

TED HUGHES

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Ted Hughes, like Shakespeare according to Ben Jonson, had small Latin and less Greek: only enough Latin for the minimal requirements of the Cambridge English entrance exam, it seems, and no Greek at all. Nevertheless, classical literature and mythology are of enormous significance to his work, and this substantial, enterprising collection of essays charts many of the interconnections and intertextualities. Originating in a conference in Edinburgh in 2005, the collection, with contributions from classicists and from critics in both English and Comparative Literature departments, is a volume in the OUP Classical Presences series and testifies to a welcome development and new orientation in the reception of Hughes's work and also to the burgeoning study of the culturally diverse reception of classical literature and, more specifically, of the importance of the classics to modern and contemporary poetry in English. Tony Harrison and Seamus Heaney are notable points of comparison and reference, for instance, and Michael Longley, Anne Carson and Peter Reading are adduced. There is manifestly scope for further work in this field, which is itself, as Stuart Gillespie justly claims in his essay here, part of a larger phenomenon in which modern and contemporary verse translation 'begins to resemble the English Renaissance verse translating tradition in its extent and scope'.

Some of Hughes's work is manifestly taken up with the classics: the version of Seneca's *Oedipus* made for Peter Brook and staged at the National Theatre in 1969, for instance; the poem-sequence *Prometheus on His Crag* (1973); and, above all, the flurry of translations or versions made towards the end of his life which include, outstandingly, *Tales from Ovid* in 1997 and the accounts of *Alcestis* and the *Oresteia* which were both published posthumously in 1999. These all receive attention in this collection and, unsurprisingly, *Tales from Ovid* attracts much of it. Sarah Annes Brown elegantly says that any reader approaching Hughes after Ovid 'hears a chord, not a single note', and these essays are variously illuminating and challenging about Hughes's intertwining of his voice with Ovid's, his recovery of what Garrett A. Jacobsen calls an 'absent presence' in the original text. They are also revealing about the exact nature of the 'passion *in extremis*' which Hughes claims to have found in Ovid and about the reasons for his re-organisation of the 'tales' he selects for translation. This appears partial in both senses of the word; and Jennifer Ingleheart offers a searching, subtle account of Hughes's 'polemical' sexualising of the Actaeon myth. Suggesting that Hughes's treatment depends on a reading of Titian as well as Ovid, she finds an autobiographical motive in its preoccupation with voyeurism: Hughes's relationship with Sylvia Plath. Much of this book's criticism and scholarship is in fact impelled by the discovery of this motive and, we might say, *motif* or even leitmotif in Hughes's classics-related work. *Alcestis*, in which a husband attempts to retrieve a wife from the dead, is an obvious source for such inquiry, but Vanda Zajko, uncovering Hughes's indebtedness to the 'ritualist project' of the Cambridge School of Anthropology, finds in *Prometheus on his Crag* a reflection of Hughes's circumstances in both 1963, when Plath died, and 1969, when Assia Wevill and her daughter Shura died. These readings are all patient, scrupulously attentive to the texts themselves, and, given their material, unmelodramatic; but they still run the risk of implying that Hughes

had no biography but this. As far as the texts under discussion are concerned, this may well be so: but it is still surprising to find so little surprise being registered about it.

In Michael Silk's outstanding essay on allusion and poetic language, 'the whole tragic configuration of the *Oresteia*' is said to 'align[] itself with the personal Hughes/Plath tragedy', notably as that may be read out of *Birthday Letters*. Silk is persuasive, and an element of his persuasiveness is polemically devoted to prosecuting his case at the expense of others. He says that other mediations in Hughes's late classical versions of the Hughes/Plath story are 'momentary or crude by comparison'. This opinion, although confined to a footnote, seems harsh in a volume in which labour has been expended on the explication of what we are now invited to consider the 'momentary' and 'crude': but Silk may rest assured that his own case is indeed very powerfully presented. In fact this wide-ranging essay, with an ear acutely attuned to English as well as classical literature, virtually smuggles in under the camouflage of its classical contextualising an account of Hughesian allusion more generally in which the idea that it operates most intensively at the ends of poems is particularly arresting.

And Silk does not confine himself to Hughes: his discovery of *Antony and Cleopatra* in Plath's 'The Rabbit Catcher', and what he does with the find, is a genuinely revelatory instance of the capacity of close intertextual criticism to ramify unpredictably. Some of the most engaging and memorable moments in this volume do actually come when work of Hughes's not officially, as it were, indebted to the classics is discovered to occlude allusive or structural indebtednesses, or when less well known or less highly regarded texts – notably a 1971 radio account for children of the Orpheus myth and a 100-line version of the storm episode in Book 5 of the *Odyssey* – are brought to new prominence. Neil Roberts, for instance, reads *Gaudete* as a 'distorted version' of the *Bacchae* and meticulously accounts for the distortions, and he finds Socrates emblematising 'masculine guilt' in *Cave Birds*. John Talbot sensibly but originally considers Hughes's 'mediating English sources' and judiciously discovers Eliot in Hughes's *Oedipus*, the Eliot of both 'Marina' and 'Sweeney Agonistes'. This, and the case made about it, came as a revelation to me but now appear quite obvious. Other essays in the volume locate the incantatory, antiphonal, stichomythic Eliot in some unexpected Hughesian places. *Winter Pollen* and *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* make plain Hughes's indebtedness to Eliot as critic; it is good to see his poetic indebtedness being brought more sharply into focus.

These essayists have less to say about classical indebtednesses at the level of form or trope. R., the volume's Editor, and Genevieve Liveley are exceptions. R. reads Hughes's Laureate poems as a redeployment of classical panegyric. His essay valuably brings these poems into the realm of sophisticated critical discourse and reminds us of the 'unprecedented' nature of Hughes's decision to publish them as a separate volume, *Rain Charm for the Duchy*, in 1992. However, R. seems to underestimate the extent to which Hughes's conception of monarchy in these poems (and their annotations) is not just a form of panegyric patriotism but a species of batty mysticism which also, vertiginously, has one canny eye on contemporary tabloid opinion. Genevieve Liveley illuminatingly reads the tropes of Roman love elegy out of *Birthday Letters* but perhaps similarly underestimates the extent to which Hughes could have derived these not from originals but from their deployment by generations of English poets versed in this Latin poetry. She also says, however, that a little-known poem, 'Unknown Warrior', is written in 'quasi-elegiac

couplets'; but only in a footnote elsewhere in the volume, in Stuart Gillespie's essay, is the notion canvassed that 'formal elements of classical prosody' may have influenced Hughes. Given his inability to read the originals, this is perhaps unlikely: but, particularly in the light of his cogently expressed and strategic antipathy to iambic traditions of English verse, some further inquiry could be made here.

The collection is, perhaps understandably given its exploratory interdisciplinary nature, unwilling to engage much with hostile critiques of Hughes or of the traditions of his allegiance. Some are referenced and quoted: Terry Eagleton's view of myth, as conceived by the Cambridge School and the poetry it influenced, as a pernicious attempt at the 'naturalisation of history' and Bernard Knox's scornful attack on Hughes's *Alcestis* as 'a desecration'. Given the strength and verve of such onslaughts, however, the essayists who do this citing sail too unperturbedly on. It would be good to see a more fundamental and radical engagement with such critiques from an admiring defender of Hughes.

This is, though, an original, provocative and insightful collection which will be required reading for anyone interested in Hughes or, more generally, in the relations between modern poetry and the classics. Towards the end of her essay Lorna Hardwick quotes Hughes's justification for attempting anything other than a literal translation. Such a thing might be offered, he thought, '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, extensions and explorations of his possibilities, as in the extraordinary Heine and Rilke translations in Lowell's *Imitations*'. Ted Hughes is such a poet; and this volume, by extending the scope of his reception, is an enlightening exploration of critical possibility.

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