.
[46] Talbot, ibid, p.63.

of 'the primitive literatures', which was his 'own tradition'".[47] In other words, *Oedipus* is a poem before it is a play, a fact that would sit well with the Roman tradition of reading Seneca's plays out loud. In the theatre, it would be impossible for an actor to voice the absence of punctuation, indentations, lower-case orthography and use of spacing to indicate speech rhythms. Readers have access to the eccentricities which would be invisible to the audience in the theatre. Ronald Bryden's comment in the *Observer* that Hughes's *Oedipus* was the best translation since Yeats seems to support this judgement.[48]

So what is the nature of this poetry? The choice of Seneca's rather than Sophocles's text may have been Brook's, but with its ritual and mythic dimensions it chimed with Hughes's imaginative temperament and lifelong intellectual concerns. It is Seneca who focuses on the sickening effects of the plague and Tiresias's use of animal entrails for prophecy. Seneca who has Jocasta stab herself in the womb rather than hang herself as in Sophocles. Seneca who has Oedipus proclaim a curse on whoever is found guilty of the murder of Laius. The effect of Seneca's sanguinary imagination upon the Elizabethans is well rehearsed in Hughes's *Oedipus*, let alone *Wodwo*'s last half-dozen poems, *Crow,* and *Gaudete*. Hughes would also have responded enthusiastically to the shamanistic emphasis of the original, notably Tiresias's visit to the world of the dead. Hughes greatly expanded Jocasta's role in his version, possibly a courtesy to Irene Worth but definitely in line with his desire for a strong female character where masculine intellect destroys feminine instinct, the theme he was to develop at such great length in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*. Jocasta's suicide at the end of the play is Hughes's most Hughesian touch – at least the Hughes of

[47] Roberts, ibid, 82.
[48] Ronald Bryden, *Observer*, 24 March 1968, p.31.

Gaudete. In Seneca she plunges the dagger into her womb. In Hughes, she chooses “the place the gods/hate where everything began the son the husband/up here”.[49]

The addition to Jocasta’s role itself makes an interesting point. There would be no point searching for the added words in the original because they are not there, and it is surely telling that when you work through the published text, you would be unlikely to notice them if not forewarned. In a short speech in the Seneca, Jocasta asks “Quid iuvat, conjunx, mala/gravare questu?” and at the end of the speech “haud est virile terga Fortunae dare”.[50] The Loeb edition translates these two short sentences as “How does it help, my husband, to make troubles heavier by bemoaning them?” and “It is not manly to retreat before Fortune”.[51] In the original and the Loeb, Oedipus’s response comes straight after this, but Hughes added two pages of extra dialogue for Jocasta.

> when I carried my
>
> first son
>
> did I know what was coming did I know
>
> what ropes of blood were twisting together what
>
> bloody footprints
>
> were hurrying together in my body[52]

and again:

[49] Hughes, ibid, p.54.
[50] Seneca, *Oedipus* (Loeb Classical Library, 2004) p.24.
[51] Ibid, p.25.
[52] Hughes, ibid, pp.16-17.

what cauldron was I

what doorway was I what cavemouth

what spread my legs and lifted my knees

until the actual birth “split me open and I saw the blood jump out after him”.[53] The grammatical and orthographical style here is the same throughout, and when Oedipus responds with his account of his visit to the sphinx – recounted just as in the original and Loeb - we find the same voice: “a trap of forked meanings a noose of/knotted words”. Whatever translations lie between Seneca’s Latin original and Hughes’s version – Frank Justus Miller’s Loeb edition or David Anthony Turner’s rejected prose translation – the National Theatre’s *Seneca’s Oedipus* is decidedly a work of Ted Hughes’s own imagination.

3

In the examples of Amichai and Seneca’s *Oedipus*, the year 1968 does offer a sort of model for the whole of Hughes’s career in translation. The emphasis would certainly change, especially in the last few years of his life when he worked largely with the classical canon. But his interest in literal translations continued to inspire important work, most significantly throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the poetry of János Pilinszky. Weissbort explores and quotes from the whole *oeuvre*. With Carneiro, Hughes sought “word by word transcriptions”[54]; With Helder Macedo, he wanted “as direct, as unmediated a contact with the source text as

[53] ibid, p.18.
[54] Weissbort, ibid, p.19.

possible"[55]; With Sorescu, he "barely altered more than a word or two" to the literals Edna Longley had provided[56] Given the range of material Weissbort considers, there is clearly too much to discuss in an essay, so before turning to the classical canon, I will finish talking about the literal translations by looking at what Hughes achieved with János Pilinszky.

Hughes met the Hungarian poet Pilinszky at the 1969 Poetry International. In his essay 'János Pilinszky', he quoted Pilinszky as saying "I would like to write as if I had remained silent".[57] Hughes was deeply moved by the "radiance and menace" of Pilinszky's bleak post-Holocaust vision.[58] Pilinszky seems to have been equally affected by Hughes's work, and expressed a desire to translate *Crow* into Hungarian.[59] To work on literal versions of what he called Pilinszky's "linguistic poverty"[60], Hughes sought the help of his friend János Csokits. Absolute "faithfulness to the literal version of the original" was what he called for, and seems to have been what Csokits provided.[61] My problem here is that not only do I have no Hungarian, but the original Csokits transcripts are only to be viewed in the Archive at Emory. The best discussion I know of these originals, and the contribution Hughes himself made to the final translations, is to be found in Neil Roberts's *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life*.[62] Hughes was intending to include Csokits's literal version of Pilinszky's 'Apocrypha' in their jointly published *Selected Poems*[63], but as he says in his 'Introduction' to that volume, "in the end my version inched itself so close to his that there would be no point now in printing two almost

[55] Ibid, p.23.
[56] Ibid, p.92.
[57] Ted Hughes, 'János Pilinszky,' *Winter Pollen* (London, Faber, 1994) p.232.
[58] Weissbort, ibid, p.84.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid.
[62] Roberts, ibid, pp.179-196.
[63] János Pilinszky, *János Pilinszky: Selected Poems*, tr. Ted Hughes and János Csokits (Manchester, Carcanet, 1977) and reissued as *The Desert of Love* (London, Anvil, 1989).

identical texts".[64] All I intend doing here is to glance at the finished poems anthologised in Weissbort's *Ted Hughes, Selected Translations*.

And with 'The Desert of Love'[65] one is immediately in the landscape of linguistic poverty described by Csokits and Hughes: "A landscape like the bed of a wrinkled pit,/with glowing scars, a darkness which dazzles./Dust thickens. I stand numb with brightness/blinded by the sun." This is a landscape Crow has already stumbled across, though the personal pronoun is decidedly unHughesian, and the abstract "catatonic" in the previous stanza is not an adjective that would have occurred to Crow. "Where you have fallen, you stay" could be the epitaph on a generation's tombstone, though in 'On the Wall of a KZ-Lager'[66] and "In the whole universe, this is your place." "Speechless, speechless, you testify against us" the last line of this poem has it, reminding us of Pilinszky's ambition "to write as if I had remained silent." There is something nightmarish about the vision here, an accusatory, relentless nightmare: "At all times I see them," Pilinszky says in 'Harbach 1944'[67] and the very naming of the year is enough to remind us of the criminal insanity that devastated a civilisation. With the anonymous personal pronoun of its opening line – "He steps out from the others" – 'Passion of Ravensbruck'[68] is the most chilling of these frightening poems, Pilinszky's great talent being to achieve his ethical silence in such simple grammatical choices. These are poems which cry from the page in their choking of silence, and even in the brief selection Weissbort has room to give, one recognises the world of Hughes's *Oedipus*, *Orghast* and *Crow,* a world where Hughes was seeking a sort

[64] Weissbort, ibid, p.84.
[65] Ibid, p.89.
[66] Ibid, p.87.
[67] Ibid, p.85.
[68] Ibid, p.87.

of desperate elemental language of reality, a world in which Pilinszky and his generation of poets lived.

Before leaving the literal translations Hughes demanded when working on contemporary Eastern European poets, we should perhaps return to the paradox raised by Neil Roberts: the problem that despite working from literal transcriptions, Hughes's translations often sound so thoroughly Hughesian. In the discussion of his friend the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai, I suggested that the coincidence of a shared political experience and obsession with myth, folklore, fairy-tale and legend might well be more important than any aesthetic similarities. To illustrate this point, at least as far as the early phase of Hughes's career is concerned, it would be useful to compare Hughes with Vasko Popa, the Serbo-Croatian poet he hugely admired but never translated.[69] Anne Pennington and Charles Simic are the exemplary translators of Popa's *oeuvre*, but Hughes took a lively interest in their work. The shared interest in folklore is an obvious influence, but in his essay 'Vasko Popa'[70] Hughes emphasises the "primitive pre-creation atmosphere"[71] of Popa's world, a world immediately recognisable from his own *Crow* in which "Human heads, tongues, spirits, hands, flames, magically vitalized wandering objects, such as apples and moons, present themselves, animated with strange but strangely familiar destinies".[72] Given the brief of this essay to look at the translations Hughes did produce, there is not room here to explore such a comparison, though it is an area of Hughes studies attracting some attention.

[69] Vasko Popa, tr. Anne Pennington and revised and expanded Francis R. Jones, 'Introduction' Ted Hughes, *Complete Poems* (London, Anvil Press Poetry, 2011). Earlier editions were published by London, Penguin in 1969, London, Anvil Press Poetry in 1978 and Manchester, Carcanet Press in 1989. Charles Simic translated *The Little Box* for The Charioteer Press in Washington in 1970.

[70] Hughes, *Winter Pollen*, ibid, pp.220-28.

[71] Ibid, p.223.

[72] Ibid.

4

In the latter part of his career, Hughes's main interest, apart from the modern dramatists Frank Wedekind and Federico García Lorca, was with the classics. Here, the range is between the freely adapted *Oedipus* of Seneca, Euripides's *Alcestis* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses,* and the more conservative *Oresteia,* where Hughes admitted he felt somewhat constrained by the sheer monumentality of the Aeschylus masterpiece. When they were preparing their anthology of passages from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Michael Hofmann and James Lasdun wrote to their authors inviting "each contributor to translate, reinterpret, reflect on or completely reimagine the narrative . . . we wanted an Ovid remade, made new".[73] Inspired by the experience of producing his own four long sections, Hughes went on to complete the substantial sections which became *Tales from Ovid*.[74] Shakespeare of course drew on the *Metamorphoses* for his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis*, and we should bear in mind what Hughes made of this in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*.[75]

To say that Hughes freely adapted Ovid would be to minimise what he actually achieved. To echo Lowell's words, he wrote the poem Ovid might have written had he been writing in the late twentieth century. But then Ovid had done something similar with the original material. "As a guide to the historic, original forms of the myths, Ovid is of little use" Hughes tells us in his 'Introduction'.[76] "His attitude to his material is like that of the many later poets who had adapted what he

[73] Weissbort, ibid, p.106.
[74] Ted Hughes, *Tales from Ovid* (London, Faber, 1997).
[75] Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* (London, Faber, 1992).
[76] Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, ibid, p.viii.

presents. He too is an adaptor".[77] What Hughes found in Ovid was a sense "of what it feels like to live in the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era".[78]

Given that this is precisely what Hughes attempted, it is possible to get a sense of his achievement by simply looking at a single tale. I have chosen the story of Pentheus in 'Book III' of the *Metamorphoses* – translated as 'Bacchus and Pentheus' in *Tales from Ovid* – for its dramatisation of the enduring conflict between Dionysus and Apollo, the conflict most famously explored in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*, another key text in Hughes's development. The key passages I will quote are from lines 528-563 of the Loeb *Metamorphoses*[79] and pp.185-188 from the Faber *Tales from Ovid*.[80] I will not quote from the Latin original as Hughes is known to have worked from "the Penguin Classics version by Mary Innes, the Loeb edition with translation by Frank Justus Miller, and the Elizabethan verse translation by Arthur Golding", not from Ovid's Latin.[81]

In the Loeb, having heard Tiresias's prophecy that he "'will be torn into a thousand pieces'" if he defies the new god Bacchus, Pentheus "flings [Tiresias] forth" and then denounces the people of the city. Even in Loeb's measured translation, the language has considerable heat. "'What madness, ye sons of the serpent's teeth, ye seeds of Mars, has dulled your reason?'" Pentheus cries. "'Can clashing cymbals, can the pipe of crooked horn, shallow tricks of magic, women's shrill cries, wine-heated madness, vulgar throngs and empty drums – can all these vanquish men, for whom real war, with its drawn swords, the blare of trumpets, and lines of glittering spears, had no terrors?'"

[77] Ibid, p.x.
[78] Ibid, p.xi.
[79] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, tr. Frank Justus Miller (Loeb Classical Library, 1977).
[80] Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, ibid.
[81] Roberts, ibid, p.187.

Hughes brings a savage syntactical energy to Pentheus's denunciation. "He screams like an elephant:/'This is a disease – /Toads have got into the wells,/The granaries have all gone to fungus,/A new flea is injecting bufotenin./You forget, you Thebans,/You are the seed of the god Mars'" and again "'How can you go capering/After a monkey stuffed with mushrooms?/How can you let yourselves be bitten/By this hopping tarantula/And by these glass-eyed slavering hydrophobes?'" Pentheus cannot believe that his sensible people who dragged themselves "'Out of the mass graves/and the fields of massacre'" to build their city "'Out of the slime of the salt marsh'" can now go 'rolling your eyes and waggling your fingers/After that claque of poltroons'", the worshippers of this new god.

Continuing with the Loeb, the rationalist Pentheus is reminding the citizens of their history and their greatness, and offering his own prophecy. "'If it be the fate of Thebes not to endure for long, I would the enginery of war and heroes might batter down her walls and that sword and fire might roar around her: then should we be unfortunate, but our honour without stain; we should bewail, not seek to conceal, our wretched state; then our tears would be without shame. But now our Thebes shall fall before an untried boy, whom neither arts of war assist nor spears nor horsemen, but whose weapons are scented locks, soft garlands, purple and gold inwoven in embroidered robes.'"[82] Enraged at this prospect, and despite all the wise counsel of his advisors, Pentheus orders his slaves to go forth and bring Bacchus to him in chains.

Hughes seems to be inspired into a sort of Dionysian flight with this passage of Pentheus's outrage. How can the citizens of Thebes allow themselves to be driven mad "'Like bobbing unborn babies?/Iron warriors, menhirs of ancient

[82] Book 111 lines 549-557 of *Ovid: Metamorphoses Books 1-8* tr. Frank Justus Miller

manhood,/Tootling flutes/Wet as spaghetti?/And you philosophers,/Metaphysicians, where are your systems?/What happened to the great god of Reason?'"[83] We can hear in this all of Hughes's scorn for the left-brain dominance of a rationalist society, dismissing religious ritual to the fringes of the accepted, as if Richard Dawkins is speaking directly through Pentheus's contempt: 'You have become sots,/You have dunked it all, like a doughnut,/Into a mugful of junk music - /Which is actually the belly-laugh/Of this androgynous, half-titted witch.'"[84] As far as Pentheus is concerned, if Thebes has to fall, it would be better if it fell to "the hard face of the future,'" which is presumably as Puritan as it is militaristic, than "'to a painted boy, a butterfly face,/Swathed in glitter./A baboon/Got up as an earring/In the ear of a jigging whore.'"[85]

In 1997, *Tales from Ovid*, like *Birthday Letters* in the following year, won Hughes the Whitbread Book of the Year.

5

Context is important in the work of any writer. In the last years of his life, the single experience which seems to dominate the work Hughes produced – whether translations or original poetry – is his relationship with Sylvia Plath. *Birthday Letters* and *Howls & Whispers* were both published in 1998, the year of his death. *Phèdre* appeared in the same year, and *Alcestis* and *The Oresteia* posthumously in 1999. A little noticed event in 2001 saw the publication of *Orpheus,* a play for children which was broadcast by the BBC in 1971 as part of their 'Listening and Writing' series but only published in the United States during Hughes's lifetime. *The*

[83] Hughes, *Tales from Ovid*, pp. 186-187.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

Oresteia is clearly not in this category of work explicitly influenced by Plath, but it is worth noting the other connections simply to show just how biographical a writer Hughes was, even when apparently working at the most removed from his own life. Unless I am imagining things, there is a sense of facing tasks long avoided throughout these late works. Seamus Heaney's review of *Birthday Letters* in *The Irish Times*, comparing the experience of reading the book with "the psychic equivalent of 'the bends'" seems to draw the same conclusion.[86]

Phèdre (83) may be worth mentioning simply as the last text Hughes published during his lifetime, but there is a biographical coincidence here which may have much deeper significance than we can yet identify.[87] When Plath first met Hughes, at Cambridge in 1956, she was working on a tutorial essay on Racine's *Phèdre.* The meeting with Hughes distracted her, and she abandoned the essay to write a poem based on themes in the play. The poem is 'Pursuit'[88] and contains the line which resonates down the years, "One day I'll have my death of him". When she finally completed the essay, she received among the lowest marks she earned at Cambridge.[89] One might be forgiven for pondering the coincidence, and wondering whether the memory of this incident was in Hughes's mind when he returned to the play in the last year of his life. French was after all the only language in which he was fluent enough to work without a literal translation, yet he had never tackled the subject in a long career.

Euripides's *Alcestis* tells the story of a lost wife, and one has the sense of an inner-compulsion driving Hughes to this text. *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* deal

[86] Seamus Heaney, 'A wounded power rises from the depths', (*The Irish Times*, Saturday, January 31, 1998).
[87] Ted Hughes, *Jean Racine: Phèdre* (London, Faber, 1998).
[88] Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London, Faber, 1981) p.22-3.
[89] Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath: A Marriage* (London, Little Brown, 2004) pp.21-2.

with wives lost, thought to be dead, and restored, but Alcestis really is dead: she sacrifices her own life to save her husband's, Admetos. "She met the death that you dodged" Pheres, Admetos's father, tells him.[90] What Hughes does not include in his own version of *Alcestis,* is the heart of Pheres's accusation: "you have found out a way/Never to die at all – get each successive wife/To die for you! . . . Marry wife after wife, let them all die for you!".[91] "It was either her or me" Hughes is reported as saying in Elaine Feinstein's biography, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet*.[92]

Orpheus must of course have been the most significant myth for a poet with Hughes's repeated experience of tragedy. But he knew it would be seen as "too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation".[93] He did not include the Orpheus myth in his *Tales from Ovid*, and avoided it completely in his original adult work. His play for children was not published in the United Kingdom until after his death.[94] Even in 1971, he could not face the stark reality of the original. When Orpheus turns to look back, he does not see Eurydice because she is not there. It is her soul he takes with him, in the form of "the music of love coming and love going/And love lost forever,/The music of birth and of death".[95] This remains pretty strong material for children, but at least we can hear Hughes seeking some sort of consolation. It comes in the final moments of the play, in one of the most beautiful passages in Hughes's work. This is not a translation but a retelling of mythic material which

[90] Ted Hughes, *Euripides: Alcestis* (London, Faber, 1999) p.44.
[91] Euripides, *Alcestis/Hippolytus/Iphigenia in Tauris* (London, Penguin Classics, 1953) pp.64-5.
[92] Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (NY, W.W. Norton & Company, 2003) p.145.
[93] Roberts, ibid, p.172.
[94] Ted Hughes, *Collected Plays for Children*, (London, Faber, 2001).
[95] Ibid, p.195.

looks forward to *Remains of Elmet* and *River* rather than back into the maelstrom of Hughes's personal anguish.

6

Despite all the controversy provoked by Hughes's interventions in the world of translation, the issues are really quite simple. With his literal translations honouring the historical circumstances of the originals, there is the paradox that he produced translations which frequently sound decidedly Hughesian. With his versions of classical texts, he produced translations which are an important part of his own imaginative *oeuvre,* but hardly 'translations' at all in any conventional or conservative sense of the word. The problem, obviously, is with the word 'translation.' His literal translations reflect a shared historical reality which has influenced both translator and original. His versions of works from the classical canon hold up a mirror to his own needs and obsessions. The truth is that everything Hughes wrote forms part of his single mythopoeic venture. He has never claimed to be a translator in the traditional, conservative sense derided by Lowell as taxidermy.[96]

Reading Hughes's critics, one often seems to have strayed into an argument between Pope and his critics. It was in his *Life of Pope* that Samuel Johnson noted Richard Bentley's patronising dismissal, "It is a very pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer" and there have been several Richard Bentleys in our own time, often the critics who most dislike Hughes's entire oeuvre.[97] The best reply to

[96] Robert Lowell, *Imitations*, ibid, p.xi.

[97] Roger Rees, *Ted Hughes and the Classics, ibid,* p.158. Samuel Johnson, *The Lives of the Poets* (Oxford University Press, 2009) p.429. Samuel Johnson, *Selected Writings* (Penguin English Library, 1984) p.459.

this conservative criticism remains that offered by Moses Finley in his *Aspects of Antiquity*. Discussing "the intelligibility of a 'desperately foreign' Greek drama" he argued that "we should remember that 'all art is dialogue' and 'in the end, it can only be a dialogue in the present, about the present'".[98]

Whether in his original work, discursive prose or translations, Hughes is increasingly being seen as the most important poet since Yeats and Eliot, engaged in precisely such a dialogue with the great figures of the past.

98[1] Roger Rees, ibid. Sir Moses Finley, *Aspects of Antiquity* (NY: Viking Press, 1968) pp.3-6.